

# Notes from underground: Russia's unofficial rock bands

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The group Aquarium looks much like any other rock 'n' roll band. Its members have long hair, tight clothes and there's a moody singer. The band plays sophisticated new-wave with a European flavor, recalling early Roxy Music or David Bowie. Its video shows the band cavorting in a "k," looking like the Beatles in "Hard Day's Night." Only one thing about Aquarium is unusual: From the Soviet Union, the last place where most people would expect to find a thriving rock 'n' roll scene.

Aquarium is one of four Russian bands featured on "Red Wave," a double LP released last week on the Big Time label. Produced by Los Angeles singer-songwriter Joanna Stingray, the album is the first to feature Russia's official rock groups — the ones that aren't recognized by government and aren't allowed to make any money from their music. Stingray spent the last two years making eight trips to Russia, meeting the underground bands and sneaking the tapes into America.

Her story reads like a rock 'n' roll fairytale. She went to Russia on a whim, joining her younger brother on a school trip. Within a year she was writing songs with Boris Grebenshikov of Aquarium, one of Russia's best-known "rock 'n' rollers." "I got his name from a friend of a friend, who emigrated seven years ago," said Stingray this week from her home in Los Angeles. "The minute I saw him at a crowded Metro station, I knew he was one of those special people. I only had three days, and I spent nearly all of it together; I was talking about our lives and writing our songs for each other. I did to get back immediately and I got more about him."

She found that her new friend is a major rock star, "as big as a wife or a Dylan over there. But he's not recognized by the government, so he's not treated specially. He walks to the concerts, carrying his own guitar; and the kids always follow, begging him for tickets. It's not like in the West, where they can get close to the rock stars. Everyone knows where Boris lives; they buzz his phone all day, just wanting to be close to him. When he plays, it looks like a teenage concert — you see people outside the shows, trying to get tickets for the equivalent of \$50."

## Official bands

Russia has a number of government-sponsored rock bands, notably Autograf, who appeared last year's Live Aid telecast.

Official bands are notably inferior to unofficial ones, says Stingray. "I think most people laughed when they saw Autograf — and my friends called me and said, 'You've been raving about this?' They looked old-fashioned, like they belonged in some cocktail bar. It reflected people's ideas, that the Soviets are far behind us. That's the reason I had to get this album out."

"The unofficial bands have few chances to play, so they often do free concerts in people's homes. They're not allowed to make records, so their music circulates on homemade cassettes. And they're not allowed to make a profit, so they work at low-pay day jobs. Grebenshikov works as a night watchman; his bandmates have jobs as street cleaners and boiler-plant attendants. But they have a relative freedom that's never al-



Aquarium, (front left) Vtita Sologub, Boris Grebenshikov, Victor Tsol and Kostya Kinchev.

Leningrad's Rock Club, which holds 1,000 people. In contrast, the official bands usually play in 10-15,000-seat arenas. Many unofficial bands, including Aquarium, have refused a chance to become official.

"The official bands are better businessmen," says Stingray. "They want to be rock and roll stars, have a better life and travel to the West. But the government is their boss. It chooses their songs and their itinerary. The unofficials can improvise on stage. They might give a different concert every night or choose songs at the spur of the moment. You can't control artists like that, and that's what the government is afraid of."

"The government can tell the official bands what to play, when to tour, what to sing about," says Stingray. "The unofficial bands aren't political, but they have a different message. Boris writes a lot about awakening, being happy within yourself, being able to dream. That's a little controversial, because many Soviet people are brought up to work all day, get drunk at night, work the next day, and that's it — so the bands say there's more to life. But they're not saying, 'We want to leave the Soviet Union.' Most of them are proud to be Russian."



Joanna Stingray, producer of "Red Wave."

A Russian rock concert isn't much different than an American one, especially in the small clubs where the unofficial bands play. "It reminds me of concerts in the '60s, because the equipment is usually poor-quality. But you get a real raw energy; the kids are up and screaming and wild. There's usually RGB at the shows, so the kids can't rush the stage; but they can get up and dance. Drugs (definitely aren't part of the scene) that can get you thrown in jail. But the bands can dress up, and the guys can put on dresses and makeup, which they could never do on the street."

Stingray plans another trip to Russia next week, and hopes to acquire more tapes and videos. "It's been strange, because both sides are wondering what I'm doing. I've met with both the CIA and the KGB — they never asked if I was a spy, but that's what they wanted to know. One KGB agent asked me, 'There's musicians all over the States, so why come here?' My friends just looked them right in the eyes and said, 'She knows that Russian musicians are better.'"

The music on "Red Wave" shouldn't sound too foreign to Western ears. The tracks were recorded in Leningrad, using low-budget equipment, and the vocals are all in Russian. But there's usually a clear American or British influence. The group Strong Games has a happy dance style mixing Russian folk rhythms with ska and reggae. And Kino has a lean, guitar-driven sound recalling the early Jam.

Grebenshikov's band Aquarium is by far the most interesting, both for their textured music and introspective lyrics available in English on the lyrics sheet that comes with the record. "I like my life because it's simple. I like my steel because it's spotless. I receive signals from all directions: I dream of ashes," he sings in one nervous-sounding number. The rest of the album ranges from simple love songs to teen-rebellion anthems. "My parents got tired of me, they wanted peace and quiet," brags the punky band Alisa and salutes to rock heroes (Alisa's "De Boogie," about the late Marianne Faithfull). The album includes only one English phrase, a phrase that turns up in three songs: "Rock and roll." Some things, of course, are universal.