

# Taking rock out of Russia

"THE KGB think I'm an American spy," grins Joanna Stingray between sips of iced water, "and the FBI think I'm working for the Russians."

Stingray, a fast-talking 26-year-old, attracted this unwelcome attention by smuggling out tapes of four Russian underground rock bands and releasing them in America as an album, Red Wave. This is available here tomorrow on Big Time records.

What makes a singer/songwriter from Los Angeles throw up her potentially lucrative recording deal with Polygram records, change her surname from Field to Stingray and risk imprisonment for a handful of Russian rock-and-roll outlaws? Love, money, or a bit of both?

She considers it an act of impulse; but her road to Russia was clearly mapped out at an early age. Her grandparents fled from the Soviet Union as teenagers and settled in New Jersey. Her mother Joan, a high-kicker with Radio City Music Hall Rockette's dance troupe, married film maker Sid Field. Passionately anti-Communist, Sid made a documentary, The Truth About Communism, in the early 60s.

When her parents divorced three years later Stingray found herself living in Beverly Hills, going to school with rich kids while Joan took two jobs to make ends meet. "There was a school trip to Russia in 1978, but we couldn't afford it - so I pretended I didn't really want to go."

After leaving school she concentrated on singing, building up a reputation around Beverly Hills which led to a deal with Polygram records. "But the guy I did the deal with left to go to Motown, and I saw that as a sign that Polygram wouldn't work out."

At this critical moment a second chance to visit the Soviet Union came up in March 1984. She now had the money. Just before she left, a musician friend gave her a phone number and said, "Ring Boris when you get to Leningrad. He's their Bob Dylan - the father of Russian rock-and-roll."

"I thought it was a practical joke," she laughs. "I mean, everybody knows there's no rock music in the Soviet Union." Nevertheless, she made the call and met up

**JOHNNY BLACK spoke to Joanna Stingray, an American singer who's conducting her own style of Glasnost rock-and-roll**

with Boris Grebenshikov of the group Aquarium, who introduced her to Leningrad's underground music scene.

"The Leningrad groups were and still are unofficial, so the government doesn't support them financially. They have part-time jobs to earn enough money so they can go on performing."

Official artists still operate under severe restrictions, and groups like the appallingly dull Autograph (who appeared on the Live Aid satellite link) are paid a standard £350 by Melodia, the only record label in the Soviet Union, irrespective of how many copies are sold. So it's only the concert performances which make a rock star's career profitable.

The unofficial Leningrad bands play wherever they find space, selling tickets on the street to young people who looked sympathetic. At one such concert Stingray met Yuri Kasparian, keyboard player of the group Kino, whom she now plans to marry when and if her visa is renewed.

"Unofficial bands can't record for Melodia," she points out, "so they record on domestic two-track tape machines. Then they give cassette copies to friends who duplicate them and pass the originals on." It was the bulky two-track master tapes that Stingray smuggled out during subsequent visits to the Soviet Union. This was achieved by taking in Western tapes, registering them at Customs, recording Russian bands and leaving with, apparently, the same tapes.

"Believe me, I sweated. But I really felt that, given the opportunity, these bands could stand alongside the Bowies and Jagers; and I wanted to prove to people that Russians are just like the rest of us."

During this period the KGB took an interest but didn't question her directly, perhaps anxious to avoid an international incident while Gorbachev was rebuilding Soviet culture. Instead, they grilled Grebenshikov and others about her activities. Red Wave was subsequently denounced in leading Soviet publications for causing "moral and material damage to the Soviet Union".

The FBI, however, ap-

proached her directly on the pretext of needing to know, according to her, "anything about the Soviet way of life, even insignificant little cultural details."

"At first I was paranoid, convinced I could hear noises

on my phone, but you learn to live with it. I became Stingray because we had to use false names when we made calls to Russia."

Red Wave has sold 15,000 copies in the United States and, apparently as a direct

result, Boris Grebenshikov's Aquarium has acquired official status. According to exiled musician Seva Novgorodsev, who broadcasts a BBC World Service rock show to the Soviet Union, "Red Wave embarrassed them. They'd started trying to organise and export their rock, even opened official rock clubs in Leningrad and Moscow. Then this girl came along and beat them to it."



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