Tila Tequila has never had to struggle much in terms of getting people to notice her. Model. Musician. MTV star. It's hard to define exactly what Tequila does, but one can't deny that she's blazing a decidedly unique trail. From a poor childhood in Texas, the 26-year-old has self-promoted herself into a veritable Internet icon with millions of MySpace friends, and now millions of viewers for MTV's bisexual dating series A Shot at Love With Tila Tequila. Love her, hate her, or simply wonder "Who the hell is Tila Tequila?"--the undeniable truth is that she has created a new Hollywood success model for the 21st century, a career born and bred almost entirely through the Internet. "I don't like doing everything the old way," says Tequila, alternately sipping on Jack Daniel's and a can of Red Bull in her hotel bar shortly before departing for the club. "I always like to start trends, and then people follow."

And people have certainly been following A Shot at Love. The unabashedly sleazy reality dating series--in which the bisexual Tequila looks for a mate from a pool of both men and women--premiered on Oct. 9, 2007, and went on to become MTV's highest-rated new series that year in viewers ages 12-34; the season finale reached a network record high 6.2 million viewers. Now Shot at Love has returned for a second season of even more outlandish fun. "I think the loud, electric one-liner was, This is a bisexual battle of the sexes," says Tony DiSanto, MTV executive VP of series development. "That hits people right on the back." However, for as many fans as the show has found (the season 2 premiere attracted over 1.7 million viewers), there have been critics who blast the program's incessant tawdriness. Contestants engage in heavy drinking--not surprising for a show that features two alcohol references in the title--which often leads to intra- and inter-gender brawls, while the challenges involve the cast stripping down to their Skivvies. "I think people are going to criticize anything that is successful," defends executive producer Sally Ann Salsano. "These are twentysomething-year-old people, and this is just what's happening in the world." Albeit a made-for-TV world that comes complete with an open bar and bull-penis-eating challenges.

Then there's the question of the show's central conceit: Gossip sites claim Tequila isn't truly bisexual (she chose male contestant Bobby Banhart at the end of season 1, but the two broke up shortly after), a charge she denies. "Well, where's my damn Academy Award?" she asks. "I actually had experiences before I was 11 with a few girls," says Tequila. She believes that the show--in which she once gave a lap dance to a contestant's grandmother--promotes a positive message, providing sexually confused youths with a role model, something she lacked growing up. Gay rights organization GLAAD agrees--to a point. In a statement to EW, a spokesperson for the group says, "Bisexuality is something rarely seen or discussed on television, so Tila's presence and the success of the show have certainly increased the dialogue about bi and lesbian issues. Still, Tila's on-air persona reflects this one person's quest to find love and should be seen as Tila's story only, not a reflection of other bisexual people any more so than a straight contestant on a dating show represents other straight people."

Tequila's story began when her parents and older siblings emigrated from war-torn Vietnam while Tequila (born Thien Nguyen) was still in her mother's womb. The family settled in the Houston area in a conservative gated community run by Buddhists. "It was more like their own cult kind of thing," she remembers. "You could only wear blue and white. And long sleeves only." The rule-bound environment led the youngster to rebel early. "When I was 11, I did a lot of Ecstasy," she claims. "I used to rob houses, steal cars and stuff. And it just got worse in high school." (While she wasn't arrested, Tila says her parents sent her to a nearby reform school for about six months: "They sent me to a school for bad kids, kinda like juvenile.") It was around this time, Tequila says, when she actually began playing a bizarre game of racial roulette. "I went through a stage where I thought I was black," she explains. "Then, Mexican." She even went so far as to befriend a chola gang and adopt a Mexican accent.

After a brief, drug-fueled sojourn to New York City, Tequila returned to Texas and posed for a friend's calendar; the pictures drew the attention of photographers and gave Tequila her first taste of modeling. But it was a fortuitous trip to the mall and a discovery by a Playboy scout that yielded her biggest gig: an online pictorial as Playboy's first-ever Asian "Cyber Girl of the Week." The nude photo shoot didn't phase the then 18-year-old. "Being in Texas and being very young and ambitious, you just do what you can to get yourself out there," she says. "Playboy came to me in f---
ing Texas, man, come on. So I’m gonna take that chance and just see where it goes." And where it led proved to be--
shocker!--the Internet. Tequila built a huge fan base from her nudie pics and decided to launch her own personal
website, now www.tilashotspot.com. "You had to be a member on my website," she recalls. Those who paid the fee
got "access to my diaries and my chats and stuff. Back then, it was smaller, but that's how I made money." Tequila
chalks her online popularity up to people responding to her relatability--particularly her modest beginnings, flaws-and-
all attitude, and openness about her own sexuality. We're going to venture a guess that her petite frame, ample bosom,
and exotic looks also have something to do with it. As does her commitment to connecting with fans personally on a
daily basis, whether it be through the blog updates, photo uploads, or personal appearances.

It's this dedication that drew MySpace cofounder Tom Anderson to contact Tequila after she was kicked off Friendster
for objectionable content. "I already had a big growing fan base from my own website," says Tequila. "So I mass e-
mailed everyone and told them, 'Come to MySpace. It's really cool there.'" Today, Tequila has over 3 million friends
on the site. Her page is a veritable online shrine to all things Tila, with fans able to call and leave a message, find
merchandise, and even listen to her music, like Tequilas single, "Stripper Friends" (sample lyrics: "Hotties in the
bar/Reaching for the stars...".). Music is something Tequila says she's always been passionate about, but even she has
realistic notions about her abilities. "I think I have a unique voice," she admits. "I wouldn't say I'm like Whitney
Houston." Tequilas intimate relationship with fans extends even to the way she's distributing her music, eschewing
the record-label model and going directly to her public. (Her answer when asked if she thinks she's a smart
businesswoman? "Um, duh.") She claims to have turned down offers from will.i.am's label and Jive (will.i.am's rep
denies any offer, while a Jive spokesperson says there were only "discussions"), and instead prefers to record on a
single-by-single basis and release them for free on MySpace or for purchase on iTunes. "We're into, like, six figures
of downloads now on iTunes," says her manager, Simon Renshaw, who insists Tequila's collective projects command her a
seven-figure income but declines to be more specific. Says Tequila: "Many other record labels wanted to sign me, but I
felt like my whole career was built on just doing it myself. So I figured I would just keep doing it myself."

Tequilas preference for independence was her reason for initially turning down A Shot at Love. Worried about how the
show would portray her bisexuality, the tireless titan of self-promotion resisted before realizing the exposure was
simply too good to pass up. "I thought, Just trust your instincts," she says. With the second season of Love wrapped
(episodes continue to air on MTV Tuesdays at 10 p.m.), Tequila is looking to her instincts again to guide her next
project. She's currently writing a career-advice book and working on pitches for a TV series, which she sees as a
"comedy-drama." But the reality star says what she's most interested in now is--wait for it--helping the less fortunate.
"I wanna do meaningful stuff," she says. "After a while you reach your goals and then what? You just prance around
like Paris Hilton all day long and feel like you have to find the next scandal to stay big." So what's Tequilas idea off
Instead, she's hosting a Tila's Hot Bods 2008 contest for hopeful calendar models. (Do they have a U.N. summit for
that?) But the party girl does see a day when she plans to hang up her platform heels. "This lifestyle is fun and I
worked hard for it, but I think in the long run, it's a lot," she concedes. "I just wanna be in love for the rest of my life
and move to an island and have kids."

Today, however, is not that day. The crowd at Tribe HyperClub beckons. An excited fan hands his iPhone to Tequila
with "Buy u a drink!" programmed to scroll across the screen. She politely declines. Even this party girl has her limits.

> EW.COM To view a gallery of some of reality TV's most shocking moments (like those below), go to
ew.con/appallingtv

PHOTO (COLOR): A Shot at Love 2 contestants strip down for Tequila

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By Tim Stack

Photograph by Maria Rutherford

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