

# Born in the USSR

Rock Soviet rockers have mixed feelings about official acceptance

By Thom Shanker  
Chicago Tribune

**L**eningrad is a place where people once thought—no, believed, truly believed in their hearts—that rock and roll could mean something, could even make a difference.

For a decade or more, a generation of Leningrad rockers played music for themselves, disdainful of the impurities of official acceptance and commercial success. Fresh melodies and powerful lyrics sprouted underground as an act of self-creation, a statement of personal freedom within a controlled society.

But now, courted by a Kremlin leadership eager to buy off its disillusioned youth with once-vilified pop culture, many of the USSR's most creative unofficial rockers are signing contracts and signing on to Mikhail Gorbachev's program of *glasnost*, or openness. It is a decision that has stranded them in a musical no-man's land: Many longtime fans say they have sold out. Yet they still await the rewards of studio time, quality instruments—and money—that should come with official acceptance.

A year in the life of Boris Grebenshchikov, Russia's reigning rock idol, tells the story, and it is as complete a story as there is of the cultural revolution now sweeping the Soviet Union—and the sometimes unexpected effects of reform as brought to the USSR by Kremlin leader Gorbachev.

Some of the changes are subtle. Grebenshchikov still lives in a cramped communal apartment that is a nightly gathering spot for denizens of Leningrad's Soviet Soho. Now, however, added to the herd of admirers tramping up the graffiti-lined staircase are correspondents from official Soviet newspapers and magazines.

Some of the changes, though, reflect the dramatic way life has improved for artists and musicians once forced underground by conservative Kremlin control of culture. Grebenshchikov has saved a copy of the poster announcing eight sold-out concerts his rock group, Aquarium, played in the 6,000-seat Jubilee Hall.

Can this be the same band that once had to skulk around Moscow, playing obscure little clubs under the name Radio Afrika to avoid arrest and deportation to Leningrad? Is this the same Boris Grebenshchikov whose music was the hard currency of a bootleg cassette counterculture linking rock fans across the 11 time zones of the USSR?

Boris Grebenshchikov, who just a year ago told *The Tribune* that his decision to remain underground was a choice between "love for love or love for money," has gone official.

With the passing of a year, Grebenshchikov can now give out copies of his first album pressed by Melodiya, the state-run record label, and affirm: "I am the darling of *glasnost*."

Grebenshchikov said he is in a



Soviet rocker Boris Grebenshchikov: "Since the end of October, we've been playing what we wanted. Nobody stopped us. Nobody asked us."



Russian rock stars Sergel Kuryokhin [left] and Boris Grebenshchikov.

better position to call the shots than were Soviet rock groups like Avtograph, Stas Namin and Time Machine, who opted for official status in years past. He believes the Soviet Union's cultural establishment needs Aquarium more than Aquarium needs the Soviet cultural establishment.

He may be right. One pragmatic motive underlying the application of *glasnost* to rock music is an assessment by the Kremlin that the youth of the Soviet Union are becoming a rather spoiled, cynical lot. Unlike their grandparents, they do not see the great improvements in health care and education brought by Soviet rule.

And unlike their parents, they did not suffer through World War II—the Great Patriotic War as it is called in Russia—and savor the costly victory over Hitler that re-

mains a cornerstone of the Kremlin's claim to legitimacy and power.

**T**hus, Kremlin cultural officials now are saying to Soviet youth that a system that accepts rock music is a system that can't be all bad. Melodiya records announced March 12 that it will release a million copies of Aquarium's debut album [the group has 30 collections circulating underground on cassette].

Grebenshchikov, 33, said he had complete artistic control over the first album, from the selection of songs to the choice of cover art. The liner notes were written by Andrei Voznesensky, one of the angry young men of Soviet poetry who is a leading voice for artistic freedom.

"Since the end of October, we've been playing absolutely what we wanted," Grebenshchikov said. "Nobody stopped us. Nobody asked us."

And nobody's paid him, or at least not very much. Grebenshchikov said he received 300 rubles, about \$468, for the tape that became Aquarium's first album. He receives royalties from VAAP, the Soviet copyright agency, if other groups record his songs for sale or the album is sold overseas, but no percentage from record sales. After each public performance, Grebenshchikov said, he is paid nine rubles—less than \$15.

Grebenshchikov acknowledges that his transition from leader of Leningrad's loose-knit coalition of underground and semi-official musicians to sanctioned rock star has cost him support.

"A lot of people don't trust us—young people who can't imagine that people like us can play in accepted halls," he said.

"The music is the same, but when it was played in small halls, with lousy acoustics, it was 'the thing.' Nobody can believe that anything in the system can change. They think that we must have changed." Grebenshchikov insists that "the system can change, is changing."

When Grebenshchikov steps out in front of Aquarium to perform, one senses that he is attempting to prove the virtues of cultural reform. Audiences immediately relate to the energy of Grebenshchikov's brooding stage persona, even if they never know what style of music they will be hearing on any given evening.

The basic Aquarium ensemble consists of two guitars, bass, violin, cello, flute, keyboards and drums. Depending on mood, the size of the hall, availability of instruments and quality of amplifiers, an Aquarium concert might be anything from full-powered rockers to swinging reggae to the heartfelt ballads that earned Grebenshchikov's title as the USSR's leading rock poet.

He has an undeniable lyrical gift, although it is one that is usually lost on foreign listeners. As with most poetry, it is difficult to adequately translate the double meanings, puns and Russian imagery that give his lyrics their power.

Music fans who already were plugged into the Soviet rock and roll scene have a mostly ho-hum attitude to the current changes. These are the people whose family connections or black-market contacts got them copies of Beatles records almost as quickly as kids in the West. Just as "Doctor Zhivago" was widely read in certain circles, despite Boris Pasternak's 30 years of official disgrace, those who wanted to hear rock always could.

"There is no new stream of ideas," said Aleksandr Kahn, one of Leningrad's leading music critics. "People are being set free, and it turns out they don't have much to say."





id Square [from left]: Viktor Tsoi, Yuri Kasparyan, his fiancée: Joanna Stingray, Gustav Gurianov, Sergei Kuryokhin and Igor Tikomirov



one of Russia's hottest groups, has not been allowed to record.

everyone had the feeling there was an ocean of ideas that was suppressed," he added. "But the suppression was relaxed, and the sea was not as deep as they thought."

They agreed that the Soviet Union is experiencing a cleaning of the cultural attic, as long-suppressed films and music are, at last,

being made available to a wide audience. Perhaps it is still too soon, but there is little of interest that is being freshly spawned under glasnost, he said.

Even the rock bands waiting in the wings as the lines blur between official and unofficial music are those that have been playing the Leningrad circuit for years. After

Aquarium, the hottest ticket in town is Kino—it's Russian for cinema—a hard rocking quartet that has not yet been allowed to record.

Their lead singer, Viktor Tsoi, is descended from a Korean immigrant; with his long, raven hair, black leather jacket and Asian features, Tsoi could be the perfect front man for a New Wave band in any Chicago club.

Kino's lead guitarist, Yuri Kasparyan, had planned to be the initial member of a U.S.-USSR rock and roll joint venture; he is engaged to Joanna Stingray, a Los Angeles-based singer who has become the leading advocate of Russian rock in the United States.

Stingray's visa to fly back to the USSR for an April 6th wedding, however, was not approved by Soviet consular authorities. Officials

said they felt no responsibility to approve a visa for Stingray if the trip was not for talking business. Insiders said the USSR was uneasy about creating yet another "divided spouses" case, where husband and wife are separated by emigration laws.

Stingray, who has released a compendium of Soviet Rock, "Red Wave," on an independent label, said she is "a political football, which is unfortunate after all my positive cultural work." She remains committed to bringing Grebenshchikov to the U.S. for sessions with leading names of British and American rock. She also has filmed a quartet of Soviet rock videos with Aquarium, Kino, Strange Games—since disbanded—and Aisa.

There also are a handful of Mos-



grebenshchikov [second from left] and the other members of Aquarium

cow music groups exist. They include Bravo, a whimsical band that revives 1950s classics with a new wave edge; Cruise, a heavy metal band; Zerkalo mirror, a high-octane guitar band; and Zvuki Mu, a cerebral addition to the Soviet rock scene. Even their name is a play on words: It is a contraction for the phrase "sound of music," but also is a pun on what a cow says.

One of the leading names of Leningrad's semi-official music scene refuses to trade in his cult status as a rock and roll outlaw because he believes that creativity in the USSR exists best in an adversary relationship.

Sergei Kuryokhin, creative force behind the jazz-rock group Pop Mechanics, aims for the outrageous in an attempt to show that Soviet musicians have more zest than the West.

At the most recent music festival sponsored by the Leningrad Rock Club, a weekend of concerts included sets by the city's rock royalty: Aquarium, Kino, Jungle [an avant-garde fusion band] and Pop Mechanics. For Aquarium and Kino, the crowd of 1,500 in the Palace of Youth were dancing in the aisles despite the best efforts of the local militia and their civilian helpers.

But nobody was prepared for Pop Mechanics. Kuryokhin opened his set with 20 minutes of creative doodling on a grand piano and a synthesizer. The clever keyboards were simply appetizer for the Pop Mechanics big band: a horn section wearing long white robes or checkered slacks; an industrial-strength percussion section; a row of leggy dancing girls; mimes and actors and a man who shaved his head. A goat was led onstage. For the encore, a stuffed dinosaur and a plastic lizard danced it out.

It was difficult to decide whether Kuryokhin is a better band leader or stage director. It was a wonder nobody got hurt.

"It may not even have been music," Kuryokhin said after the concert. "But there was certainly a spirit of joy and fun. It was not boring or predictable."

Kuryokhin chooses to remain at the margins of officialdom because "freedom may not necessarily be positive." He believes that it is the breaking of official boundaries that is the liberating aspect of creativity. Pop Mechanics, to him, is just that: an exercise in the mechanics of popular music.

And what would happen if he could perform in America, where there is no musical censorship? "There is always something the authorities would ban," he mused. "Perhaps I would ask my bass player to jump off a 23-story building in the middle of a song. I would find something."

It is the diffusion of this red-hot creative force—the trademark of unofficial art under Soviet rule—that most worries the country's music connoisseurs.

"If you add some boiling water to cold water, the cold water becomes warm," said Anne Crill Kahn, assessing the effect of official acceptance on Soviet rockers. "But the boiling water stops boiling."