

THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING THE RUSSIANS ARE



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President Mikhail Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* have dissolved what were once rigid trade barriers between the Soviet Union and the West. The result? Get ready for an onslaught of serious rock bands from the U.S.S.R.

Summer's here and the time is right for dancing in the streets — in Moscow, that is. Thanks to *glasnost*, the Soviet Union's burgeoning youth culture is exulting in a period of rapid and profound social, artistic and political change — kind of like America did in the late '60s. One result of all this change is that after years of repressing the stuff, the Soviet government has finally realized that you can't knock the rock.

The government's decision is most likely motivated by economics, since the debt-burdened Soviet economy could very well collapse if something isn't done soon, and rock is a good way to inject foreign cash into the country — recall the way the Beatles almost singlehandedly resuscitated the floundering British economy in the early '60s (why do you think they got the M.B.E.?). And the promotional value of a successful Soviet

BY MICHAEL AZERRAD

THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING



SOVIET ROCK

group would be priceless — what better way to show the world that you're lightening up than to export rock bands?

However, Soviet rock impresario Stas Namin doesn't think that "rocknost" is all that calculated. "The Russian government is so crazy with the situation here — it's close to civil war — so they don't care about all this rock and roll shit. Believe me, they have much more problems to worry about," he says.

Whatever the reasons, there has been a glut of releases by Soviet bands recently, led by the first U.S. major label release by a Russian rocker, Boris Grebenshikov; there are also fine releases by moody new wavers Kino, metal masters Gorky Park and the impossible-to-categorize Zvuki Mu, as well as keyboardist Serge Kuriokhin's collaboration with avant guitarist Henry Kaiser. And there's more Soviet rock on the way.

Thanks to the Soviet government's laissez-faire attitude, the rock scene there has become very Westernized (read: capitalized). Bands regularly play large arenas, with posters proudly plastered all over the city; they've gotten into merchandising posters and T-shirts, and professional managers and promoters take care of the business end. And if they can swing the financing, most bands can travel to the West, meet musicians they've dreamed of meeting for years and buy up all the equipment they can.

One beneficiary of this rock revolution is the grandfather of Soviet rock, Stas Namin, who began playing rock 'n' roll in the late '60s and formed Flowers, the first nationally popular Soviet rock group. By '72 the group had gotten *too* popular, and the government made them a "forbidden" band for 10 years. Last year, Namin founded the Stas Namin Music Center in Moscow's Gorky Park. The Center includes the first private Soviet recording studio, a video studio, a booking agency, a 12,000 seat amphitheatre and a 24-hour nightclub.

Kino (l-r): Yuri Kaspariyan, Victor Tsoi, Gustov Gurianov and Igor Tikomirov.



Joanna Stingray

Opening day saw a jam session featuring Quincy Jones, Bon Jovi, Pink Floyd, U2 and Peter Gabriel. The Center also arranges festivals (including the Moscow Peace Festival), and will soon begin publishing a rock magazine with a circulation of two million. It is also set to launch a radio show.

The enterprising Namin clearly represents the more commercially ambitious side of Soviet rock. He says the days of coasting on the novelty of being Russian are already gone. "To make a record which makes it to the States is not so difficult. The most difficult thing to do is to break the group, to make it popular." He dismisses artsy bands like Kino, with their vaguely political lyrics, and Zvuki Mu's oddball stance as "just funny, exotic novelty from the Soviet Union — there's no music, no sound,"

adding, "It's time for us to play real music, and not just be controversial."

Leningrad was Russia's first rock 'n' roll town, followed soon after by Moscow. But now, almost every city, even far-flung places like Vilnius and Sverdlovsk, boast a thriving rock scene; there are even rock bands in Siberia. But with diversity comes rivalry — Moscow musicians complain that their Leningrad counterparts don't really play a "Russian" kind of rock; Leningrad says the same thing about Moscow. *Everybody* agrees that the border city of Tallinn (capital of the Estonian S.S.R.) produces the Soviet Union's most Western-sounding rock... but the natives of Tallinn take that as a compliment.

"Rock and roll is one of the easiest things that people can relate to, and it can create a bond between two countries."

— Joanna Stingray

Just before Joanna Stingray's first visit to the Soviet Union in 1984, a Russian emigre told her to check out some of the rock bands there. She thought it was a joke. But in Leningrad, she met Boris Grebenshikov and swiftly became immersed in a flourishing underground rock scene. Since "unofficial" bands were barred from the state label, they'd press flexidiscs on used x-ray film and sell cassettes on the black market, which were then bootlegged ad infinitum. (The Soviet state label, Melodiya, is the only game in town if you want to make a record. Because it pays a flat fee to its artists, with no royalties, it's no surprise that there's a huge bootleg scene in the U.S.S.R.)

Oddly enough, it was a *lousy* Russian band that inspired Stingray to produce *Red Wave — 4 Underground Bands From the U.S.S.R.*, a double-LP released by the late, great Big Time Records in 1986. Autograf's via-satellite appearance at Live Aid was so bad that the audience booed, and MTV cut to a commercial. "It was a terrible performance which had a very negative effect on the American public. It reinforced the idea that Russia was 20 years behind," Stingray says.

Feeling she had to stick up for Russian rock, she rounded up Grebenshikov's Aquarium, plus Kino, Alisa and Strange Game. As recently as 1986, Americans were still leery of getting involved with underground Russian bands, so Stingray produced *Red Wave* herself, on a primitive two-track machine. It sold a very encouraging 20,000 copies in the U.S.

Stingray is planning to produce four more Soviet rock records in the coming year, including albums by Vasily Shumov, Alisa, Strange Game and the Moscow group, Center.

According to Stingray, Kino is the biggest band in the world's biggest country (bias alert — she's married to the group's lead guitarist). It's difficult to count bootlegged cassettes, but Stingray estimates that there are over two million copies of its new album, *Groupa Kroovy* ("Blood Type"), in the country. "They're absolutely the number one group here — they tour all over the U.S.S.R. They'll play three or four nights in one town for 20,000 people. There are screaming, crying girls and everything."

SOVIET ROCK

Stas Namin replies that Brigada S, which was profiled recently in *Time Magazine*, is the U.S.S.R.'s true number one group. U2's Edge was reportedly blown away by the band, which sports a brass section and a dynamic lead singer who Namin describes as an "angry Charlie Chaplin." A U.S. deal is imminent.

Kino's album, *Groupa Kroovy* (Gold Castle) is now available in the States, and it's worth checking out. The album was recorded in Russia on a home studio, and is sung in Russian, with singer Victor Tsoi, like many Soviet rockers, growling in a portentous monotone near the bottom of his range. With its stark textures and bleak minor keys, it's closer to Joy Division than arena rock, and some of the record's best cuts — "It's Our Time, Our Turn," "Shut the Door Behind Me," and "Boshe-tunmay" — are reminiscent of the Cure, whose dank, dreary music seems quite compatible with the Russian psyche.

Despite the obliquely political nature of Kino's songs, Stingray says government censorship is almost nonexistent. "It's just amazing how they've come to accept the fact that it's OK for people to say what they feel or what's really happening. A couple of years ago, they had some censorship problems, but not anymore."

Furthermore, the distinction between "official" and "unofficial" bands is starting to blur. "Official" bands, made up of professional musicians who record for Melodiya, are paid by the government. Their lyrics are censored, and they are told when and where to tour. "Unofficial" bands were previously not allowed to make money from music, and so many musicians shoveled coal — a high-paying job which allowed them to work only a couple of days a week.

Now, a band like Kino makes more in one concert than most Soviet citizens make in an entire month. Also, "unofficial" music was banned from radio and couldn't be played in large halls. Now, "unofficial" bands flood the airwaves and play events such as the annual three-day festival in Leningrad. With only 500 seats in the arena, it's hopelessly sold out months in advance.

Zvuki Mu (pictured l-r): Peter Mamonov, Lyosha Bortnichuk and Sasha Lipnitsky.



Boris Grebenshikov

BORIS GREBENSHIKOV

In the U.S.S.R., Boris Grebenshikov is known as the "new Dylan," which proves that the Soviet Union isn't 20 years behind the times, just 15. For 10 years, he was the leader of the pioneering Soviet group, Aquarium, whose three Melodiya albums have sold a total of three million copies in Russia. Unlike most Russian rockers, Grebenshikov had the luxury of going to America to write songs for his solo album; he recorded them in Montreal, London, Los Angeles and New York. Eurythmics' Dave Stewart produced this rather slick, AOR-ready affair, and Chrissie Hynde and Annie Lennox make guest appearances. On paper, Radio Silence (Co-

DAVID OJAAR

lumbia) stands the greatest chance of success of this first crop of Soviet releases, because of Stewart, the production values and because it's mostly sung in English.

But for all its commercial promise, even Stingray runs a little cold on the record, intimating a sell-out on Grebenshikov's part. "It's hard to listen to a record so polished, that has such a pop-dance side to it — it just doesn't fit. I like a couple of songs on there, but with his Russian stuff, you love everything he does. His lyrics in Russian are so important to people — they live by every word he says — but I know a few people who know his lyrics in Russian and think his English lyrics are kind of trite."

GORKY PARK

Once they get the obligatory fist-waving clichés over with, heavy metallers Gorky Park crank out an extremely air guitar-friendly din. They got some expert help from producer Bruce Fairbairn, whose platinum thumb has graced multi-million-selling albums by Bon Jovi and Bryan Adams. The band is something of a Soviet version of Cream, since Stas Namin hand-picked the best musicians he knew in the U.S.S.R. for this band. Working a neo-Zeppelin sound, the band boasts the outstanding lead guitar of Alexei Belov, who turns in some very nifty Jeff Beck-inspired licks. Kramer Guitars, which is building a guitar factory in Moscow, manages Gorky Park.

One of the band's best tracks is a stomping metal version of the Who's "My Generation," appropriate since the U.S.S.R. is one of the few countries left in the world where the lines "People try to put us down/just because we get around" still have any meaning. The band is scheduled to play August 13-14 at the Moscow Peace Festival with Bon Jovi, Motley Crue, Scorpions, Cinderella and Skid Row; Gorky Park might just blow a couple of those bands right off the stage.

ZVUKI MU

Unlike Grebenshikov or Gorky Park, Zvuki Mu sounds truly alien. Its U.S. debut album is subtitled "Modern Sounds From Russia," and nothing could be more on target — Zvuki Mu would sound as cutting edge in New York's East Village as it does in Novosibirsk. One Russian music critic denounced them as "a source of infection," and one can see why — music this profoundly quirky is more subversive artistically than politically, but sometimes that's one and the same thing.

The group's U.S. debut, produced by Brian Eno for his Opal label (distributed by Warner Bros.), is full of cramped, spooky spaces. Dominating the sound is Sasha Lipnitsky's looming lead bass with Lyova Pavlov's clattering Beefheartian drums rarely outlining a simple pulsebeat. But the real attraction of this band is singer Peter Mamonov, who intones vague lyrics that teeter uneasily between realism and metaphor; the words are in Russian, but his ravings come vaulting over the language barrier like a crazed escapee.

Eno discovered Zvuki Mu on a videotape of Russian bands, and the album was recorded in a Moscow state studio which had been previously closed to "unofficial" bands.

The band's name comes from the Russian for "The Sound of Music," one of Russia's most popular movies, but it's truncated to something which translates as "The Sound of Moo."

continued on 71

SOVIET ROCK

From 30

Stingray says the band really has to be seen to be believed, what with Mamonov's artful grimaces, which Eno dubbed "total face theatre." Its upcoming American tour should be fantastic.

Also just out on Opal is *I Will Not Be Sad in This World*, by Djivan Gasparian, a Soviet Armenian musician who plays a wind instrument called the *duduk*. It is, without question, the most mournful sound ever recorded.

Pulnosc is a Czech group which includes several members of the legendary Prague (Czechoslovakia) band, the Plastic People. Pulnosc grinds out discordant, mesmerizing grooves located somewhere between the Sugarcubes and Joy Division (with the Velvet Underground thrown in for that extra bit of hipness). The band recently did a brief tour of the States, including a sold-out two-night stint at the New York performance space P.S. 122, with downtown brainthrob Elliott Sharp and former Captain Beefheart guitarist Gary Lucas sitting in for the entire set.

KURIOKHIN/KAISER

Every year, keyboardist Serge Kuriokhin leads a Soviet multi-media performance spectacle called "Popular Mechanics," and he's played with everyone from the excellent Soviet jazz group, the Ganelin Trio, to Aquarium, of which he was a member for five years. Kuriokhin was recently praised by the *New York Times*, which compared him to everyone from Cecil Taylor to Dmitri Shostakovich.

Kaiser and Kuriokhin's joint project, *Popular Science* (Rykodisc), is only the latest teaming for Kaiser, a superlative musician who has



Serge Kuriokhin and Henry Kaiser

collaborated with just about everybody except Willie Nelson. The music was written and recorded in four days last October, almost exclusively using the Synclavier. It must have been an interesting time, since Kaiser does not speak Russian, Kuriokhin does not speak English, and the two musicians worked alone without a translator. To top it off, it was Kuriokhin's first

contact with the Synclavier, an ultra-sophisticated digital keyboard/recording studio that can make virtually any sound.

Miraculously, they came up with a thoroughly enjoyable (and thoroughly challenging) record. The music ranges from classically inspired keyboard compositions (a la Frank Zappa's recent "difficult" music) to the most perfectly annoying sounds since NRBQ's *Tapdancing Bats*. Titles like "The Magic Soda Fountain," "Onion in a Closet" and "Electricity vs. Foods" should provide a fair idea of the goings-on.

The liner notes actually encourage you to reprogram the album's 19 tracks if you have a CD player—with 77 minutes of music, there are plenty of possibilities, from an album of challenging contemporary classical to something which sounds very much like a twisted cartoon soundtrack (that's a compliment).

No doubt about it, everything Soviet is hot now—Zvuki Mu, Kino, Boris Grebenshikov and Pulnosc are likely to be only the first trickle of an impending Red Wave. A lot of groups will quickly disappear as the novelty value wears off, but a few will go on—Kino, Pulnosc and Zvuki Mu may find a college following, the charismatic Grebenshikov could find an American niche, and Gorky Park will almost surely do quite well in the American metal scene.

Where will it all end? According to Stingray, "Rock 'n' roll is one of the easiest things that people can relate to, and it can create a bond between two countries." ●

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