

Underground Soviet bands get unlikely champion

THE FBI WANTED to talk to her. So did the KGB. Some of her friends thought she was crazy. But Joanna Fields, 26, of Los Angeles had a simple answer: "Hey, I'm just a rock 'n' roller."

Eight trips to the USSR between March 1984 and this spring raised bureaucratic eyebrows and security questions on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Who is this young woman with the crazy punk haircut and what is she doing? The answers to those questions came with last month's release of the two-record set "Red Wave: 4 Underground Bands From the USSR" (Big Time Records).

The album contains music smuggled out of the Soviet Union by Fields, who now goes by the last name "Stingray." That was her code name when contacting the Russian groups that appear on the compilation album. She has now taken it as her own.

The four groups documented on the album — Aquarium, Kino, Alina and Strange Games — are four



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By David Barton

"unofficial" groups from Leningrad. Although these groups are not illegal — they are allowed to play live in a government-run club in Leningrad — they are not allowed to receive money for their work, nor are they allowed to record for the state record label, Melodiya, or to have their music broadcast on state radio.

"I thought Russia was so gray and dull," she said in a phone interview of her first trip to the Soviet Union. "The people seemed so unhappy." But a Russian friend in Los Angeles, aware of Fields' interest in songwriting, had given her the address of a friend in Leningrad. That friend turned out to be singer/songwriter Boris Gre-

benschikov, the first Russian to sing his own rock songs in his native tongue: the "father of Russian rock 'n' roll."

The two hit it off and even collaborated on some songs. After her return to Los Angeles, Fields found that she was writing songs in a different way, influenced by Grebenschikov. She went back to Russia, wrote more songs with him and became involved in the Leningrad "unofficial" rock scene.

THESE GROUPS are "unofficial," unrecognized by the government, not because of their lyrics — in translation they seem basically apolitical. But, said Stingray, they are unofficial "because they want to be. Because as unofficial groups they have complete artistic freedom. Boris (Grebenschikov) has been asked to be an official act, but the official bands are told when to go on tour, when to record, even what to record."

On the other hand, official bands such as Autograph make a decent living. Life for unofficial acts is quite different. Recordings are not done in Melodiya's big studios, but in the living rooms of friends who happen to get access to a two-track (or more recently, eight-track) tape recorder. The crude finished tapes are then circulated on cassette, dubbed off and passed from friend to friend. The artists receive no royalties.

Instead, said Stingray, they work jobs (it is required by law that they work) that take as little time and attention as possible, even though there's little money in cleaning streets and watching apartment building boilers.

The irony in this is that these bands, especially Grebenschikov's Aquarium, are tremendously popular, even rivaling the better-financed official acts.

"Boris is as famous there as a Bowie or a Dylan," said Stingray. "They (fans) come up to him on the street, come to his apartment. One guy showed up at his apartment and asked to come up, said he had come 18 hours by train from Siberia. They just want to be around him. Sometimes he lets them come up and we just keep working on the songs — they're happy just to sit and watch."

The bands play fairly regularly, says Stingray, but only one venue is authorized: the 1,000-seat Rock Club, opened by the government in 1981 as a concession to the unofficial bands. But, she says, "These bands could sell out 10,000-seat arenas. Scalpers get as much as \$100 for the \$1 tickets." The groups also may play in factory halls and do a lot of "home concerts" for parties, usually playing just acoustic instruments.

Stingray's exposure to this scene over four trips to Russia planted the seed that would become the new album. But the turning point was last year's Live Aid broadcast, in which the official Russian band Autograph performed via satellite. "Autograph was like a cocktail band from the '50s! My friends said to me, 'That's what you've been talking about!' They thought I was crazy." It was then that she knew what she had to do.



Special to The Bee

Four leaders of Russian rock, from left: Vitia Sologub of Strange Games, Boris Grebenschikov of Aquarium, Victor Tsoi of Kino and Kostya Kinchev of Alisa in Leningrad.



Bee file

Joanna Stingray's frequent trips and numerous calls to the Soviet Union led to questioning by both the FBI and KGB.

It took her four more trips to the USSR to gather the tapes and make the arrangements for what would become the "Red Wave" album. During those trips, she also filmed videos for each group, but says that, contrary to popular belief here, filming was not much of a problem: "Most people on the streets didn't say anything to us because they thought we were KGB." The videos should be released later this year.

Stingray's frequent trips and numerous calls to the Soviet Union drew the attention of both the KGB and the FBI. Grebenschikov was questioned by the KGB, which thought that Stingray was perhaps a CIA agent ("We got a big laugh out of that," she says) and the FBI paid her a visit, she said. On a later trip, Stingray said she was taken from an official rock festival and questioned by the KGB.

Stingray noted that the release of the record is not a primarily political act. "I'm a rock 'n' roller," she says. "I think music is on a level above politics. It has no borders. The Russians are people just like us."

Fields hears "a unique energy that is Russian. Since they don't have access to modern equipment, they are forced to be original. They'll grab a neat piece of metal

out of the street to use in recording new songs."

The Russian musicians are in close touch with developments in the outside music world. "They're very aware of it — they get tapes from tourists and hear lots of stuff on foreign radio stations. They were raving about the Smiths and the Cocteau Twins before I'd ever heard of them. They know all the latest videos."

Equipment is a big problem. "Yuri (Kasparyan, guitarist for Kino and now Stingray's long-distance lover) saved for four years to buy a guitar. He spent \$3,000 for a \$300 guitar on the black market. They don't mind not having the money; access to equipment is their only complaint."

It is too early to tell what the Soviets' reaction to her album will be, but she says she is confident that it will be positive and that she will be allowed to return there, as planned, in August. "I hope that it changes what constitutes 'official music' in Russia. I think that they will see that this shows us (foreigners) that the Russian groups are good, and that the people are just like us."

"I hope so," she adds. "Cause these people are family to me and it's very important that I get back there."