

By Sheryl K. Ingber

When most Americans think of life in the Soviet Union today, images may come to mind ranging from Chernobyl to the Goodwill Games to Russian entertainers who have defected to the West. But few would imagine a thriving rock 'n' roll scene comprised of hundreds of "unofficial" bands who meet and practice secretly all over the country, musicians who are not allowed to sell their recordings or perform for money.

In March of 1984, Joanna Stingray, an L.A.-based aspiring musician/songwriter, visited Russia with her sister on a tour sponsored by her sister's school. Through a friend, Joanna was given the telephone number of Boris Grebenshikov, a 32-year-old resident of Leningrad who is considered the father of Soviet rock 'n' roll, and is perhaps the best-known figure among fans of Russia's unofficial rock scene. Over a three and one-half day period, Joanna and Grebenshikov discussed life in Russia and America, and performed their songs for one another. Through Grebenshikov, she also met and listened to the music of other Soviet underground rock musicians.

The subsequent years of return trips—currently being paid off on six different credit cards—and meetings with Boris and his friends convinced Joanna that what these musicians were doing should be heard in America. With the consent of the bands involved, she smuggled tapes of their music out of the country—tapes that would later become the basis of *Red Wave*, the recently released double album on Big Time featuring four of Russia's most popular unofficial bands: Kino, Aquarium, Alisa, and Strange Games. Each of the four sides showcases one group—and a diverse range of style and sound, from contemporary pop and ballads to ska- and punk-influenced tunes. That the lyrics are in Russian and the production quality is primitive detracts little from the music's power and appeal. For Joanna, rock 'n' roll is a universal language that transcends cultural boundaries and borders between nations.

Q & A

with Joanna Stingray

Rock and Rule



Q: Why was it so important to you that this music be heard in America?

A: When I brought the music back here on cassettes, my friends listened to it and thought it was interesting. They didn't know there was rock music in the Soviet Union. At Live Aid there was a satellite transmission from Russia of a band from one of the country's official bands. When they came on, everyone thought it was a joke. They were just so far behind us musically, even MTV cut to a commercial in the middle of their set. I had people calling me—horrified—saying, "Joanna, that's what you've been raving about? You're calling that rock 'n' roll? That's what you go back and forth to Russia to see?" To me, the bands I knew in Russia rated with the Beatles and Jagged of the world, that's when I knew it was time I showed people who and what I was dealing with.

Q: Explain the difference between "official" and "unofficial" rock bands.

Being in an official band means that it is your job. You are a musician, you get paid for it, that's how you earn your living. The Soviet government is your boss; they tell you when to tour, and they have control over what you write and what you perform. The unofficial artists can't record on the state-owned label; their music can't be sold in the stores and they can't receive any money for their performances or recordings, and by law they all must have other jobs. The one thing they do have is total creative freedom to create the kind of music they want. Most of these artists would never give that up to become official.

Q: If their music can't be sold, and it is illegal for them to perform for money, how do people know these groups exist? How does the Soviet government deal with the unofficial groups?

The bands record on very outdated, low-tech equipment. Usually two-track, sometimes eight, and it is usually in someone's home that has been set up as a studio. When they record, they take ¼-inch copies or cassette copies and give them to a couple of friends; within a month there are tapes all over the Soviet Union, just circulated hand to hand. By this method they have become

very, very popular.

What the Soviets realized was that these bands were having an effect on the population and they didn't have control over what the bands were doing. At that time the bands could only play in people's homes or maybe in parks way out in the country. So in 1981, the Soviet government formed a club in Leningrad called the Rock Club.

This was an organization for all the underground bands, and it made them "unofficial," as opposed to underground. This club has a hall that seats about a thousand people, so it did allow them to play public concerts, but they still could not receive any money. The club receives all revenue from ticket sales. What is more unfortunate, though, is that these bands could easily fill 10- or 15,000-seat arenas.

Q: Their following is really that tremendous? It is. Outside, it's like a Bruce Springsteen concert. There are people out front buying and selling tickets for the equivalent of 100 dollars. For a Russian to save up that much money takes a long time. But you know at least they do have an outlet to play. These bands also are not political bands. They're not singing blatantly about politics; they don't really care too much about that. By allowing the bands to play, the government can also keep an eye on them, even if they can't control what they do.

Q: Does the government invite them to come and play at the Rock Club?

Well, the club arranges this, but the Rock Club in turn is controlled by the government. Every year the club sponsors a three-day rock festival where the unofficial bands can perform. Basically, it's an officially sanctioned concert of unofficial bands. It's a contradiction that just doesn't make sense.

Q: What is the average income for these musicians and others like them?

Since they all have to have regular jobs by law, and since they are really true artists who aren't even interested in doing anything else, these musicians have chosen jobs that don't take much time; they are taking the jobs on the lowest part of the pay scale there. They have jobs like street cleaners, janitors, nightwatchmen. My boyfriend, who is the guitar player for the band Kino, is a boiler. He makes the equivalent of 70 dollars a month. The lead singer of Kino is a custodian two hours a night at a bathroom.

This guy is as famous as any of the Top 40 bands that are around right now, and he's working as a custodian! An official band that makes a thousand dollars a month is a month because they tour so much.

Q: What criteria does the U.S.S.R. set before asking one of these underground or unofficial bands to become an official band?

To become an official band you have to be part of the musicians' union. So I think it's the music and the way you look. You know these unofficial bands—not only are the Soviets afraid and unsure of what they're going to write or sing about, it's also the way they look. They look like musicians here. A lot of them have pierced their ears or even dyed their hair pink. Those are the kind of bands they're afraid of because you never know what they're going to do.

Q: The difference is the official bands seem to be more like businessmen than artists. They want to be rock 'n' roll stars. They want an easier life in Russia, they want more things, to live better and to travel. It doesn't matter to them that they compromise their artistic integrity. When I asked Boris what he thought the difference was between an unofficial and an official band, he said, "It's the difference between love for love and love for sale."

Q: How would you describe the music of the official bands?

The energy and creativity just aren't there. It isn't music that I liked, comparing it to our standards, it's very outdated.

Q: Do Russians have access to Western pop and rock 'n' roll?

They do, but most of it is not easily accessible to the average Russian. All the music that comes in, comes in with tourists, or through Finland or Germany and on the black market. They get all the Top 40, but not much of the underground stuff from America. In fact, they are so up on current music that they knew about some Western bands before I even heard of them. They were raving about groups like the Smiths and the Cocteau Twins before I knew about them. They like the Cure and the Cure. Boris likes Irish bands like Clannad and the Chieftains, Irish folk music, and U2.

Q: I want to talk about how you got the tapes out, and how you decided on the four bands that wound up on *Red Wave*.

I never thought that I would put an album out. But when I realized that was what I was going to do, I figured it would be a one-time collector's item type deal. I thought I should include more than just one band so that people here could get a feel for the kind of rock bands that are over there. And the reason I picked these four bands in particular was they were the ones I had become particularly close with and that I liked; I also thought they were a pretty good representation. All four of them are really different, and I think that's why people will want to buy the record. After listening to it they will have a better idea of what is going on in Soviet rock 'n' roll.

Q: Getting the tapes out is a whole other story in itself. It's difficult, and I have to keep coming up with new ways to get them out. I can't tell you how I do it because I might not be able to do it again in the future, also, somebody might get in trouble. I got out from 8 to 12 songs from each band, then I picked six to represent each band on the album.

Q: What kind of problems did you encounter in trying to get these tapes out? When you are leaving the U.S.S.R., do they thoroughly search your belongings?

It depends. When you're with your groups—and I went over many times with tours—it's easier because there are so many people. Even though they look through people's bags, they can't look that thoroughly, because they'd be there all day. A couple times, though, we came in as individuals and drove through the borders of Finland, where there's little traffic. The border guards get excited about having someone to check, and they go through everything. That's why I had to think of ways to bring the tapes out with me and think up stories of what they were for.

Q: Once you got the tapes back here, how did you go about getting a record label to help you with the distribution?

Originally I went to Warner Bros. They thought it was an interesting idea, but they said even if the project got any further, their lawyers would never let it go. Right away I knew I wasn't going to go to any of the other majors. It would have to be through an independent label.

So I went to Fred Bestel at Big Time, and the minute he heard the tapes he thought it was a great idea, and that people should hear the music. I arranged a pressing and distribution deal with them, meaning that I had to give them the finished product. I paid for everything, and they just pressed it and distributed it. I was happy with that arrangement because I had full control. I still had to borrow and scrounge for the money to do everything, but at least everything was done the way I wanted it.

Q: What has the response to the album been so far?

The initial reaction has been pretty good. The record is across the country in mostly Tower Records stores and maybe some Music Plus stores. Tower's initial orders, which were anywhere from five to 25 records, sold out right away. We've also gotten a lot of requests for the record from college radio stations.

Q: What stations in Los Angeles can people tune into to hear some of the songs?

Well, KROQ did an interview with me and played two of the songs; and one of the local college stations has been playing the album quite a bit. I've done interviews for college radio stations in Michigan, Oklahoma, Indiana, and talk shows like the "CBS Morning News" and Tom Snyder, so there are people who are finding the album and playing it.

Q: Do you think there is a possibility that any of these unofficial groups will be allowed to perform outside the U.S.S.R.?

These bands never thought it would be possible for them to be let out for a concert; now that they've done this album, they've told me they will never doubt that things can change in the world.

What we hope is that the Russian government realizes how positive this album is and how it is changing people's view of Russia and helping the West better understand the Soviet Union. Getting these bands out to tour is our next dream, and I really think that given time, it can happen.