

Some of this is real?

A locally produced, downloadable album is a hip collaboration of musicians, voices and sound.

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"None of This is Real" is available for download at http://www.isound.com/machine_475 and can be purchased in CD format at Microphone Zone in Beverly. For information on Machine 475, visit www.myspace.com/machine475.

The mountains of Kentucky, the deep, dark sea and a tour of cosmopolitan cities around the world are all destinations on a musical journey that has been produced in a Salem home, featuring distinct voices of people around the North Shore.

Richard Lewis, James Forrest and their friends and acquaintances are Machine 475, a collaborative group creating the kind of electronic music you would expect to hear in the background of a Volkswagen ad or setting the scene in a movie soundtrack. It's reminiscent of the kind of roundabout journey to fame taken by Moby in the '90s or the circuitous route to popularity the music of dead British singer songwriter Nick Drake took in the last few years.

Forrest, a Web creative director at the Peabody Essex Museum and Lewis, chairman of Salem State College's art department, have been collaborating for the past year on the album "None of This is Real."

Composed by these visual artists, it is no surprise that the music is cinematic. It's dramatic and ambitious. It's also about including as many layers of sound as possible. The spoken word sections feature voices belonging to old friends, Salem State faculty members and theater students who can now add voice-over to their portfolio.

A Vietnamese woman, whose family owns a local market, is featured in a nightmare vignette, chasing after a girl and screaming out in her native language. A Southern born friend lends his twang to the song "Blue Kentucky Skies" and several international voices, including two from Kenya and Haiti take the listener on a spoken world tour called "My City."

Lewis and Forrest are always on the hunt to record more voices and area musicians.

"There's no reason why this shouldn't involve hundreds of people, each adding to the pot," says Lewis.

None of those involved in this "collaborative music and art project" are named on this first album. That's deliberate, says Lewis, because there are simply too many.

The album was created in the Lewis' third-floor home recording studio, which looks down on the traffic of Bridge Street. The group's clean, modern sound betrays the home's 150-year-old architecture, the upstairs room's wide yellow pine floors and Nordicflex in the corner.

With a Mac computer, a couple of monitors and a few thousand dollars, a home studio is now possible that once would have only belonged to John Lennon or Paul McCartney.

Beyond genre

Lewis is hoping to make music videos to go with each song. He is finishing up one now that he plans to exhibit at the Salem State College faculty art show. They also hope to one day perform live this computerized, studio generated music.

What the two don't expect to do with "None of This is Real" is make any money. In fact, they are

making it available online for free download.

Why?

"Because we have day jobs," says Lewis. "Also because it's purer and more radical in this day and age ... It's actually radical not to sell something."

"It's not American," adds Forrest, with a giggle. "We're not patriotic."

Says Lewis, "We're not 18-year-olds forming our first band and we think we're going to make it big. I don't need your \$8."

"That's not why we're doing it," adds Forrest.

For those who must have the jewel case and liner notes, the CD version can be bought at Microphone Zone in Beverly.

The name Machine 475 comes from the King Crimson song "Marine 475," though their music sounds nothing like the '70s band.

The songs are not a radio friendly length and these aren't guys who need Top 40 approval. If anything, college radio, a venue for fresh artists and experimental sounds, is where these guys would get played.

Forrest says, "We're doing it for the love of the music, just like those out there gigging on the streets."

Of course, the tracks are copy written and if someone asked them to put it in a car commercial or a movie, they would like to score the cash, but the average listener will be able to put it into their Ipod for free.

"If we're going to sell out, we're going to sell out big," says Lewis. "I'd actually rather be a cult sensation for 20 years than be a hit and next year, people say 'are they still around?' I'd rather always be on the verge, the potential always being there rather than oversell and be done."

Selling won't be a problem in this music industry, since the two musicians don't know quite how to categorize their music.

A close comparison could be Massive Attack, a British collaboration that has evolving members and recently performed in Boston with their eclectic, fresh sound. It's a little bit hip hop, combining elements of jazz and classical, making for a dark moody sound. Like the group Thievery Cooperation, Massive Attack is more accurately trip hop, a sound that combines British house music and hip hop. The French duo Air, with their dream-like quality, also could compare. Their electronic sound has also been used to sell cars and Levi's.

A question raised by "None of This is Real" is just what of this is real?

The album cover, painted by a Salem State professor, features the fictional characters of Dick and Jane watching black and white dancers from the 1950s on TV.

When a child singsongs amid the sound of crashing waves against the shore and a poem that begins "a family portrait on the beach," Lewis says it could be a beach you are hearing. At the suggestion that something sounds like a steel guitar, he says, "Yeah, that's steel guitar, sure."

But some of it is real. Lewis' wife, Emily, a professional harpist, is featured on one track, playing the flowing harp music in a heavenly dream.

'Mad about music'

Lewis, 47, says he's been waiting 20 years for the technology to catch up, since he was in a band in New York City in the mid-'80s called Movieland that created electronic music, was signed to RCA and made an appearance on MTV.

Originally from London, Lewis moved to New York in 1981 and has been teaching at Salem State College since 1993. When he's not producing dramatic mixed-media photography pieces or on his

small sailboat in Salem Sound, he spends much of his time in the recording studio.

Like Lewis, Forrest, 29, is equally visual and musical. He is an award winning Web designer and artist. The two met when he was studying mixed media at Salem State. From Malden and now living in Lynn, Forrest has been with the Peabody Essex Museum for seven years.

"Five years after graduation, I run into Richard having dinner (at McSwiggins) with his family and we realize that we're both mad about music," he says.

Forrest studied sound engineering and has jammed in Boston bars with all-black bands, playing acid jazz and soul, but most recently he produced an album that is a "sound sculpture" called "Who's Awake." It aims to help the listener experience the night as an owl. The project uses abstract sound synthesis, organic instrumentation and samples live environments. It is featured in the owl exhibit at the Peabody Essex Museum.

Meet up with Forrest in a Salem pub and he might bring out his Ipod, hand you the earphones and play some soothing guitar music that he composed and recorded, referring to it as "meditative."

Messing around for hours on his guitar, Forrest finds a tone, a mood, a bit of atmosphere and shares it with Lewis, who then wraps context around it. He calls Lewis the "curator" of the entire project, who uses his "cursor acts" to bring together the various levels of voice, beat, samples and actual music.

"I can't play a note without thinking about it for three days," says Lewis, in his British, self deprecating way.

Talk to Lewis about the mixed sound and he refuses to call it techno, because of the booming, flashing light, monobeat connotation, but he can't very well come up with a genre for it either. On his Myspace page, an online communication link used by musicians, Lewis calls it prog pop, "in tribute to all those prog rock bands, and giving a notion of ambition and seriousness to pop music. It avoids the horrible 'techno' word. It's impossible to define the music because every song is different," he says, "which is a disadvantage in a world where everything is defined down to emo-grunge-goth."

This first album is uplifting and positive, sincere and even innocent, without drifting into being corny. The first track "Party at the End of the World" starts with a rousing keyboard and mixes the sound of breaking glass, a minister calling out to God and holiday like chimes.

Lewis says the music is almost naïve, regardless of the cynicism harbored by its creators.

You'll find bluegrass on track two, fusing with a hardcore funky club beat, layered with spoken word and a great female voice. Another song pays homage to Southern truckers.

Forrest calls it "techno-twang." Another term could be electronic Americana. Whatever the genre, it's imagination run amok, arm chair travel and something you're likely to play again and again, preferably in the dark, as you embark on a new musical journey each time.

In Salem, you can find live music seven nights a week, but you probably don't know what might be happening in attic recording studios, thanks to this technology. Forrest has a similar setup at home, so the two can collaborate without being in the same room.

Still, even though albums and even movies are now composed and edited on home computers, Lewis seems to question whether the project will be looked upon as "legitimate" since the music is recorded at home. "People might say 'you do this at home, so does my nephew in the garage.'"

On a recent evening, the two were starting on the first song of what will probably be the second album. The funky tune is just waiting for voice-overs, says Lewis, between Forrest's Chuck Berry-like guitar riffs.

The tracks are right there on the screen and with the program Logic Pro, magic happens at the touch of the computer keyboard.

"Show ... your drum setup, which is just so nerdy, I love it," Forrest says to Lewis.

Like the owl sounds created by Forrest, crickets are also featured in one of Machine 475's songs.

"We love crickets," says Forrest.

As if on cue, Lewis' 10-year-old son William comes into the room. "What kind of music is this?" he asks.

"Good question," laughs his father. "If you can tell me, I'll give you \$20."