



Second Life's motley crew. Below: Duran Duran.

# Welcome to the Surreal World

In Second Life's online utopia, record labels and musicians are reaching new fans **BY MARK ANDERSON**

**W**HILE WEB SITES LIKE MySpace and YouTube are changing the way artists and record labels reach out to fans, the next online revolution in the music industry is already well under way. But Second Life is no mere social-networking or video-sharing site. A fully immersive three-dimensional digital universe that looks like a video game, Second Life is actually a whole new animal.

In stark contrast to the task-oriented, slay-the-dragon-style adventures of other multiplayer online games like World of Warcraft, EverQuest and Final Fantasy, Second Life is less a game than an alternate reality: There are no stated goals other than wandering around aimlessly, exploring the eighty-three-square-mile pixelated utopia. And lately it's become one of the coolest – and strangest – sites for experiencing music online.

In Second Life, launched by the San Francisco-based Linden Lab in 2003, users can create their own "avatars" in whatever form they choose: models or unicorns, punk rockers or robots. Like in the real world, they attend lectures, go on vacation, shop, have cybersex and go to concerts. For the 500,000-plus users, the options are endless. And increasingly the real world is taking advantage of Second Life's potential: Professors have their students set up shop to develop their business skills, real-estate brokers supplement their incomes by selling virtual plots of land, musicians can reach out to their

fans, and record companies use the site to market their artists.

"This is what broadband has been waiting for," says Justin Bovington of London marketing firm Rivers Run Red.

"Anyone within seven minutes can download it and be online. It's like turning up in a new country. You're dropped off at the train station, and off you go."

Using Linden Lab's basic content-creation tools, users are developing their real estate into a fantasia of neighborhoods, colonies and communities. There's Zephyr Heights, a hard-scrabble skater paradise; the anime-themed Nakama; the gritty, Gotham-like shopping mecca of Midnight City. There are tropical islands, snow-covered Alpine retreats, a forty-eight-acre Victorian London. There's even a burgeoning sex trade, replete with strip clubs, escort services and prostitution rings.

In Second Life's thriving online economy, users spend real money, converted to Linden dollars, to purchase virtual possessions. With an exchange rate of about L\$300 to one U.S. dollar, user-to-user commerce totaled \$6.3 million in July alone, and some users are earning thousands of dollars of real-world money.

"It's like a 3-D MySpace," says Ethan Kaplan, senior director of technology at Warner Bros. Records. This spring, Kap-

lan helped launch a Second Life listening room for Regina Spektor, where fans could hang out, chat and listen to tracks from her new CD, *Begin to Hope*, two weeks before its release. "Second Life has grown by a couple hundred thousand users in the past few months," notes Kaplan, who is planning a similar campaign for Talib Kweli. "Second Life users are becoming real tastemakers."

Second Life's burgeoning music scene features both established recording artists – such as Chamillionaire, Suzanne Vega and Duran Duran – and "local" talent struggling to make it big through intimate gigs and building word of mouth.

Slim Warrior (Leo Wolff) is a London artist who has performed her dreamy electronica on the site since November, when Second Life contained only five performing musicians. Using their avatars, artists can utilize Second Life's audio-stream features to play "live" concerts. Wolff now counts at least 100 musicians on the scene, at popular clubs such as Menorca, the Muse Arena and the Lily Pad Lounge. "It isn't the same as getting up on a real live stage, but in some ways it's better," she says. "You're actually reaching a far wider audience than if you were jamming in your local area."

Rootsy guitarist Frogg Marlowe notes other advantages to Second Life gigs. "It was easy to quit smoking cigarettes, because I wasn't around smokers," he says. "I don't have to pay for gas to get to and from the gig, and the gear's already all set up."



"It's a medium that transmits experience," said Bill Lichtenstein of Lichtenstein Creative Media, which produced a recent Suzanne Vega concert on the site.

"When you have these spaces on Second Life where people perform, if it's a small club or the back deck of a hotel at sunset, the brain processes it as that experience. And you feel it. You get that sense . . . that you are really there."

Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes has been exploring Second Life incognito for the past few months, and now the band is establishing its own campus on the site. Four Duran Duran islands are slated to open by year's end, where the group will stage concerts as well as, Rhodes ultimately envisions, lectures by artists and designers and conferences for the band's favorite causes.

"I'm determined that we set the standard with it," says Rhodes. "Because I think once other artists start getting hold of Second Life and realizing what a playground it is for creativity, there are going to be some fantastic things developing."