

RUSSIAN ROCK

American Woman Smuggles Music of 'Unofficial' Soviet Bands Into the U.S.

"We're back in the U.S.S.R. You don't know how lucky you are boys!" — The Beatles, from "Back in the U.S.S.R."

By LIBBY JENKINS
Of the World Staff

The Soviet government has, for the first time, allowed some Beatles records to be sold in Moscow stores. Also for the first time, American rock 'n' roll fans will be able to purchase an album of "unofficial" Russian rock music.

The music on the album "Red Wave: Four Underground Bands From the USSR," was

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smuggled out of Russia by an American woman who became acquainted with members of several unsanctioned bands while visiting that country.

Many Russian musicians and bands are disapproved of by government officials because their music is difficult to control. To the government, they are "unofficial," meaning they are not allowed to record on the state-owned label, Melodyia. Their records are not allowed to be sold in stores and they cannot receive any money for their music and performances.

Government-sanctioned bands are allowed to perform and record, but under government rules.

Joanna Stingray is the 25-year-old American from Los Angeles who began taking trips to the Soviet Union nearly three years ago and brought the music of the unofficial Soviet bands to the U.S. She recently talked to the Tulsa World about rock music in the U.S.S.R.

"Musicians have to become a member of a musicians' union," she said in a phone interview from L.A. "That is your job, and you have to work for the government. It is your boss so it can tell you what to do, when to tour, when to record."

"An unofficial band has complete freedom to perform, but it must record any way it can. Bands have been recording on primitive equipment such as two-track and, more recently, eight-track. Most musicians today record on 24- and 48-track."

While in the Soviet Union, Stingray met Russian musician Boris Grebenshikov, and several members of underground bands. She was impressed with the musicians and eventually smuggled enough recorded material out of the country to produce a double album. The LP was recently released to record stores in the United States, though it is not yet available in Tulsa. She also shot several videos while in the country and they soon will be released.

Stingray (a code name she adopted), initially took the trip to Russia as a tourist. "It was in March of 1984," she said. "My sister was going to school in London and she said she was going to go on a trip that was inexpensive and why



Joanna Stingray, an American, smuggled the music of "unofficial" Soviet bands into the United States and has made an album of the songs.

didn't I come along."

She joined her sister and, through friends, met Grebenshikov, known as "the father of Russian rock 'n' roll," and a member of an unofficial band. "My first reaction (when she arrived in Russia) was 'there's no rock 'n' roll here.' For the first three and a half days of the tour I was in Moscow and saw only touristy stuff. It was gray, unhappy and cold."

When I got to Leningrad, I decided to call Boris. We started spending 20 hours a day together talking about our music (she is involved in the music industry in L.A.) and about life in America and Russia. I learned a lot from that first trip.

Stingray has been to Russia several times since her first visit, and each time she left the country she "smuggled" out copies of Grebenshikov's music, as well as that of other bands. She would not say how she got the tapes out, just that she used different methods each time.

But she did talk about the music and musicians. "At first, these bands got their music circulated by making cassette copies, giving them to friends, who in turn made more copies and gave them to their friends. Through that method they became very popular."

"But they had nowhere to play except in people's homes. The government saw what was happening so it created a rock club designated for unofficial musicians to allow them to play, but not receive any money for their performances."

"In one respect the club is good for the musicians because it provides an outlet for them to play their music. The problem is it only seats 1,000 people and these bands could have easily filled a 10,000 seat hall. There were riots outside because of people trying to get in."

Stingray attended several concerts at the club, at one point arousing the curiosity of officials.

"I was at a rock festival when a man began talking to me in Russian. They are uncomfortable with foreigners and I didn't know what he wanted, so I thought the best thing to do was walk out."

"When I got close to the door, he said something in Russian and eight guys picked me up and took me to a room and questioned me for about 40 minutes. They kept asking me who I was and what I was doing there."

"I kept telling them 'tell me who you are and why you're holding me and I'll tell you who I am.' They never did tell me and eventually let me go." She said officials are more relaxed now with foreigners in the club because, she believes, officials have realized the visitors are not threats.

Stingray said she is sure that she was followed several times while in Russia, but had no major encounters. Back in the United States.

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Joanna Stingray is shown here on one of her trips to the Soviet Union.

Musician Featured in Series

Sergei Kuryokhin, a Russian jazz/rock musician who plays with the band Aquarium in the Soviet Union, will be the subject of "All That Jazz," one program in a 12-part presentation called "Comrades: A Special Frontline Series," which looks at life in the U.S.S.R.

The show on Kuryokhin will air Tuesday at 10 p.m. on PBS, KOED Channel 11 in Tulsa.

Soviet authorities denied "Comrades" permission to make a film about Kuryokhin and his colleagues, so Producer Olivia Lichtenstein went to Leningrad on a tourist visa and made

the program with a home video camera.

Kuryokhin and his band are also featured on a new album, "Red Wave: Four Underground Bands from the USSR," which has recently been released in the United States.

The double-LP contains performances by four unsanctioned groups from Russia, including Aquarium.

Kuryokhin was expelled from the Leningrad Conservatory and the Institute of Culture. He is now an "unofficial" musician and composes, conducts and plays avant-garde music.

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the FBI became interested and had a few talks with her.

"I met with them a couple of times," she said. "As often as I go over there I'm sure both sides are wondering if I'm a spy."

Stingray said she hopes no one is negatively affected by the release of the album. "The most important thing to me is that nothing happens to them (the musicians) and that I'll be let back in. These people have become family to me.

"I feel this (album) is a very positive thing. I want to help people understand that Russians are people like us and that rock 'n' roll is rock 'n' roll no matter where you are.

"The kids (in America) need to see another part of Russia. They need to see another side than what they get from movies. I showed some videos (of the bands) to some high school students and they were amazed.

"They seem to have the idea that Russian kids sit at home and pout all day because they can't leave. But when they saw them running around in the snow laughing and singing and dressed fashionably they thought it was cool."

Although the bands are artistically stifled, Stingray said they do not want to leave their home. "They are Russian and that is part of a very old heritage that they are proud of. Their music reflects their culture and traditions."

Stingray hopes the album has an effect on the Russians, as well. She said her dream is that perhaps one day these bands can give a concert in the West. She also would like to see Western and Russian musicians performing together in the Soviet Union.

During last year's Live Aid concert, a tape of an "official" Russian band was played.

"I also hope that eventually the Russians will realize the positive effect these bands have on the public and ask them to become official and that they will be allowed to stay the way they are," she said. "I can see that happening. It would be wonderful. These people are incredible and they are doing a wonderful job.

"The guys are thrilled to see the album coming out in the West, because they never dreamed this would really happen. The last time I was over there I showed them a copy of the album and they all had tears in their eyes."