

Russians invading rock music world

HOLLYWOOD (NEA) — American viewers got their first taste of real Russian rock 'n' roll when MTV's new "International Hour" previewed four home-made video clips by underground Soviet bands. True, millions had seen "official" rockers Autograf during Live-Aid, but regional superstars like Aquarium, Strange Games and Kino don't get to play for overseas audiences. In fact, they can't legally play at all.

"You have to be a member of the union to be official," explains the 25-year-old Californian known as Joanna Stingray. She has been traveling to Russia and discreetly exporting tapes of Russia's underground rockers to America. "When you become official, you're allowed to earn money from playing music. But then the government is your boss. They tell you when to tour, how to perform and what to record. These unofficial bands want their creative freedom. Since they're not allowed to make money for their music, by law they have to have other jobs."

Working as nightwatchmen and street sweepers to support their craft, the underground rockers have nonetheless garnered huge followings by playing in living rooms and public parks. "These people are as famous in the Soviet Union as a David Bowie or a Bob Dylan," says Stingray, "and yet they walk to their concerts, carrying their own guitars on the street."

In 1981, Soviet officialdom decided that it would serve its purpose to keep an eye on this

cultural phenomenon. They established an open concert hall in Leningrad called the Rock Club, bestowing quasi-legal status on the local performers. While the bands still can't earn any money from their shows, at least they can now play their songs for 1,000 people a night. Ticket scalpers, however, make up to \$100 apiece on seats that retail for \$1.

Stingray succeeded in spirited out enough recorded material for a double album called "Red Wave: Four Underground Bands from the USSR" on the independent Big Time label, and 30 hours of video footage, which is being prepared as a documentary. Her clip for the ska group Strange Games is expected to go into rotation on MTV, and four clips will be showing up on other broadcast outlets next month.

Can Russian rock ever make it to the American charts? Some of the stuff is pretty good, even though the technical quality is archaic by Hot-100 standards. The main problem, radio programmers say, is that the lyrics are in Russian. How many American teenagers understand Russian?

"People can be affected by a song without knowing what the words mean," insists Stingray. "Falco had a No. 1 song in German. And don't forget, three-quarters of the world grew up on the Beatles' music, and had no idea what the lyrics said. It still changed their lives."

"That's the neat thing about music. It doesn't have any borders."