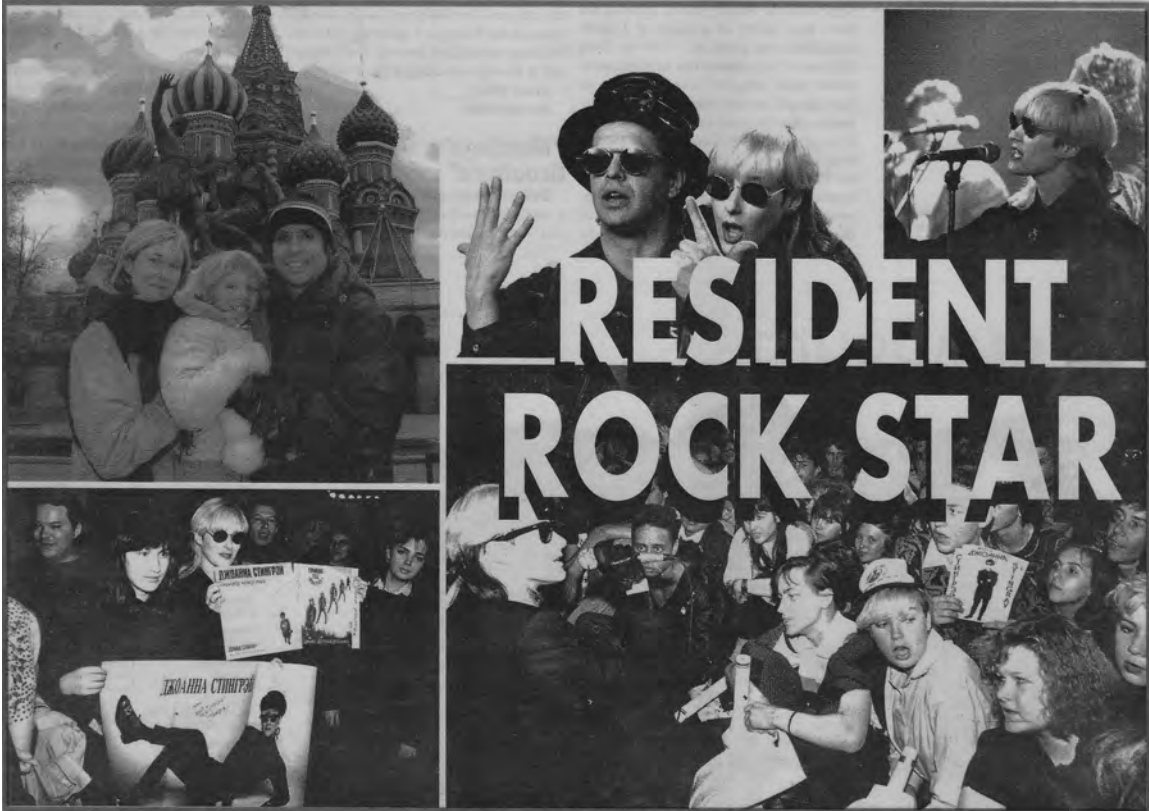


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## RESIDENT ROCK STAR

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coverstory

# RESIDENT ROCK STAR

Beverly High Alumni Association Director Joanna Stingray talks to the *Weekly* about her life in Russia as a celebrity under communist rule and what it was like to go back 20 years later.

By Andrea Simpson

Joanna Stingray has lived every boy's and girl's dream. Every youngster grows up idolizing that one musician, while playing air guitar or lip synching in front of the mirror, but for Joanna this wasn't make-believe. She was a bonafide rock star.

Now a mother and executive director of the Beverly High Alumni Association, it may seem unbelievable today that Joanna with her light blonde hair and laid-back nature once sported a platinum blond mullet, wore red lipstick, dark sunglasses, leather gloves and chains on stage like a true rock and roll star. But it was her all-American looks and passion for music that made her so loved-- and famous-- during a time in our world's history when any type of artistic expression was banned. Ironically enough it was during this time in Communist Russia that Joanna's career skyrocketed, and her work changed the face of what was the former Soviet Union forever.

When Joanna Fields was a student at Beverly, music was the farthest thing on her to-do list. She was a cheerleader and a diver on the boys swim team. In 1977, she even won the diving CIF championship. Music was definitely not on her school, or after school, agenda.

It wasn't until after graduating from UCLA that Joanna's singing aspirations surfaced. While a college student she put together an EP (an album with four songs) that made its debut in 1983. It was appropriately called "Beverly Hills Brat", and as she put it, "it was basically a song about what the Beverly Hills kids did." Joanna attended Beverly High, but didn't live in a mansion, like most of her classmates. Rather, she and her mother lived in a duplex near the high school. Her fledgling album chronicled her life as an ordinary teenager growing up in an extraordinary environment.

Trying to figure out how to break into 'the biz', an opportunity of a lifetime fell right into her lap. Joanna's sister was taking a trip to Russia, which for Joanna wasn't possible in high school because her mother couldn't afford it, but this time it was meant to be. And it so happened that her best friend, Diana Isaacs Sturr (also Class of '78), had a sister who was married to a Russian immigrant and would introduce Joanna to the person that would change her life.

"[Sturr's sister's husband Andre Falalayev] called and said, 'Oh, you're a rock and roller-- you should call my friend Boris Grebenshchikov, who's the most famous underground rock and roller in Russia.' So, of course in 1984, while the Soviet Union was still under communism I didn't believe there was any music there. But I went and met Boris who introduced me to this whole underground arts movement that was happening in the Soviet Union under communism. It was amazing," Joanna remembered.

Joanna met up with Boris when she arrived, but she remembers at that time it wasn't easy to find people, let alone meet them in person. But when she did, it opened up a whole new world unlike anything she'd ever seen before.

"I finally found [Boris] and met him at his friend's apartment. I was only in Leningrad, which it was called at the time, for three days and he showed me this whole world of incredible happenings of art and poetry and music. It just seemed to be so similar to what the sixties were like here [in America]. I wasn't old enough, but the people that lived through the sixties and talked about what was happening in San Francisco and Soho in New York, it seemed very similar to that," Joanna said. "And so it just totally captivated me."

Joanna then spent the next three years trying to go back to Russia as often as she could, but it was a lot harder than she anticipated because in those days you could only go in as a tourist -- and only about a week at a time. So she did everything possible to get there, even taking a job as a travel agent going back every three months for about a week, sometimes staying a little longer by going on the official travel tours and sneaking off to hang out with her friends.

That's how she first got started in the underground rock scene. Joanna describes her sound as rock/pop, and although she was known as the Madonna of Russia, Joanna thinks she was more like the Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde of Russia.

In high school, Joanna's friends, like fellow El Rodeo and Beverly graduate Alicia Saver Goldsmith (another '78 graduate), never knew she could sing, but her following doesn't surprise Goldsmith.

"Apparently she could pack a stadium in Russia. It's wonderful and doesn't surprise me because she has unbelievable energy. She's very magnetic," Goldsmith said.

Goldsmith admits she knows more about Joanna's life after the music, but has 'dropped' her name before, but all in the name of a good cause.

"I once fixed her up with a guy and told him she was a Russian rock star and he was really interested in going out with her," Goldsmith said, laughing.

"She even got the star treatment going through customs in Russia. I don't know that side, but I know a really good side," she added.

Sturr remembers her as always being able to carry a tune.

"She was the first person to memorize the Top 40 hits. So it was a natural progression for



Joanna Stingray rocks out 'back in the USSR' in the 1980s

her," Sturr said.

The only club in the USSR where these types of bands were allowed to play was called the Rock Club in Leningrad. Joanna recalls the lengths these bands would go to just to get their music out-- and their messages heard.

"These bands were so famous in Russia, and they were famous by just making homemade cassettes, like on two track recorders," she said. "It was all very antiquated machinery and they'd give out cassettes and in like a month there would be a million copies of the cassettes across the Soviet Union. They'd be as famous as Bob Dylan. People would come from Siberia and travel for days to see Boris."

Sturr remembers her outrageous and unforgettable Russian escapades with Joanna during her rock heyday.

"We went to visit in 1987-88 for New Year's and being there with her was incredible. We hung out with the top rockers in Russia. Boris Grebenshchikov was like the David Bowie/Bob Dylan of Russia," Sturr said. "We were there for the new year and in Russia there was no graffiti on the walls, but when we walked to Boris's flat there was graffiti all over walls of walk-up that said, 'We love you', and it was lined with candles and people singing his songs. And then Joanna would walk by and you'd hear them whisper, 'That's Joanna Stingray.' It was like the parting of seas to let Joanna through."

"And everything was so antiquated at this time in Russia, but we walked into Boris's apartment and he had the latest stereo equipment and everything and we watched a video of himself and Annie Lennox going down Ventura Boulevard [in L.A.]. It was probably the most Fellini-esque experience I've ever had."

Once they also got stopped at the border right before Joanna had to go on stage. It was time for Joanna to do a little name-dropping of her own.

"Once we got stopped at the border trying to drive a car into Russia, and they didn't know what to do with Joanna," Sturr said, laughing in amazement. "There was a guy that just got stopped in front of us who had a gun with him. So Joanna picks up the phone and is talking to her mother-in-law who told her she had to perform at The Rock Club in five hours. So Joanna starts pulling out all these articles about herself and shows them to the guys. Then she went to the bathroom to change and came out in this fabulous 'New Wave' outfit, and they were just like, 'You got to let her go.' The doors opened and they said, 'Have a nice time in Russia.'"

Under communist rule these bands weren't allowed on television. Although there were official bands at the time that were sanctioned by the government and were allowed to perform on TV, other bands, like those Joanna later performed with, their lyrics had to be pre-approved. The Soviets called these types of bands 'amateur', because they weren't good enough to be called professionals. So they allowed them to play at this rock club, which was under the umbrella of the KGB, and that's how they could keep an eye on them, Joanna said.

Joanna seemed to be in awe of how much these people yearned to express themselves and how far they were willing to go to do so.

"What was amazing was that even though you couldn't officially be out in the open, they were still making their music and they were making it the way they wanted to and people were still getting a hold of it. And that's how I started recording. Boris became my mentor and really helped me grow as an artist. And he and I started writing together and I started writing with other bands there. And I had a couple cassettes out on the underground, meaning that copies were made and sold and passed around the Soviet Union. I mean, it was exciting because you could still express yourself and for these artists in Russia it wasn't so much the money, it was

about being able to express themselves in the way they wanted to. For them, they preferred the situation they had because at least they could put their snuff out the way they wanted to put it out," Joanna said.

At this time, however, Joanna was only recording and couldn't perform her music. In fact, she was even taking a risk just attending concerts.

"I couldn't perform for a long time because everybody was afraid that the musicians would all get in trouble, and I was arrested once by being at one of these concerts because westerners were not supposed to be at these concerts," Joanna said. "For whatever reason they were fearful of bands like this, they didn't want foreigners to be exposed to it."

Down the road in 1986, one of her best friends and fellow rock and roller, Victor Tsoi, invited Joanna to make her on-stage singing debut with his band.

"I was singing mostly in English because I wrote my own lyrics and sang some songs in Russian, but most of the people in Russia who like rock music were brought up on the Beatles. Even though it was under Communism and the stuff wasn't sold there, people could get anything on the black market. They got a lot of Western rock and they'd translate the lyrics," she said.

Joanna's run-ins with the law did not stop at her first arrest. She was a target of the KGB and FBI because both sides thought she was a spy. As she said it, in those days nobody would go back and forth to Russia as many times as she did.

"I was going in every three months. I just went for the music and I kept telling them that, but they just didn't believe it," she said. "The last time I ever met with the FBI I actually met at the Hamburger Hamlet on Sunset and I remember bringing in the record; it was finally out. And that's how I told them. I said, 'Here's the music, and I told you this is all I'm doing. I'm just trying to show Americans that there is rock music in Russia.' And I remember that they said, 'Oh, can we have that record?' And I said, 'No you can go buy it. It's at Tower Records.' I wouldn't give it to them and that's the last time I saw them," Joanna laughed.

But before she could record her first album, she had to get back to Russia, but was declined admission.

"I was supposed to get married to a Russian musician in 1987 and there was 30 people going with me and then I had my visa declined," she said. "So in 1987, I became an enemy of the Russian state and they wouldn't let me back in to get married. It took me six months to finally figure out a way to get back in."

Those who helped her included the office of U.S. Senator Alan Cranston (D-California), who Joanna described as "a huge believer that when two people are in love and want to get married, politics have nothing to do with it and politics shouldn't stand in the way."

"After I got married, the Russians said, 'You're OK. Now you can be a singer. You can record officially and be on a record label, Melodiya,'" Joanna said.

That same year she also officially changed her last name to Stingray, originally Joanna's code name.

"When I was doing the record we had code names for all the bands because it took us a year to get everything out that we needed to. I used a home video camera and I videotaped them and I edited videos that were on MTV and I needed to get their lyrics and we had to call and the phone lines were tapped. So my code name was 'Stingray,'" Joanna said.

"I actually drove from Houston to Indiana in a friend's Stingray and I had my foot on the dashboard and thought Stingray would be cool."

Joanna's first two records were on Melodiya, the only state-owned record company in Russia. It was 1989, in the midst of Glasnost, when Joanna moved to Moscow and began her own career. She then started touring and while she was in the middle of nowhere she really started to pick up Russian and spoke it "quite well."

The first album she produced was titled "The Red Wave: Four Underground Bands from the USSR."

"That was putting the Russian music out here to open people's eyes to show them that there were people in Russia who were rock, and rollers like rock and rollers anywhere," Joanna said. "The way they dressed, they were really hip, and their music. Even though they were Russian, people that heard it they could tell these were respected artists. They were very interesting," she said.

Joanna released five albums in Russia and was known as the video queen, with 24 video clips on TV, but her reputation went far beyond her rock and roll status.

"I was famous in Russia for my music, for the people into rock music, but I was also famous to everybody in Russia for being this clean, no litter girl because I hooked up with Greenpeace in Russia. I did a lot of stuff with them, recorded and produced an album called 'Greenpeace Rocks' and I made a public service announcement and in Russia there were never any PSAs on TV before."

"I made the first PSA which was called 'Don't Litter.' And it was a huge hit because we used all the famous rock stars in Russia, because at this time you have to remember this is post-Glasnost, so all these underground rock stars who were my friends could now all do what they wanted to and they were all even bigger stars because they were all over the TV. So I'd have a guy walk down the street, drink from a bottle and throw the bottle on the ground and Boris would be walking the other way and he'd pick the bottle up and throw it in the trash. It was so hysterical because Russians would just throw everything on the ground. It was just amazing to me. They'd open their car door and dump stuff on the street and keep driving. It was unbelievable. And at the end there would be all these rockers picking up trash and I'd say in Russian, 'The earth is our home. Please don't litter.'"

Joanna quickly learned that the American way of life was not necessarily the Russian way. "I didn't drink, I didn't smoke. And the other thing is I'd exercise and I'd walk everyday with my Walkman for an hour listening to music and it wasn't a Russian thing to do. Life there is like exercise. No one would think, 'Oh, I'm going to go out for an hour walk because there to go to the market or go home is all walking,'" she said.

As soon as "Red Wave" hit the charts, Joanna became a hero to the Russian people because she validated that Russian bands were like rockers anywhere, she said. But now she looks back at her redefining days with awe and laughter.

"Of all the rock bands in Russia, none of them had women, so I was one of the few women. So I think people were in awe that I seemed like this very strong woman. My image on TV and in my videos was one that I had on dark sunglasses, I had red lipstick, this crazy dyed hair, and looking back all the young girls did the same hairdo and it's now kind of embarrassing. To look back and cry, 'What was I thinking!'"

"They never wore sunglasses so I brought in this whole trend in Russia to wear sunglasses. Especially no one had ever been on TV wearing sunglasses. For me, I don't like to wear make-up and I never wear make-up and it was just easy to throw on some sunglasses. But people love

these videos and I look like this woman with dark glasses and I look really strong and cool and they'd laugh when I'd do interviews or they'd meet me because I'm so down to earth and I have all this energy and I talk very quickly."

Once in awhile Joanna thought about starting a music career in the U.S., but she was too busy and having too much fun in Russia. The call of motherhood also played a significant role and that's why she returned to Beverly Hills with her husband Sasha, a drummer in one of the Russian underground bands.

"When I came back [to the U.S.] from Russia [in 1996] I was 35 and pregnant, and I wanted to be a full-time mom so I was smart enough to know you can't all of a sudden at 35 try to start a rock career in America," Joanna said.

"It just worked out that way and I had such an amazing adventure in Russia and I look back and think how lucky I am that they brought me there and I was involved in this whole thing, because honestly none of it was planned. I had no clue what Russia was like or how this would all turn out. It just happened. So I feel so lucky because then I came here [to Beverly Hills] when I came home and became a full-time mom and I was so ready to focus on somebody else, I had such an amazing adventure that I was just so ready to settle down and be a mom."

"I think there are some women who go to college and somehow they get married and start having kids and resent that they haven't really learned anything and haven't done anything on their own, and I have certainly had a very full, creative and awesome life before I became a mother which really made me appreciate and be ready to be a mother and focus on somebody else," she said.

From 1984-1996, Joanna lived in Russia through three different eras in the country's history - communism, Glasnost and capitalism, the latter of which was the hardest to live through. It was unsafe and not a place to bring up her daughter, she remembered.

"In the beginning it was a big struggle, but there were tons of these brand new Mercedes all over the streets in Moscow and all of a sudden the mafia became big business and it was a whole different time."

"That was hard for me. When capitalism came there was a very small percentage that obviously got very wealthy and a lot of the criminals got wealthy. I was ready to leave because I was a bit nervous because there were 'hooligans', as they called them, that would beat people up on the street to steal their western hat or their shoes. I also had the mafia call me up and meet with me and wanted some money because my videos were on the TV and a lot of Russian artists paid to have their videos on TV so they thought I had a ton of money. And I explained to them, 'No, because I give them all these western videos, so they just play my videos.' So they just let it go."

Literally having lived two different periods in her life, after returning to the States and becoming a full-time mom, Joanna said that as inconceivable as it may sound, she somewhat forgot about her former rocker days, until last month when she returned to the Russian stage to reunite with her former bandmates.

"For my daughter [Madison] all she knows is mommy is here to take care of me and my life and she was shocked that I had this former life," Joanna said. "It was a 'This Is Your Life' thing and everybody was coming out of the woodwork and it was so cool. It was amazing. It brought up a lot of emotions and it brought up nostalgia. I did a lot of interviews while I was there and a lot of people were talking about what an important part I played in the Russian culture before Glasnost and it was just nice to hear it. Because when you're younger you just do it, when you're younger you're not doing it for any reason. So you never think it's that cool; you just do it because it's fun and I was so passionate about these people and about their music. So it was cool to go back and think, 'Gosh, maybe I actually did do something.'"

Since Joanna left Russia a few of her closest friends have passed away, but she's learned many lessons from her experiences with them and her life so many years ago.

"It's a very hard life in Russia and they live for the day, whereas Americans always think about the future. We always have to think about working to make money for the future, we have to eat well so we can live longer. In those days in Russia, it was absolutely living for the day," Joanna says her philosophy now is somewhere in the middle.

"There has to be balance," she said.

It was second nature for her when she got back on stage recently. "I hadn't done it for so long, and it felt so good to be back up there. I'm a very lucky person because when people are younger, even my daughter and her friends say, 'We want to be rock stars,' and I sit there and explain to them that there is so much more negative about being famous than there is positive. And I actually give them exact examples. And I'm one of the few people in the world that was in another country, became famous in another country and I got to feel what that was like. And a lot of it was good, but a lot of it I prefer not to have a life that way, and I'm very lucky to come home where I'm not known and out just be a normal person, again. Getting up on stage and singing again and having people sing along was a great feeling. There is nothing more satisfying than singing for people who love your songs and love what you're doing."

Although she is hesitant to encourage her daughter Madison to pursue a career in music or the arts, if she did, her one piece of advice would be to have creative control.

Despite living thousands of miles away from Russia, Joanna still even runs into the occasional star struck fans here in L.A.

"Whenever I'm at the high school to speak I usually talk to the graduating seniors and tell them about the alumni association and [Beverly Principal] Dan [Stepenovsky] always loves to say, 'She was a rock star!'"

Joanna's friends even run into her fans.

"My friends call me periodically and say, 'I can't believe it. I was getting a pedicure and mentioned your name and the woman giving me the pedicure freaked out. Because only Russians would know me, so my American friends seem to be very impressed when somehow they seem to mention my name to a Russian person who was in Russia at that time,'" she said.

And believe it or not, Joanna even gets a little shy about performing.

"People always want me to get up and sing here and it's funny because I've never sang except for in front of a crowd of people who were my huge fans and knew every word to my songs. So when you're lucky enough to sing to people who love you to death, I just get a little shy to get up and do it in front of people here," she laughed.

Upon leaving Russia last month, Joanna, who is also working in real estate with Beverly Hills realtor Michael Libow ('81) and finishing another record to be released in Russia, finally realized that her original mission and musical message translated from one country to another.

"I opened up the West's eyes to the fact that there was rock music going on in Russia and that these rock musicians were like rockers anywhere," she said. "The whole point was to show that rock music has no borders."