

# THE RUSSIANS ARE STRUMMING! THE RUSSIANS ARE STRUMMING!

## Iron Curtain Gives Way to New Metal



Joanna Stingray outside the Kremlin in Moscow

by Dan Daley

The snow is piled in drifts on the cobbled streets of Leningrad, the mist rising from the banks of the Neva River giving way only to the leaden sky overhead. A young woman stands in the city's Metro station, clutching a phone number and looking for a man she knows only by reputation. Some might say legend.

Suddenly, through a sea of suspi-

cious eyes, one pair stands out, electric, looking straight at her. His long brown hair falls from beneath a furred cap. She stands motionless, mesmerized. They move towards each other, tentatively at first, as though one false move, one simple gesture, will give them away. She has found Boris.

Days later, she walks through the corridors of Moscow's Sheremetievo Airport. The customs handler looks her over with hard eyes. He rummages

through her bag, returning it with a grunt and waving her onto the plane. And nestled beneath the innocent-looking mementoes of a trip to a strange land, in with the wrapped teacups and Sacha bears, the tapes are safe.

For now.

A John LeCarre thriller? Perhaps another lost Ian Fleming gem found at last?

Hardly. This is real life. It's a story of rock and roll in the Great Socialist Worker's Paradise, and how Joanna Stingray, a singer/songwriter from Los Angeles, single-handedly punched a hole in the Iron Curtain and let the music out on a record called *Red Wave*.

The tale above is based on fact, as they say in the movies. Back in March, 1984, Joanna, 26, was getting over her initiation into the sleazier side of the music business—one of those, "You put up a few grand to make your record and we'll match it" deals that ended with a lawsuit and her EP being sent to the accountant's version of magnetic heaven.

Joanna's younger sister, Judy Ann, was about to go on an academically-sponsored tour of the USSR, and Joanna decided to join her to get her mind off the EP debacle. Enter Fate: "Right before I left, a Russian emigre here in Los Angeles called me and said I should get in touch with Boris Grebenshikov, who he said was the most famous rock musician in the Soviet Union," recalls Joanna. "I laughed at the idea of rock in Russia, but I took the number anyway."

Moscow was cold and gray, she found: "It was a place you go to once and never come back to." The tour group moved on to Leningrad, historically the center of Russian culture, Peter the Great's gateway to the West, immortalized by Pushkin and Tolstoi. But Grebenshikov's number was burning a hole in her pocket and her





**Aquarium (L to R):** Vitya Sologub, Boris Grebenshikov, Victor Tsoi, Kostya Kinchev

curiosity got the better of her. Using bits and pieces of three languages, she finally got through to someone in Aquarium, Boris' band. "We planned a meeting at the Leningrad Metro station, which was wall-to-wall people, Joanna remembers. "I didn't know how I would recognize him. So I stood there looking for someone who looked like a rocker would look like in Russia, which is to say I didn't know what I was looking for. Then I caught this guy's eye through the crowd and knew immediately it was Boris."

It might have been that not a lot of men in the Soviet Union sport shoulder-length hair, or that few women have two-toned razor cut tresses like Joanna. But she saw more mystical implications in their initial attraction. "I sensed that there was something incredible about this person. He's one of those few people in the world who you just look at and know that there's something incredible about him. I knew right then that he would have a big effect on my life and that I would know him for the rest of my life. We spent the next three days together."

Through Boris, Joanna became friends with other underground musicians in Russia, and since that first meeting she's made over a dozen trips back to Leningrad, becoming intimate with a side of Soviet culture that the indigenous powers-that-be had at first censured, deeming it illegal and anti-Soviet (and you think we have problems with the PMRC!), and have been warily tolerant of ever since.

During those trips, Joanna got hold of recordings of a number of Russian rock acts, literally smuggling the tapes out under the noses of the Ministry of Culture and the KGB. Those tapes be-

came *Red Wave*, subtitled "Four Underground Bands From The USSR." The double LP set was released on Big Time Records, a California-based label that specializes in college markets and alternative radio. RCA Records has recently picked up the manufacturing and distribution side of Big Time, giving *Red Wave* a shot at a larger audience. While unit sales are barely into five figures so far, the attention the record has garnered has led Joanna Stingray to seek the management expertise of Ken "We Are the World" Kragen and company to handle the numerous queries from the press and from bidders interested in making a movie of her life story.

The double LP has a side devoted to each of four bands. Aquarium, Grebenshikov's outfit, is Slavo-punk, nervous and edgy. Kino's clean guitar twang and lead-footed rhythms are simple and sincere. Alisa is the most polished sounding; a Soviet band no longer intimidated by synthesizer technology. Strange Games is an exuberant college band, all speedball tempos and honky horns.

The bands sing in Russian, but the stiffly translated lyrics reflect the spiritual side of the Russian character, placing personal love in a larger, more societal, context than Western pop songs do. These sorts of ideas are then juxtaposed with more quotidian Russian concerns like the absence of privacy in the culture, as evidenced by the many allusions to crowded apartments and limited access to telephones. The sound and the production values range from fair to atrocious by contemporary Western standards. This is not a Phil Collins record, sonically speaking. But it is a sincere statement

by artists struggling in a hostile milieu.

### You Say You Want a Revolution

Russian rock did not evolve in a vacuum. As with other forms of art, many Soviet pop artists took their lead from Western acts, like The Beatles and the Rolling Stones, Joanna points out. Except that they had to take it underground to do it. It wasn't your basic capital offense—you didn't get put up in front of a wall for playing rock and roll. But other types of harassment were serious and relentless: loss of privileges, apartments and jobs. Boris Grebenshikov was one of the first victims; he was denounced as anti-Soviet and lost his job. Bands had to play in parks and in neighbors' apartments.

But the music and the musicians persevered. About six years ago, when the authorities finally realized they couldn't stamp rock out altogether, they decided to keep an eye on it in two ways: on one hand they legitimized it, designating certain acts whose material they judged to be politically and socially correct as "official" bands. On the other hand, the remaining artists—the so-called "underground" bands—were given a 500-seat hall in Leningrad called "The Rock Club" as their only legal venue to play in, rendering these bands officially unofficial. (Joanna was instructed by the KGB not to sing at the club with any of the bands, since her presence as a Westerner with an approved visa would, from their Orwellian viewpoint, make an officially unofficial band appear unofficially official.)

"Official bands are paid by the state," explains Joanna. "The government is their employer. They don't have to have other jobs like the unofficial bands do. They record on the state-owned label, Melodyia, which gives them access to 16- and 24-track studios, and they're paid to tour. They have to join the Composers Union and a concert organization and the government has to approve their content."

But the biggest difference between the two classifications is in attitude, says Joanna. "The creative energy is missing in the official bands, while it's the most apparent thing in the unofficial ones. In the official bands, they seem to be more like businessmen than creative artists, in the sense that the most important thing to them is to be big stars, have more privileges and live better than the average person. In unofficial bands, the most important thing is their creative freedom."

### We Are Making Record, Yes?

If the official bands get 24-track recording time as a perk, where does that leave the unofficial bands? Out in

a cultural and economic Siberia, according to Joanna, forced to rely on fairly primitive equipment. One session that Joanna sat in on was typical of what *sub rosa* rockers have to endure. A Leningrad resident has converted his apartment into a 2-track studio. His last name, Vishna, translates in English as "Cherry," so it's informally known as Cherry Sound. One room is divided by a wall with a window in the center. The recording side has egg cartons on the wall as a sound baffle. The other side is a control room that houses a pair of 2-track decks of unknown make and vintage. The tape sits on the machine as a pancake with no flanges. After a period of rehearsal, the band plays all the musical parts together onto one 2-track. The singers then go to work, and the vocal signals and the previously recorded music tracks are mixed to the other 2-track simultaneously. The whole process is one big live bounce.

When Joanna sang harmony parts with one of the other singers, she found herself giggling at the way his Russian accent sounded as he struggled with the English lyrics. But she learned after a couple of passes that no one else found it funny: in this kind of a setup you can't punch, so a blown part means you have to start over again from the beginning.

What equipment there is is mainly of European manufacture, says Joanna, with a smattering of American and Japanese items when they're available on the black market. "That's the most expensive stuff to get," she points out. "The equipment is very primitive for the most part. They didn't have synthesizers until recently."

Part of Joanna's mission now is to help the bands get better equipment. She went to several companies in the United States and has found sympathetic ears at Yamaha, Fender and L.A.'s Guitar Center store. "There was one guitar player who saved for years to buy a Yamaha guitar on the black market for the equivalent of \$3000," she recalls. "The guitar retailed for about \$200 in the States. I brought back a picture of him with the guitar and showed it to Doug Buttleman of Yamaha and told him about the price the guy had paid. Buttleman nearly had tears in his eyes. He said, 'Here, take a drum machine. Take this, take that. Help these people!' Yamaha has provided her with their RX-11 digital drum computer, and when she brought it over to Russia, it might as well have come from another planet. She gave it to one musician, along with a pair of distortion and digital delay effects pedals. The next time she saw him he

was running the drum machine through the pedals, with exactly the results you might expect. "He comes up with these noises that he plays for me and after a couple of hours it drives you crazy," she sighs. "They're fascinated by this stuff. All they want to do is play with it."

(Russian rockers aren't all that unsophisticated, she adds. They read every western music magazine they can lay their hands on, including *Mix*, and they give her detailed descriptions of the equipment they'd like her to get for them. "They give me the make and model numbers, but they'd give me the serial numbers too if they could.")

### The Check's in the Mail, Comrade

Releasing an underground record in Russia is no summer cruise down the Volga. For starters, there's no vinyl or pressing plants available outside of official channels, so everything is released on reel-to-reel, though the cassette format is becoming more common as Walkmans make their way onto the black market. "Album" covers are photos taken by friends and pasted onto the tape boxes. Then it's back to the black market for sales, with copies of tapes passed like *samizdat* from one fan to another. What's known as "pirating" in the West is a standard distribution method for underground music in Russia. Copies of *Red Wave* smuggled into Russia sell for 200 rubles—\$250—on the black market.

Bookkeeping is simple: there aren't any royalties to keep track of. This little oversight doesn't bother the bands, though, says Joanna. "It doesn't take much money to survive in the Soviet Union. All they really want to do is play their music and have people hear it."

To make *Red Wave*, Joanna had to literally smuggle the tapes of the bands out of the country, a situation which didn't sit all that well with the Russian authorities. Joanna is prudently vague on the details of getting the tapes out. "It was like a scene from a James Bond movie," she shudders. She had attracted the attention of the KGB, who tailed her, wondering what she was up to, and the FBI, who she says also took a professional interest in her comings and goings.

"It certainly has affected my status," she says of *Red Wave*. "I was very nervous about whether they would grant me another visa after I learned that the KGB had gotten wind of the record through articles in magazines like *International Newsweek*. I did get my visa, but I'll never know if it was because the Soviet consulate in San Francisco didn't have me on their re-

fusal list or if Moscow realized that to decline my visa would create a PR problem for them."

Joanna has been trying to work more through official channels lately, talking with VAAP, the Soviet music publishing agency, about royalties for *Red Wave*. "You don't get anywhere if you don't play the Soviet's game," she says, explaining the fine line between pragmatism and principle she has to walk. (No royalties have been paid to the bands so far, says Joanna; all monies have been plowed back into the project. However, she did make a one-time financial settlement with VAAP for use of the songs. She also signed a document admitting that the record was released illegally, a move that was primarily designed to help Soviet officials save face after they realized *Red Wave* was a *fait accompli*.)

Some unofficial bands, eyeing the more sophisticated recording equipment at Melodyta, are discussing with officials the possibility of agreeing to some sort of official status, if they can do so with minimal artistic compromise. Boris Grebenshikov's Aquarium was the first to do so last November, and according to Joanna, such a move is significant since many underground musicians regard him as their spiritual leader.

Joanna will be getting more familiar with official channels in the future. This April, she's getting married to Yuri Kasparyan, Kino's guitarist, in Leningrad. Love, she says, grew from an initial attraction based on the fact that they both dye their hair blond on top.

While marriage will both simplify and complicate her efforts to get Russian rock a wider audience, Joanna believes that the USSR will become more open to rock music, both because of the policy of *glasnost* (openness) initiated under party leader Gorbachev, and for other, more pragmatic reasons.

"They realize there's a lot of money to be made on rock and roll," she says. "I was over there with UB 40, who asked me to give them some pointers on dealing with the Russians when they played there. One thing the Soviets learned from that concert was that they made a lot of money on it, and they certainly are in dire need of foreign currency, especially dollars, and rock is a way to do that."

Joanna Stingray remains boldly optimistic. "You can change the world," she says. "I learned that from everything that's happened with this. And you can change the Soviet system, mainly because the people there want a change. And music is a great place to start." ■