

ENTERTAINMENT

The Rock and Roll Cultural Exchange

By Wayne Robins

WHEN THE Beatles sang a song called "Back in the USSR" nearly 20 years ago, knowing fans delighted in the absurd wit of the premise: Rock and Russia were mutually exclusive concepts.

But an album on the West Coast-based Big Time label called "Red Wave: Four Underground Bands from the U.S.S.R." shows that there is now at least the semblance of an intriguing rock scene in the Soviet Union. And with increased official tolerance of rock as part of the Gorbachev government's *glasnost*, or openness, policy, it is likely that each country will soon develop more firsthand familiarity with the other nation's rock artists.

Billy Joel has been invited to perform in the Soviet Union this summer. His management company says that it is "still a possibility," and an effort is being made to work out details. UB40, the English reggae group, toured there successfully last fall.

Cyndi Lauper was also invited to tour the Soviet Union, and would like to go. But because of film making and other commitments, she may not be able to do so until next year, according to a spokesman for her management company.

The best known Soviet rock performer is Boris Grebenshchikov, the singer, songwriter and guitarist for the band Aquarium, one of the four groups featured on the Red

Wave album. Grebenshchikov may come to the United States in September and October to record with American musicians and producers.

"What we'd like to do with Boris is prove there is Russian rock and roll in its own right, that Russian rock and roll can be in the world market," said Joanna Stingray, an American singer-songwriter from Los Angeles who produced the Red Wave album and who has written songs with Grebenshchikov and other Soviet rock musicians.

Four groups — Aquarium, Kino, Alisa and Strange Games — get one side each of music on "Red Wave," a two-record set pressed on red and yellow vinyl. Don't wait for the CD version: The material was recorded two years ago on 2- and 8-track tape recorders in home studios, using primitive equipment. Stingray stealthily managed to get the tapes out of the Soviet Union over a nine-month period in the pre-*glasnost* era.

What's most surprising is that they *don't* seem like clones of American or English groups. The songs are in Russian (English translations are provided), and both the heavily accented singing and the odd chord changes that seem to be rooted in native folk styles give the music its own idiomatic feel.

Some of the idioms are very odd indeed, however. The group Strange Games plays reggae and ska, with a little early Springsteen thrown in. Their lyrics are Russian translations of French poems. The songs of Kostya Kinchev of Alisa include a



Joanna Stingray: 'Russian rock and roll can be in the world market'

tribute to the late English glitter rock-musician and romanticist Marc Bolan called "Doctor Boogie." Victor Tsot, the Russian-Korean leader of Kino, composes restless odes to night-time cities and the Soviet Union's merciless winters.

The songs for the most part avoid politics. "These bands are not en-

emies of the state, they aren't dissidents," Stingray said. Stingray went to the Soviet Union as a tourist in March of 1984. Through a Russian emigre friend in Los Angeles, she met Grebenshchikov and other musicians in Moscow and Leningrad, and has been returning to the Soviet

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Union every three months since then. She is now engaged to Yuri Kasparyan, the guitarist for Kino.

There are three levels at which rock music operates in the Soviet Union, according to Stingray. "Official" musicians make it their vocation. They can record for the state-owned label Melodiya, appear in authorized concerts, and get paid for their work. The drawback: The government controls what you perform and when and where you perform.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are "underground" bands, who perform in people's homes or parks. There is an intermediate level known as "unofficial," which is the level on which the bands on "Red Wave" existed. (The groups, in fact, were irritated at the word "underground," used as an American marketing term, in the album's subtitle.) "Unofficial" meant that the groups couldn't record for Melodiya, and couldn't get paid for performing, but were permitted to play in authorized "rock clubs."

"Members of unofficial bands have to have other jobs," Stingray said. "They chose jobs on the lowest pay scale, but which took up the least amount of time." The musicians on the "Red Wave" album work at jobs, as night watchmen, boiler room attendants, street cleaners.

Not surprisingly, Grebenshchikov's songs are the most sophisticated and accomplished. There is a palpable undertow of tension on "Ashes," some unexplained paranoia on "Tonight," and surreal terror on "The Thirst." In the latter song, it's obvious that he's been exposed to the music of

Talking Heads: He quotes a line from the Heads' song "Once in A Lifetime," and gives that song about the dissatisfactions of materialism a new ironic twist: "You can ask yourself, 'where is my beautiful house,'" and continues, "You can even cite David Byrne and Brian Eno / But every communal apartment has its own corridors."

Grebenshchikov can also be warm and elegiac on "Dance On the Edge of the Spring," and optimistic on "Dreams of Something Bigger," which sounds like a Slavic David Bowie singing Bob Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." His best song, though, is the brooding anthem "Rock and Roll's Dead." This may well be the confession of Grebenshchikov's worst nightmare: that official acceptance will destroy the soul of his music.

"Boris calls himself 'the darling of *glasnost*,'" Stingray said. "They've taken Boris and Aquarium and made them the symbol of the new liberalism in the Soviet Union. He's in newspapers, magazines and TV everyday."

But it's not a dream come true. "He feels money is a dangerous thing," Stingray said. "People who spend time and energy trying to make money lose their creative energy. Underground bands who go mainstream lose something, and that's happened to virtually every band that went from 'underground' to 'official.' So for him, it's a scary thing to do."

But for Soviet rockers, like their American counterparts, it's the only thing to do. As Kostya Kinchev of Alisa sings in "Bad Boy": "In the crater of a nuclear explosion . . . And standing in a subway / And even where it's forbidden / I will sing: rock and roll!" /■