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'Unofficial' Soviet Rockers Get First Spin On U.S. Vinyl

By Gregory Dobrin

LOS ANGELES — For the first time in the history of Rock 'n' Roll, Americans at large are finally getting their chance at some true insights into the world of Soviet rock — not the "official" variety, as witnessed during last summer's Live Aid concerts — but the underground, unrecognized music, of which four of the best acts are featured on a double album of the Soviet Union's flourishing music scene, recently released by Big Time Records.

The thanks for this unprecedented illumination of the American perception of Soviet rock goes to local L.A. musician Joanna Stingray, who has smuggled out of the U.S.S.R. tapes recorded in Leningrad, complete with videos, by some of the Soviet Union's leading underground bands. It is an idea that first occurred to her during Live Aid, when the Soviet band Autograph failed to represent what she has found to be the sophistication and creativity of Soviet rockers during her many trips to the Soviet Union.

The double album, which is entitled "Red Wave," includes selections recorded between 1981-85 by the Soviet bands Kino, Alisa, Strange Games and Aquarium — the last being a techno-rock act led by the "father of Soviet rock," a David-Bowie-ish singer/songwriter named Boris Grebenshikov (Bowie is, in fact, an admirer of Grebenshikov's and was one



of the first supporters of Stingray's ambitious project, providing advice when his schedule proved too hectic for any direct involvement).

Because the bands are "unofficial" they cannot record on the Soviet state-owned record label, Melodia, their music cannot be sold in Soviet stores, and they cannot receive any money from their music, which also means that they are required by law to hold paying jobs. As for the proceeds from the album, which cost around \$15,000 to produce, Stingray didn't originally expect any. Witnessing the positive reaction Americans have had to the recordings, she now feels that

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the album could catch on. If so, she won't be sending money to the musicians, but says she'll help in other ways. "Giving them dollars doesn't help them and it's also illegal for me to do it. What I will try to do is to get some better recording equipment over there."

Equipment is a primary concern of Soviet musicians. The only usual ways they can get it are if foreign bands leave their equipment or if they buy it on the black market. The average electric guitar, costing roughly \$300 in the U.S., can cost as much as \$3,000 on the Soviet black market.

Stingray has enlisted the aid of various manufacturers in her quest for equipment to bring to the Soviet musicians, the first of which, Yamaha, helped her to get a keyboard and drum machine at cost. "I gotta tell you these guys cried when they saw a drum machine," Stingray said. "They know about this stuff, they've been dreaming about having it."

Recording the music was no small feat, either. Because the musicians are not legally allowed to record professionally, they rely on friends who work as engineers for Melodia, many of whom have either built recording studios in their homes or have access to equipment they can lend. While the norm is still two-track, the musicians have lately found more

access to eight-track. Stingray has managed only to smuggle two-track, ½-inch tapes, already mixed, which she mastered once back in the U.S.

The songs were recorded in Russian, but the album includes a complete translated lyric sheet for each cut. The music, which reflects certain western styles in its cynicism and youthful experimentalism, is less rebellious lyrically, though possibly more poetic. Stingray shot videos for each of the bands, which she considers "refreshing" in their simplicity and compares to early videos by The Beatles and The Monkees. The videos will be released commercially in the coming months.

Getting the tapes out of the Soviet Union took skill, but Stingray (a name she adopted while devising code names for communication with Soviet friends) is reluctant to describe the techniques she used, fearful of endangering future attempts. She downplays the political implications of the project. "I didn't do this album to embarrass the Soviet government," she told *Cash Box*. "It has nothing to do with politics, and it's unfortunate that every time you do anything with the Soviet Union and the United States people automatically think it is political. But it's just music and I think it's a very positive album. I really think that this is going to create a better understanding between people."