

Rockin' in the USSR

Had enough musicians from England? Ready for some from Leningrad?

By JIM FARBER

THERE'S A HOT new city for rock 'n' roll—Leningrad. Surprised? Joanna Stingray, an aspiring rock 'n' roller from Los Angeles was.

In the last two years, she has made eight trips to Russia, during which time she met and recorded a whole host of red rockers from Leningrad. The results recently have been released as a double LP, titled "Red Wave," on Big Time Records.

Actually, all four bands on the album represent a certain kind of USSR rock—the so-called "unofficial bands."

As Stingray explains, "These groups cannot record on the state-owned label, Melodia. They can't have their music sold in stores and can't receive money for their performances or recordings. They're not regarded as musicians so, by law, they have to have other jobs."

Still, Stingray says,

'They are not dissidents or enemies of the state. They love Russia'

these musicians "are not dissidents or enemies of the state. They love Russia."

Many of these unofficial bands have been approached by the government to become "official," but, says Stingray, they've turned it down.

"They don't want to compromise their art. Official bands are more businesslike. The government tells them when to record and tour and how to perform."

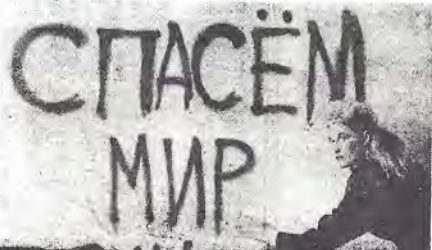
Of course, that's not terribly different from how many bands here would describe their relationship with their record company. In a way, then, the unofficial bands are a bit like small label or avant-garde musicians in the U.S., although from Stingray's description it seems such groups in Russia often attract larger followings than their counterparts here.

One may wonder, though, how those audiences are built up. Stingray explains it's all done through friends "bootlegging" tapes, with no money changing hands.

Of course, she speculates, some enterprising youths may make up copies to sell for profit. But, Stingray says, the bands themselves remain uninterested about money.



STRANGE GAMES' song is getting airplay in Los Angeles.



JOANNA STINGRAY assembled the "Red Wave" album.



AQUARIUM sing about having dreams.

That decadent music

RUSSIA'S rock 'n' roll scene will also be explored in the French documentary, "Rock Around the Kremlin" which will be shown Sept. 15 at the American Museum of Natural History's Margaret Mead Film Festival.

The film, which is having its U.S. premiere at the festival, shows that the attitudes toward this music is not so different in the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.

The teenagers there love it, the parents there deplore it, and the government is trying to "officialize" it. (Remember our own Senate hearings to rate rock records based on their lyric content?)

The film runs from 6:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. in four museum theaters. Admission is \$4. Call the American Museum of Natural History, at Central Park West and 79th St., 212-679-1070, for information.

about the music."

The Leningrad rockers first started drawing fans by playing in local parks, but by 1981 the crowds had grown so big the government created a 1,000-seat club for them, called The Rock Club. Stingray feels the government helped out because, "when something's getting too big, it's better to give it some leeway."

Official bands usually play in 10,000-seat halls, but says Stingray, "Their audiences just sit in their seats. At unofficial shows, they're up and screaming."

Stingray is hard-pressed to pin down specific musical differences between official and unofficial bands. The differences, she feels, seem to be more in terms of spirit.

One can say, though, that the unofficial bands feature Russian folk influences along with a strong influence from the west. All the bands have easy access to western music, and even videos, through tourists.

The performers they like most include The Smiths, The Cure, David Bowie and Bob Dylan. Accordingly, "Red Wave" reveals a wide range of musical style, from the jazzy-rock of Kino's "Saw a Night," to the punk-metal of Aquarium's "Ashes." Another song, "Metamorphosis," by Strange Games, has been getting a lot of airplay lately in Los Angeles.

OF THE lyrics, Stingray says, "People expect them to sing about politics, but they don't."

In fact, many of their lyrics concern what people everywhere sing about—relationships and self-esteem. "Boris Griebenschikov [leader of the most popular of the bands, Aquarium] sings a lot about having dreams," Stingray says. "But there's more to him than dreaming all day and getting drunk at night."

Geo-sounds a bit like Bruce Springsteen. Stingray says such similarities will help give American youths a more humane picture of the Soviets than they're used to getting through, say, "Rambo" movies.

Towards that end, she has made videos of the bands and recently ran them on MTV. "People think Russians sit home all day and pout. But when they see the videos they say, 'My God, they're having so much fun' or 'Wow, I can't believe they're like us!'"

Jim Farber writes about music and movies for the New York Daily News.