

# BACK IN THE USSR

By Cary Darling

**R**ock and roll, for all its platinum-plated success and corporate shuck and jive, is still seen as subversive in some quarters. Unlike traditional classical music, which basically functions as an arm of the state through its vast network of government grants and subsidies, rock is still on the outside looking in—and nowhere is that more true than in the Eastern Bloc. Long scorned by the Men in Moscow as a decadent, bourgeois byproduct of capitalism, rock has been playing hide-and-seek with the authorities there for 20 years. In the late '60s, Czechoslovakia's Plastic People—who achieved some notoriety in the West—had many run-ins with the police, and just a few months ago the Polish government ordered Lady Pank, who had released an album in the US last year on MCA, to break up because of what they thought was inappropriate behavior at a concert.

In the Soviet Union itself, bands which do not have the official government seal of approval cannot release records or get paid for their concerts. So it's surprising to some that the Soviet Union has rock at all, and even more surprising that a small portion of it is surfacing in the West. Chris Cutler's British-based Recommended Records has released some material from the Eastern countries, while Los Angeles singer-songwriter Joanna Stingray has brought tapes of Soviet bands out of the country over the last two years. Stingray's tapes have just been released on Big Time/America as *Red Wave: 4 Underground Bands From The USSR*. One of the musicians involved, Sergey Kuryokhin, was the subject of a one-hour special that was part of the 12-part *Comrades* documentary that aired in Britain and on PBS in the US.

"It's weird; it's like they have their own society within the Soviet Union," says the 25-year-old Stingray, who also made videos for the bands while she was there. "They really get away with a lot and lead an interesting life. MTV is premiering the videos and people are amazed. People say, 'I can't believe those are Russians, they look like us and they look like rock and rollers everywhere.'"

The bands involved—Aquarium (featuring Boris Grebenshikov, "the father of Russian rock"), Kino, Aisa, and Strange Games—may look like rock and rollers everywhere, but their experiences are unique. They are labelled as underground or "unofficial" bands, meaning they can't record for the



Red Square rockers (l-r) Victor Tsol, Yori Kasparyan, Joanna Stingray, Gustav Gurianov, Sergey Kuryokhin, Afrika Bugeev and Igor Tikhomirov

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— Red Wave organizer Joanna Stingray

only label in the country, state-owned Melodiya, or get paid for their performances. "Originally, they had nowhere to play except in people's homes, or parks out in the middle of nowhere," explains Stingray. "The way they record their music is anyway they can. Either somebody they know has made their home into a studio or somebody they know who works as an engineer gets a machine for the weekend. The equipment is primitive; most of it has all been recorded on two-track and more recently there are a few things on eight-track."

Then the resulting tapes are passed hand-to-hand along an extensive underground that cuts across from Estonia to Siberia. "Literally, within a month, you've got the music circulating all over the Soviet Union. They've been doing it that way for a long time and have become very popular doing it that way."

Realizing that rock wasn't going away, the government offered some bands official status and created a

semi-official status for others. The four bands on *Red Wave* fall into the latter status, meaning they don't have to follow all the government dictates, but they can still play the approved Rock Clubs in cities like Leningrad (the home of Russian rock because of its proximity to Western Europe) and Moscow. "You could almost compare it to bands in the West who deal with a major label; the label has a lot more control over what you're going to do. An indie lets you do what you want, but they can't get the music out there," says Stingray. "Fortunately, [the Russian bands] have been able to get this wonderful network going. It's almost like an independent label because it works so well."

The four bands on *Red Wave*, and all the bands which attain the semi-official or official status, are strikingly apolitical. British artists like the Communards and Tom Robinson or writers like Julie Burchill may proudly wave the hammer and sickle (while others like Depche Mode have toyed with communist

imagery), but there is neither flag-waving nor denunciation on *Red Wave*. "These people are not dissidents nor enemies of the state," explains Stingray. "They are all living in the Soviet Union and want to stay living in the Soviet Union. Their energy comes from the fact that they are Russian. Of course, they are dying to travel to the West and collaborate with Western musicians. But they're all happy living in Russia."

And if someone weren't happy living in the USSR? "When I've asked Boris, 'Well, aren't there political bands?' There are some bands who sing about politics, except they sing about politics so they can become famous in a day. Suddenly, it's the big deal and two days later everybody forgets about them. Nobody really cares, so you don't have too many political bands."

Still, there can be repercussions. It is assumed that the KGB is watching every show. "One time [Ultravox's] Chris Cross was there and Sergey asked him to get onstage, but in the middle of it he got pulled off. Then Sergey was told that [his band] Pop

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Mechanics was banned from playing for three months. That's like the repercussions they have, even though they aren't blatantly political. If you are really political, I assume that the band would get broken up and you would probably not be allowed to play."

The bands don't resent the power the government has over them. "They're used to it," Stingray reasons. "That's how they've lived their whole lives. They've managed to survive in a way where they can pretty much do what they want."



Boris Grebenshikov

Doing what they want means buying Western magazines, records and instruments on the black market. "They get a lot of their stuff from England and Germany so a lot of times they're raving about bands that I don't know about yet because it takes awhile to get here," she continues. "They were raving about the Smiths before I knew who they were. If you have the connections or the money, you can get absolutely anything off the black market. These musicians are very poor, but I've been with friends of theirs who had a JVC TV and video and stuck in this tape with all these music videos from the West. So, you can get a hold of anything and everyone does it and you don't get arrested for that."

Sav, what about any of those Dead Kennedys records? "They have them, but they don't carry it

around with them on the street. They take precautions. Most of them are aware that people who are much more conservative would think these guys are weird. I've seen guys with an American book cover it so it wouldn't look like they were reading a book in English. They don't want to create any problems; they just want to do what they have to do."

Harder to obtain than foreign books and records are musical instruments. As with everything else in the USSR, musical instruments are manufactured by the state, but the demand for foreign-made instruments has caused prices to soar on the black market. "Either they get it from foreign bands who meet them on a tour and leave their stuff, which is rare, or they must buy it off the black market. One of the musicians saved up for years to get a Yamaha guitar, which cost him the equivalent of \$3000 for a \$300 guitar. It takes them years and years to buy equipment."

Being upgraded to official status means having access to the latest equipment, such as drum machines, but that would also mean conforming to government rules and tour schedules. By staying unofficial, the technical side of the bands remains undeveloped. "When I've shown videotapes [of the unofficial shows] to some people, they said it reminded them of concerts in the '60s, where the sound was shit and the light man is the light man for everybody, so half the time it's dark. But what you have is the raw energy."

And if a crowd gets a bit too rowdy, the authorities are always there to keep a lid on it. "If all the people rushed the stage, they're going to push you back and make you stay in your seat. When the Rock Clubs started out, they didn't like the fact that kids were up with their arms up and screaming, but they've realized they can't stop that."

While bands like the ones on *Red Wave* may be too worldwise to put politics on their records, let's just suppose that some angry young Russians—the Midnight Oil of Moscow, the Screaming Blue Messiahs of Siberia—decided to do something that was really on the edge. Stingray pauses a second, "If there was a punk band doing a show and being totally outrageous, they would probably arrest the people. Which would be warning enough to anyone, unless you were crazy and wanted to end up in jail. These days, the Soviet Union has come a long way and you can get away with a lot. But it still has a long way to go." □