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LOS ANGELES TIMES JUNE 22, 1986

'RED WAVE' ALBUM: THE RUSSIANS ARE STRUMMING

By PATRICK GOLDSTEIN

Joanna Stingray isn't a smuggler or a spy. But for the past two years, she's been sneaking contraband out of the Soviet Union, bringing back a little piece of the rock. Not just any rock, of course, but rock 'n' roll.

By next week, you'll be able to hear the results of the L.A.-based 25-year-old singer-songwriter's secret mission when independent label Big Time Records releases "Red Wave," a double album featuring four underground Soviet rock bands. They include Kino, Alisa, Strange Games and Agurski, which is led by Boris Grebenshchikov, perhaps the best-known unsanctioned Soviet rock singer.

Stingray says she's been questioned both by the KGB and the VBL. While she was in the Soviet Union, she was tailed, photo-

graphed and interrogated by customs officials, first for trying to bring music magazines into the country and then for trying to slip Red Army caps out.

She's purposefully vague about how she smuggled rock tapes out of the Soviet Union, except to say that she did it a different way every time. "The customs officers aren't always that thorough," she noted. "I once got an army cap through the X-ray machine because the guy was admiring a pink ribbon in my hair."

But she happily explained why she became the leading exporter of underground Soviet rock. "The music these groups are making is amazing and I want people in the West to be able to hear it," she said the other day, still unpacking after a recent visit to Leningrad, the



Joanna Stingray... from Russia with rock.

metropolis of underground Soviet rock. "I'd also like to reach American kids whose only view of Russia is what they see in movies like 'Rambo' and 'Invasion U.S.A.'"

"When I was in Disneyland a while ago, I saw these 12-year-old kids and I asked one what he thought about Russia. And this little boy said, 'We've got to bomb 'em and get rid of 'em. And all the other little kids shouted, 'Yeah!'"

"So I think it's time they had a better understanding of what it's like over there. I showed some of the videos I shot there to some kids at Beverly Hills High and they were amazed at how cute the Russian guys are and what cool clothes they had. It was a shock for them—they think that all the Russians do is sit around all day, putting about why they can't leave the country."

Of course, Soviet rock—at least the underground variety—can't leave the country. There are offi-

cially sanctioned Soviet bands, one of whom performed at the Live-Aid concert last year. But according to Stingray, the official groups, who record for the state-owned label, look like "cocktail bands from the '30s." The underground groups are forced to perform in parks or in people's homes, though last year the government began sponsoring a three-day rock festival at a local Leningrad club.

"It's one of the many contradictions of their society that they allow the underground bands to play, but the KGB is there, watching everybody," said Stingray, who after eight visits has begun to pick up a little Russian.

Despite the official unavailability of most Western rock—"A Hard Day's Night" has only recently become available in Moscow stores—the underground musicians are up to date on all sorts of current bands, including such obscure English groups as the Smiths

and Cabaret Voltaire.

Stingray was also able to shoot much of her video footage out in the open, in public parks and streets. "You can't film railroad stations, airports or military installations, but we were able to shoot everywhere else," she said. "It's really like being on the streets of New York. No one would look at us or talk to us when we were filming, probably because they were just as worried as we were—who knows, they might've thought we were in the KGB."

Stingray laughed. "In the beginning, when I was roaming around, I was pretty paranoid. But I just figured there's a totem pole and I'm just low enough on it that they don't care about me. Either they don't follow you all the time or the guy that did follow me didn't really care about me and just reported back that it was no big deal—I was just hanging around with a bunch of rock bands."

Stingray acknowledged that the first profits from "Red Wave" will go to her, saying she has poured nearly \$15,000 into the project. After that, she hopes to convert the profits into desperately needed musical equipment for the bands. "It costs \$3,000 just to buy a Yamaha guitar over there on the black market," she said. "So any equipment I can bring in would be appreciated."

But her biggest concern is how the Russians will react to the release of the album. "I don't want the musicians to get in trouble and I definitely want to be able to go back," she said, noting that her current boyfriend is in one of the bands on the record.

"I just hope these groups get some exposure here. They can't

make any money playing music, so they all have part-time jobs as boilers (stokers), street cleaners or night watchmen. It's really unfair, because these are the great rock stars of Russia. I mean, can you imagine David Bowie working three days a week as a boiler?"