

MUSIC

BACK IN THE U.S.S.R. *New LP features four bands from Leningrad*

JOANNA STINGRAY'S FIRST FORAY INTO record production was hardly a typical one. It took a year, from start to finish, required four trips to the Soviet Union and involved smuggling recording tape out from behind the iron curtain. Eventually, both the KGB and the FBI had a lot of questions for her. "Anybody who goes in and out of that country as much as I do has both sides wondering if they're a spy," said Stingray, a twenty-six-year-old Los Angeles singer-songwriter.

But Stingray's persistence paid off. *Red Wave: 4 Underground Bands from the USSR*—which Stingray compiled, produced and mastered—is the first album of Russian rock ever released in the U.S. A two-record set on the L.A.-based Big Time Records label, *Red Wave* features four Leningrad bands: Alisa, Strange Games, Kino and Aquarium. Stingray first became involved with the Soviet rock scene when she contacted Boris Grebenshikov, the leader of Aquarium, during a one-week trip to the U.S.S.R. in

1984. A Russian friend in L.A. had given her his number. "He said he was the most famous rock & roller over there," said Stingray. "My initial reaction was 'Wait a minute, there's no rock over there. This is a joke.'"

Moscow, which was "gray, cold and unhappy," seemed to confirm her doubts. But when she contacted Grebenshikov in Leningrad, she found him at the center of a thriving rock subculture, where fifteen to twenty bands compete to play at a club that opened in 1981 and punks dye their hair pink, wear leather and even take part in the occasional slam dance. "Moscow and Leningrad are almost like two different countries," said Stingray. "Leningrad is so much closer to the West."

Back home, Stingray "couldn't think about anything else but everything that happened to me there. I had to go back." She has been back every three months since, to write songs with Grebenshikov, to listen to various Leningrad groups and to videotape the bands.

Stingray got the idea for *Red Wave* after an "official" Soviet band, Autograph, appeared via satellite during last summer's Live Aid concert. "They were terrible, so boring. I had everyone I know call me and say, 'Joanna, that's what you were raving about?' It made me sick, and I said, 'Wait a minute. The people I hang out with rank up there with the Bowies and the Dylans of this world. Maybe it's about time I showed people.'"

Unlike Autograph, the bands on *Red Wave* are all "unofficial"; they are not allowed to play for money or to release their music on the state-owned Melodia Records, the Soviet Union's only label. The flip side is that they are not as heavily regulated as the official bands, whose members are employed by the state and thus subject to stringent censorship. The unofficial tag doesn't keep them from distributing music domestically through an underground grapevine that extends across the country.

"One way to look at it is that they've created their own independent label,"

Stingray said. "It's become very efficient, more so than a lot of independent labels here."

The music on *Red Wave*—which ranges from the ska-tinged pop of Kino to the brooding, introspective songwriting of Grebenshikov—was recorded mostly in cramped living rooms transformed into home studios with borrowed two-track and eight-track equipment. The lyrics, sung in Russian (a translated lyric sheet is provided), are not overtly political. But veiled references to politics shine through, as does a keen awareness of progressive Western rock.

"This doesn't have to do with politics," said Stingray, who plans to send copies of *Red Wave* to President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, and is recording her own album in the U.S. "I think of it as a step above politics. These singers are really singing about how you can live in the Soviet Union and have a great time. I mean, they have a great time."

—Michael R. Benson