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## THE RETURN OF STINGRAY

Sergey Chernov  
Staff Writer

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Joanna Stingray (l) in 1984, the year she first met Boris Grebenshchikov (r) of Akvarium.  
Photo: FOR SPT / For The St. Petersburg Times

Twenty years ago a young musician from America came to Russia and played a small but significant part in ripping down the Iron Curtain. Now, after a stranger-than-fiction life that included bringing Russian rock to the West, a career as a singer and television host in Russia, a wedding that even became a matter of international diplomacy and an abrupt return to the U.S. in 1995, Joanna Stingray is back.

Now based in Los Angeles, Stingray returned to mark 20 years since her first trip to Russia with a one-off concert in Moscow and a flying visit to St. Petersburg last month. In an interview with The St. Petersburg Times, Stingray spoke out about what she did to change the world, her intimate relationships with legends of Russian music, and her encounters with Communist aparatchiks and Russian mobsters.

Although the 20th anniversary concert was held at B2 club in Moscow, Stingray's first visit to Russia was to St. Petersburg, then known by its Soviet name Leningrad.

The 23-year-old Stingray (born Joanna Fields), came to the city as an independent traveler with her sister Judy in March 1984. A Russian emigre friend in the U.S. helped her to contact Boris Grebenshchikov, the frontman of Akvarium, then the leading underground rock band in Russia. Grebenshchikov met Stingray at a subway station and took her to the apartment of Seva Gakkel, then Akvarium's cellist.

"That's where we first sat and talked," said Stingray by phone from her home in Los Angeles last week.

At the time, Stingray was a brand new pop/rock vocalist slightly reminiscent of Cindy Lauper, and who had released her U.S. 12-inch, 4-track debut, "Beverly Hills Brat," in 1983. Like Madonna, for artistic reasons she was then simply known by her first name.

"[Grebenshchikov] let me listen to his music, I let him listen to my album that I had out in the States. We started listening to each other's music."

In the U.S.S.R. bands such as Akvarium were officially considered at best "amateur," at worst "non-existent." Their musicians were supposed to have non-musical permanent jobs. They performed rare, unpaid, invitation-only concerts mainly at the specialized venues such as the local House of People's Creativity. The music was available only on home-produced tapes to be distributed privately, mostly among friends. But Stingray was impressed.

"I remember when I heard [Grebenshchikov's] music, it just sounded so spiritual and beautiful that it definitely moved me," she said. "I remember being just overwhelmed by his music even if I didn't understand the lyrics. For some reason the music and songs were just very powerful."

Stingray, who made a second trip to St. Petersburg in August 1984, thought she should share the music with her compatriots in America.

"After time I became very close to Boris, and he introduced me to a lot of the other bands from the Leningrad Rock Club, and so when I would bring back Boris's music to play to people [in the U.S.], they had the same impression I had," said Stingray.

"They were so surprised that there was actually rock 'n' roll in Russia. When they saw photos of the musicians and they heard the music, people just opened their eyes up. Then I decided 'Boy! Maybe I should do an album so that all America can see that there's rock in Russia, so basically the idea came from Boris and I.

"We were the two that sat down and figured to do a record and to call it 'Red Wave,' and then I think that I decided to do more than one band because I thought that if I'm giving Americans the chance to see there's rock in Russia, better I give them a couple of different tastes of what there is. So that's how I came up with the four bands to put on there."

The next year, 1985, was spent preparing the album. Getting the music out of the Soviet Union certainly required courage and secrecy.

"Obviously we knew that the KGB was following us," said Stingray.

"The first time was at the Rock Club, you know. A man at the end [of a concert] grabbed me and took me into a room and kind of interrogated me, talking things through...

"I remember that once we had lyrics [hidden] in our boots! I put a bunch of lyrics underneath my boot, and we carried the tapes in the back of our jackets, so, you know, we *were* scared. And the silly thing was is that it wasn't like we were smuggling anything illegal like drugs. All that we were taking out was lyrics and music - but certainly there was a sense of danger about somebody finding that we were hiding something and getting into trouble."

The breakthrough came when the double album, "Red Wave. 4 Underground Bands from the U.S.S.R.," featuring Petersburg acts Akvarium, Kino, Alisa and Stranniye Igry (Strange Games) was released on the Los Angeles-based indie label Big Time Records on June 27, 1986.

To prevent problems for them in the Soviet Union, Stingray was cautious to claim that the Russian bands had nothing to do with the album.

"The musicians do not bear any responsibility for publishing these tapes," said a notice on the album cover, while Grebenshchikov, who alongside Stingray was credited with the album's concept, went by the pseudonym "Jagger."

"We had code-names for all the bands working on the records, and 'Jagger' was actually Boris's codename, and 'Stingray' was my code name."

Although only a few of the 25,000 albums were sold, the reaction to "Red Wave" in the U.S. was overwhelming.

"Oh, I think it blew people away, because again you have to remember this was back under communism when American opinion of Russia was, you know, this enemy that we were afraid of, and they just never imagined there could be rock music there," said Stingray.

"When they saw what the musicians looked like, and that they looked like rock musicians anywhere, and that the music sounded like rock music anywhere, I think it just really opened up people's eyes to the fact that rock 'n' roll has no borders, that it's happening in every country, whether it's a communist country or a capitalist country. So I think it had a very good impact."

The record caught the attention of western artists such as David Bowie, Brian Eno and Andy Warhol, to name just a few.

"David Bowie definitely was very into it," said Stingray.

"He had heard of Boris and some of Boris's music even before that, and he helped me to buy a red Kramer guitar for Boris."

Because the circulation of the dollar was strictly illegal in the Soviet Union, Stingray would bring musicians musical equipment as compensation for their participation in the album.

"I was kind of like Santa Claus every time I came back, because I always had a lot of stuff for them, and they usually asked me for things they needed. I remember [the late keyboard player Sergei] Kuryokhin asked me for a keyboard and we came back and brought him this really neat Yamaha keyboard that he really liked, and with Boris it was guitars.

"The record obviously didn't make a lot of money. The record was more important in that it got people to see that rock 'n' roll existed in Russia. Obviously it couldn't be [a commercial hit] because it was, you know, recorded on a two-track and they were singing in Russian."

Back in the U.S.S.R., "Red Wave" made the bureaucrats seek new ways in dealing with underground rock. Six months later an Akvarium album would become the first officially released album of Russian underground rock. It had a positive effect on both fans and bands.

"I think a lot of 'Red Wave' did made sense to these groups in Russia, it made their fans still happier, it kind of validated how much they loved these bands that these bands are also recognized in the West. I just remember walking on the streets of Leningrad after 'Red Wave' and all the young people screaming 'Stingray! 'Red Wave!' It seemed like the fans were so thrilled that this record came out in the West. It seemed very important to them.

"When 'Red Wave' came out the glasnost thing started happening, so I think it had some impact on changing the situation for the musicians."

It was important that the Russian underground rock musicians see their work on real vinyl symbolizing the recognition they had longed for for years.

"A man from the Swedish Consulate in Leningrad helped to get in a box of records so I could give them to the musicians. I remember their faces looking at the album, and the only one who spoke was Sergei Kuryokhin, and he said, 'OK...' He looked [at the photo] on the back [of the album] and saw that the top of the Church [of the Spilt Blood] was lit up and then my blond hair was lit up [by the sun] and Sergei said, 'God sent a message to the church and He sent a message to you.' That totally conveyed to me how it felt for the musicians that they could see their music on vinyl with a real album cover."

Stingray continued to visit Russia but she could feel the anger of the Soviet authorities toward her activities as articles under such headlines as "'Red Wave' on Muddy Waters" appeared in the state-controlled press.

"They were very angry that the work was unofficial because they termed these musicians 'amateur,' [and felt] that they just weren't quite as good enough to be official musicians in Russia. So they were first mad that it said underground they were also mad that some of the magazines said that I *smuggled* the stuff, so they weren't happy with that. I never said this, but I remember Newsweek did."

Stingray did try to find ways to settle the issue with Soviet officials.

"When I came back, I went to [the Soviet copyright agency] VAAP in Moscow and said I was sorry and explained to them why I did it, that I thought it was important that the West saw that there was great rock 'n' roll in Russia. And eventually they had me sign a paper admitting that I did it without their authority and that I would pay a penalty fee, which I did."

But when Stingray was about to come back to get married with Yury Kasparyan, the guitarist with the band Kino, with the wedding scheduled for April 1987, she was suddenly denied a Soviet entrance visa, and would get more denials over the next six months.

"Obviously it was a hard time for me," she said.

"I was so excited to get married to Yury, to be there, and then to be cut off and not able to even get there to see him - it was a very difficult period. Thank goodness it only lasted six months."

Trapped in Los Angeles, Stingray recorded a home-made album, in the Russian underground rockers' style called "Save Stingray," with such songs as the angry "Petty Men."

She then took her case to U.S. politicians.

"We had a lot of very important politicians that were pushing the Russians and saying, you know, 'you can't separate people when they love each other, that it's not fair to decline a visa for two people who want to get married,'" she said.

Senators Alan Cranston and Edward Kennedy as well as then Secretary of State George Shultz spoke on her behalf, and the wedding finally took place in St. Petersburg in November 1987.

Having released a pair of albums by Kino and Center, a Moscow band, on her own label Red Wave Records that failed to get the same level of attention as "Red Wave" had, Stingray decided to concentrate on her own work instead.

"After those two [albums] I realized that I'd done what I could do in terms of showing the American people that there was Russian rock. I'd done enough. It wasn't going to work to try and make it commercial."

By 1989 Stingray was living in Moscow. She was occupied with her Russian careers as a singer (After 1990's "Thinking Till Monday" Stingray released 5 albums and a compilation in Russia) and a television personality with her own show "Red Wave Presents." She also had a new partner, Alexander Vasilyev, then the drummer with Center.

"Moscow was the period when I had *my* career, when I had made a couple of TV programs and when I had my albums out," she said. Despite her unlikely success, Stingray felt uncomfortable in post-Soviet Moscow.

"It just seemed that everybody was trying to figure out the capitalism and they were all obsessed with trying to figure out how to make money. I left for another reason but I also had to deal with the mafia who came to me and wanted some money. They thought that since my videos were on TV a lot that I must be paying to have them aired. So I met with them and explain that I didn't pay to have my videos on - I gave the stations other Western videos, and then they played my videos.

"But it was just a time in my life where I was ready to come home and I was ready to focus not on myself, but to focus on somebody else. So it was right at the time that I got pregnant and it all worked out. It was a good time to move home."

Back in Los Angeles, Stingray became a full-time mother to her daughter Maddie. She is now the executive director of the Beverly Hills High School Alumni association and has a part-time job in a real estate business. After almost nine years away, Stingray returned to Russia last month to perform the anniversary concert at B2 in Moscow and have a lunch with old friends at Platforma in St. Petersburg. While today's Moscow seemed to her "very Las Vegas," she said she felt an immediate link with St. Petersburg.

"I was only in St. Petersburg for six hours, but I really felt this deep connection," she said.

"And even though there are lot of western stores and restaurants, the city seemed very similar. So to me St. Petersburg has changed a lot less than Moscow has." Stingray said she is ready to continue her career as a singer.

"A couple of weeks before I came to Russia, I all of a sudden started having all this emotion, remembering my time in Russia, and I got very excited. I went to a studio and started to record some stuff.

"I recorded some acoustic versions of some of my hits, and then I recorded a couple of my new songs. And one song that [summed up] my whole feeling about coming back to Russia, how much it meant to me, is a version we did of [the Soviet children's song] 'Pust Vsegda Budet Solntse, Pust Vsegda Budet Nebo' (Let There Always Be the Sun, Let There Always Be Skies). We sing this song in kind of a disco dance version, and I'm so happy with it.

"It's a very happy song. In the song I say the name [of Kino frontman Viktor] Tsoi, and [of artist Timur] Novikov, and Kuryokhin - three very important people to me who have passed away. This joyous and happy song is my memory of how important Russia was in my life, and how exciting and fun the time that I spent there was."