

# Newsweek

THE INTERNATIONAL NEWSMAGAZINE



Better understanding? Stingray with Kino's guitarist

## MUSIC

### Back in the U.S.S.R.

A 'Red Wave' of rock

Few rock-and-roll fans have heard of Kino, Aquarium, Alisa or Strange Games. They, like hundreds of other "unofficial" rock bands, are languishing in musical anonymity deep in the Soviet Union. Without the government support of the approved groups, they get few, if any, chances to play in public, tour the country or have their records sold in stores. For the most part, their recordings are passed from friend to friend on cassette tapes. But thanks to a resourceful Los Angeles singer and songwriter who heard—and liked—their brand of Russian rock, the bands are now playing to a faraway audience. Last month Hollywood-based Big Time Records released 10,000 copies of a double album entitled "Red Wave: Four Underground Bands From the U.S.S.R." The bands won't see any royalties from the record sales, but they do get the satisfaction that their music is finally being heard in the West.

The album, which so far is available only in the United States, is the brainchild of Joanna Stingray (a.k.a. Joanna Fields), 25, who has been exploring the Soviet Union's unofficial and unheralded rock world since 1984. To gather the material for the record, Stingray made eight trips to Leningrad and smuggled the tapes back to the United States. It's unlikely that "Red Wave" will

top the pop charts (all the lyrics are in Russian and the sound quality leaves much to be desired), but Stingray is pleased with the results. "If rock fans just put on the album and let it play, everyone ends up humming part of the songs."

Stingray met her Russian rockers almost by accident just over two years ago. A Russian émigré friend, who had heard that she was planning a week-long bus tour of the Soviet Union, suggested that Stingray call up an underground rock star in Leningrad named Boris Grebenshikov. "I started laughing," she recalls. "I said, 'Rock and roll in Russia?' But I took the phone number anyway." In Leningrad, Stingray contacted Grebenshikov, who speaks fluent English and who

took the time to teach her about the Soviet rock scene. As the lead singer for Aquarium, Grebenshikov was a pioneer in writing rock songs with haunting melodies and Russian-language lyrics. "Kids would buzz his apartment and plead to come up," says Stingray. "Some had traveled to Leningrad just to meet him."

**Slipping away:** After that, Stingray traveled to the Soviet Union every few months, flying standby to London and booking a budget package tour from there to Leningrad. She worked as a part-time travel agent, took odd jobs and borrowed from her parents to underwrite her trips. "I stopped movies, dinners, everything," she says. "Any money I could get hold of went toward getting back to Russia." Once there, Stingray was adept at slipping away from the tour guides and not showing up again until the flight home.

To put together "Red Wave," Stingray smuggled out master tapes from each band. By Western standards the tapes were quite crude: the groups didn't have access to professional recording facilities, so they would turn someone's home into a makeshift studio. Once she got the tapes to Los Angeles, Stingray still had trouble getting a record company to produce the album. The major labels, she says, kept asking, "Is this legal?" Technically, all rights belong to Stingray, who collects any profits once Big Time recoups its investment. Stingray doesn't expect to make any money, however. She isn't even sure whether she will be allowed back into the Soviet Union. "I hope they'll understand that I did not do this to embarrass the Soviet government," she says. "I did it to create a better understanding between Americans and Russians by showing that rock and rollers are the same everywhere."

NOEL FINKE GREENBERG in Los Angeles