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The Soviet Union plugs into rock

By ALISON SMALE
Associated Press

MOSCOW — Two years ago, when songwriter Boris Grebenshikov was still an underground rock star, he could play in Moscow only if he quietly slipped into town and performed for a few dozen fans using the pseudonym, "Radio Africa."

Since then, he and his group, Aquarium, have cut their first record with the state recording company, Melodiya. They are one of the Soviet Union's leading rock groups and recently played eight nights at a Leningrad sports hall seating 6,500. Two weeks later, they turned up in Moscow for two short sets at a cultural evening in the Manege, the nation's premier art gallery.

Grebenshikov's emergence from an underground existence barely tolerated by Leningrad officials to acceptance and even praise illustrates a new interest by the Soviet government in co-opting rock music, as it did jazz before it, into the structure of officially sanctioned culture.

Rock music has new status in the Soviet Union, as Mikhail S. Gorbachev's Kremlin strives to show off the modern aspects of Soviet society.

Last May, for instance, authori-

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ties promoted a rock benefit for victims of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The occasion had little of the spontaneous wildness of a Live Aid. But foreign media came away with pictures that made Soviet rock look much like its Western counterpart.

Official promotion of rock may turn off fans who say resistance added a touch of romance to underground tunes, but it also stariles those who remember when rock first reached Soviet teenagers on endlessly retaped Beatles records.

"I remember how they dumped on the Beatles, calling them corrupters of youth," a Moscow musician recalled. "When you think of that, what is happening today is unbelievable."

In the 1970s, tame pop music with inoffensive and limp lyrics gained a measure of official ac-

ceptance.

Still, rock was largely considered taboo by the Komsomol, the communist youth organization. Melodiya issued no Western rock and ignored homespun bands that copied Western artists.

But groups without official sanction used state recording studios after hours to cut tapes that found their way across the Soviet Union.

Joanna Stingray, a Los Angeles rock singer, took tapes of Aquarium and three other Leningrad bands — Kino, Alisa and Strange Games — to the United States to cut the LP, "Red Wave."

In a recent interview, the 26-year-old singer said Soviet officials were initially angry that she took tapes out of the country without their permission. Now, she said, things are changing.

"They're realizing that these

bands are not threatening," said Stingray, who has visited regularly since meeting Grebenshikov on a tourist trip in 1984. "It amazed me for the last three years that the authorities could feel threatened by these bands, who are not against the state."

She said authorities now seem to want a Soviet rock band to be a success in the West. A state-sanctioned group such as Autograph, which took part by satellite in last year's Live Aid concert, won't make it with Western rock fans.

"I don't know anybody in America who's going to buy an Autograph record," said Stingray. "I do know people in America who are prepared to buy an Aquarium record."

Official Soviet promotion of rock is very different from the multi-billion dollar rock industry in the United States. Grebenshikov, whose music ranges from fusion to folksy tunes recalling early Bob Dylan or Simon and Garfunkel, is presented as a poet rather than a rock singer and guitarist.

Soviet poet Andrei Voznesensky, who is promoting Grebenshikov, recently described the spread of rock as "the birth of a new folklore."

"The whole country, the young in the country are turning to these electric guitars," Voznesensky said.