

Song of the Weekend

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Entry: 20191026 – Havana Smooth

This week's "Song of the Weekend" is Havana Smooth, from the Apogee Software cult classic, "Rise of the Triad."

Ah, Havana Smooth. One of my favorites, and one of the few songs I've done for a game that I've remastered. At the end of this write-up, I'll post a link to the remastered version, but I'll put a link to the original in-game version in a separate post.

Anyway, Havana Smooth had several influences going on at once. One was the Suite for Flute and Jazz Piano by Claude Bolling. Another would be the various recordings by an Austin, TX group by the name of Beto y los Fairlanes, a Latin jazz big band. The last would be the various Drum & Bugle Corps from the late 70s/early 80s who played a song called Tiger of San Pedro, the 1980 Guardsmen out of Schaumburg, IL being a primary example of which.

Havana Smooth was a bit of a risk. To my knowledge, no prior first-person shooter had employed a piece of Latin jazz-influenced music in its soundtrack. However, I was on a 6-week time limit, and I had to pull everything out of my hat that I could, so out came Havana Smooth. Fortunately, Tom Hall, project director for Rise of the Triad, did not reject the song - in fact, he encouraged it, suggesting spots for improvement, including suggesting the now-infamous left-channel/right-channel brass hit toward the middle of the song, just prior to the solo section (prior to which it had just been a straightforward stereo hit). He even defended the jazz flute solo to George Broussard, if memory serves.

The construction of Havana Smooth is quite complex. It begins quietly, with cymbals and a bass guitar in an alternating 3/4 - 6/8 feel. A piano joins in with a rising line, then settles down for a couple of bars before the brass enters with another rising chord progression. This leads to an 8-bar intro where the entire big-band ensemble plays large, dynamic, unison hits, with the flute "noodling" above the group. Things settle down for 8 bars, with the piano playing a repetitive chord pattern over the drum kit and Latin percussion. This leads into the flute solo.

The flute solo sets up the main melody of the song, punctuated by trumpet and saxophone hits. The brass and saxes come in at the end of the melody with a 4-bar setup, then repeat the dynamic unison hits from the beginning. The saxophones then echo the flute's melody while the trumpets play a countermelody of sorts with harmonic hits over them. The transition at the end of the melody section leads into the left-channel/right-channel brass hits mentioned above, followed by a two-note exclamation point on the end of the section, which is transitioned out of by timbales and congas. (con't)

(con't)

A trombone solo, or in this case either a valve trombone or marching baritone solo, since fingered notes and a trill are involved, takes over with an improvised (sort of) solo for the next 16 bars while the piano and rhythm section/bass play beneath. The solo continues for another 16 bars as the saxes, then the brass build pyramid chords that crescendo with each new chord.

A twelve-bar transition of controlled chaos takes over, with the trombone/baritone/whatever playing higher and higher notes above the ensemble until they all reach the same two-note stinger and timbale/conga hit from the end of the left-channel/right-channel section, although this time much stronger.

This leads into 32 bars of pure power, where the saxophone section in unison (as much as possible) plays the flute solo while the brass pyramids behind it with a strong countermelody, driving the section along in a form reminiscent of what was used behind the original sax "solo" part. This builds and builds until a final chord cuts everything off, leaving the flute to play by itself for most of two bars, transitioning back to the quietness of the original flute solo. The brass calms itself down, playing quiet notes below the flute before setting up the bass and the rhythm section for the end of the song. (In the original, this would have set up the loop.)

Phew! That's quite a lot of analysis there. I hope you stayed with me to the end. If you did, here's your reward: a link to the remastered version of Havana Smooth. I hope you'll enjoy it, and thank you for reading!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfLmmWbQ7ng>

Link to original in-game version: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1jDm_UqAnk