

Billboard®

NEWSPAPER

August 9, 1986

THE INTERNATIONAL NEWSWEEKLY OF MUSIC AND HOME ENTERTAINMENT



alent

Thriving Underground Scene In Leningrad 'Red Wave' Album Features Russian Rock

BY MOIRA McCORMICK

CHICAGO When Los Angeles-based singer and songwriter Joanna Stingray made her first trip to the U.S.S.R. 2½ years ago, she found a thriving underground rock scene in Leningrad.

Determined to expose this innovative and unsterotypical Soviet music to the West, Stingray began collecting tapes from four of Leningrad's most popular "unofficial" bands during subsequent visits to Russia. She managed to get the tapes out of the country "one way or another" and compiled them on an album.

The result is "Red Wave," a double album recently released on the Hollywood-based indie label Big Time Records. An initial pressing of 10,000 includes 5,000 collectors' editions on red and yellow vinyl. Each album contains lyric sheets with English translations.

Stingray, who herself records in L.A. with the New Improved Brand X Band (and has collaborated with some Soviet musicians), says she approached major labels with the proj-

ect before deciding on an independent.

Big Time chief Fred Bestall expressed interest before he'd even heard all the tapes, according to Stingray.

"What we have with Big Time is a manufacturing and distribution deal," she says. The label also plans to put out accompanying music videos which Stingray shot in Russia and is currently editing.

The four groups featured on "Red Wave" are the ska-influenced Strange Games, with French poetry translated into Russian for lyrics; Aquarium, headed by 32-year-old Boris Grebenshikov, a Dylanesque figure dubbed the "father of Russian rock'n'roll"; Kino (Russian for "cinema"), a reggae-flavored band led by Victor Tsoi; and Alisa, whose lead singer is the flamboyant Kostya Kinchev.

Each band is represented on "Red Wave" with six songs. The material was recorded on two- or eight-track machines between 1981-86.

All four groups are "unofficial," which means they are not authorized by the Soviet state. Thus, they are not able to record on the government-owned label, Melodia, nor can they receive money for their performances. In an effort to broaden their audiences in Russia, the bands have circulated cassettes of their music, which are dubbed and passed along.

"Money is not the most important thing to these guys," says Stingray. "Boris Grebenshikov has been asked to become official, and he's turned it down—he has to have total creative freedom."

Because these musicians are unofficial they are required by law to hold other jobs. Stingray says they have consequently chosen "low forms of employment—night watchman, streetcleaner. Victor Tsoi is a custodian in a bathhouse."

Stingray says she was eager to release "Red Wave" here after seeing the "official" Soviet band Autograph appear via satellite during last year's Live Aid concerts.

"They [Autograph] were so boring that MTV went to a commercial," she says. "I was also struck by some comments I overheard some teenagers make one day, about how we should blow up Russia. All people in America ever hear about the Soviet Union is the Communist government. I wanted to show that Russians are like everyone else, and rock'n'roll is the same everywhere."

If "Red Wave" turns a profit, Stingray hopes to funnel proceeds into getting better instruments and perhaps recording equipment for the bands.

"Musicians there either inherit gear left by foreign band members or buy things off the black market," she says.