

# Moscow Times

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## They Love Her in Perm: American Rock in Russia

By Carey Scott  
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"The great thing about having fans," says Joanna Stingray, "is that they bring you fruit juice." The 32-year old singer sits in her kitchen in central Moscow, dressed in black, unadorned except for her two-tone dyed hair. Her apartment, which she shares with her Russian boyfriend, is covered in rock posters and letters and photos sent to her from admirers all over Russia.

"I have a lot of fans in Perm," says Stingray. "I'm not sure why Perm exactly, but I've had a lot of letters from there."

It is not unusual for an American rocker to have young Russian fans, but Stingray's fans do not have to travel to her native Los Angeles to pay homage.

In 1983, Stingray, then a 22-year-old aspiring musician, joined a friend's school trip to the Soviet Union. She didn't believe that real rock could exist in Russia, but she gave a musician named Boris Grebenshchikov a call, and met him on a Leningrad metro platform.

"He didn't really look like a rocker," Stingray remembers. "He was wearing one of those woolly hats."

But, she says, the minute she saw Grebenshchikov, who was to become the most famous Soviet artist of the 1980s, she knew "he would change my life."

Stingray became a member of the underground rock scene that flourished in Leningrad in the era before glasnost. Bands like Kino, led by the charismatic Viktor Tsoi, and Grebenshchikov's Akvarium, were composing songs that would rally together a whole generation of Soviet youth. "The whole scene was so intense," says Stingray. "Nothing was planned; everything just happened."

In 1986, Stingray smuggled out a collection of their recordings and had it released in the West under the title "Red Wave." The media coverage

in the West of the "dissident rock" album raised the hackles of the Soviet authorities, and Stingray was denied a visa for six months, at a time when she was engaged to marry a Russian musician.

Throughout her time in the pre-Gorbachev Soviet Union, Stingray received unwanted attention from the equally suspicious KGB and FBI. "They were so similar! I couldn't believe they didn't know each other. They just didn't understand what I was doing."

Neither did her family. Stingray's father made a film in the 1960s entitled "The Truth About Communism," narrated by Ronald Reagan, which was shown in American public schools. Stingray says her mother "still worries about me being here."

Despite these obstacles, Stingray finally got a visa, got married and then divorced, and a decade later, is still here. She makes trips back to California, but says she could never really leave. "Once Russia gets in your blood, you're stuck here," she laughs.

Times are tougher now. The romance of the underground rock scene has been replaced by hard-nosed business. Gone are the days when official musicians recorded at the state Melodiya studios and released 100,000 copies of their albums. Now, says Stingray, who has released three albums here, an artist is lucky to get 5,000 copies pressed. She still tours, and has made a film, but recording studios now cost real money. "It's getting harder to live on rubles," she sighs.

But Stingray's main ambition of the moment is to raise the social awareness of her fans, most of whom are under 20. She has made an anti-littering advertisement, and an ironically titled anti-smoking video, "Smoking is Good for You."

Greenpeace is also a cause very close to her heart. Using her old connections, Stingray has assembled Russia's top acts Grebenshchikov, DDT, Time Machine to play in a benefit concert on June 19, probably in Gorky Park. She says it is hard making people understand the concept



Stingray, an American rocker living in Russia.

of a non-profit organization. "You have to make them understand that Greenpeace won't use the money to buy Mercedes," she says. "I don't want to force my views on anyone else but if people don't have information, they can't make choices."