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The raider of Russian rock 'n' roll

By Mary Ann Norbom
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LOS ANGELES — It sounds like a campy adventure movie: USA rock 'n' roller visits Leningrad, meets top bands in the Russian underground pop scene, smuggles out tapes to the Western world.

It's no movie. It's the story of singer/songwriter Joanna Stingray, 25, who produced *Red Wave: 4 Underground Bands From the USSR*, to be released Friday.

The album features the top "unofficial" rock bands in Leningrad: the reggae-influenced Kino, Strange Games, Aquarium and the punkish Alisa. The label "unofficial" lets them perform live (without pay) but does not give them access to the state-run record label or radio network.

Stingray first traveled to Leningrad in 1984. A Russian friend in L.A. put her in touch with Boris Grebenshikov, lead singer and composer of Aquarium, and known as "the father of Russian rock 'n' roll."

With Grebenshikov as her link to the underground Leningrad music community, Stingray was quickly accepted by several other groups. All, she says, were astounded that she kept coming back — she has made nine trips so far.

"They'd heard countless promises from people who said they'd be back. No one ever did, until me."

After her first few trips, Stingray began bringing out copies of Grebenshikov lyrics. He's thought of as a Bob Dylan by the Russian youth who've heard him. Something of a poet, he was the first Russian rocker to write in his native language. Until he came upon the scene 10 years ago, Russian bands simply performed translated versions of English and USA hits.

With encouragement from English rock star David Bowie — who'd been interested in bringing Grebenshikov's music to the West but didn't have time — Stingray made a distribution deal with Big Time Records for an LP she'd produce. That was the easy part. Getting the necessary tapes out of Russia was something else again.

"I hate using the word 'smuggle,' but I guess that's what I did. I brought the tapes out different ways at different times. I can't be more specific."

Soviet citizens can't make contracts with



RED ROCKERS: Vitia Sologub of Strange Games, left, Boris Grebenshikov of Aquarium, Victor Tsoi of Kino and Kostya Kinchev of Alisa all appear on 'Red Wave'



By George Rose

JOANNA STINGRAY: She's bringing underground Russian music to the USA.

or accept currency from foreigners. So Stingray takes massive care packages — especially clothes and musical equipment.

"Yamaha has given me a lot of support recently. The guys couldn't believe it when I came in with a drum machine and a keyboard. Fender has also started giving me great breaks on guitars. And I've asked every record store in L.A. for T-shirts."