

'Unofficial' Soviet bands heard

A New Orleans songwriter Huey "Piano" Smith predicted 30 years ago, yes they are "rockin' behind the Iron Curtain."

We saw it last year when Lady Punk, the Clash-inspired band from Poland, released an American LP. This year, underground Russian groups have found their way onto a two-album compilation, "Red Wave 4 Underground Bands From the U.S.S.R.," on the Big Time record label.

These recordings weren't released, they were smuggled out of Mother Russia by a 25-year-old Los Angeles singer-songwriter, Juana Stingray. Throughout several trips to the Soviet Union during the last two years, she met and collaborated with Russian rock musicians. Each time she left the country, she took with her tapes and videos of four "unofficial" bands — that is, bands not authorized by the Soviet government.

Unlike the authorized Russian rock acts, the groups on "Red Wave" — Aquarium, Kino, Alisa and Strange Games — cannot



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receive money for their recordings or performances. They cannot record on Melodiya, the state-owned label, and their music is not allowed in Russian stores.

Instead, they circulate their songs throughout the country via an independent network. The music is recorded on cassettes that are passed along for friends to copy. Through this more organized version of home taping, groups like Aquarium and Kino have gained tremendous popularity in Russia.

"A couple of these groups were asked to be official Russian rock bands. None of them are enemies of the state," said Stingray.

"They've chosen to stay unofficial because they want complete creative control. If you become an official rock band, then the Soviet government is your boss and has control over the content of your

music."

Actually, none of these groups writes "protest" music, in any direct sense. Instead, said Stingray, "these bands offer hope that there's more to life than the usual Russian routine of working all day and getting drunk all night."

Musically, the bands are more aligned with British and American alternative-independent bands than mainstream ones. Strange Games shows a definite ska influence; Kino is reggae based; Alisa is characterized by the strange, enigmatic voice of its lead singer, Kostya Kinchev; and Aquarium runs the gamut from a punk attack to psychedelic-inspired feedback guitar. Each band is represented with six cuts of good production quality.

"Red Wave" has plenty to recommend it musically. True, some cuts are as dreary as a winter's day in Leningrad, but generally, the music is surprisingly diverse and obviously the effort of earnest musicians.

But the album is most provocative for its cultural information. Although these bands

exist within a different political structure than most of the world, the concerns they express in music — love relationships, self-realization, fear of nuclear holocaust, and looking for something better in life than the uninspired norm — is remarkably similar to rock 'n' roll everywhere.



Cover of the 'Red Wave.'