Song of the Weekend

By Lee Jackson

From the Lee Jackson Audio Community Discussion Group
(https://www.facebook.com/groups/ljackaudiodiscgroup)

Entry: 20200208 – Shellac

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This week's "Song of the Weekend" is Shellac, from the 3D Realms game, "Shadow Warrior."

The title of the song, Shellac, is a play on words as usual. Shellac is a varnish that, if memory serves, was used in one form or another by the Chinese and Japanese in ancient times. In its slang form, shellac also means a) to defeat; trounce, or b) to thrash soundly, according to https://www.dictionary.com. Both definitions have relevance when it comes to Shadow Warrior.

The song is rare in that it utilized a lot of "outboard" processing. In other words, I did not use software plug-ins in my digital audio workstation (DAW) program to achieve most of the effects I produced. Instead, I routed many of my hardware synthesizers - the mighty Roland SC-88 and Kurzweil K2500RS, plus I believe the Kawai K5000R - through a reverb unit made by Alesis called the MIDIVerb IV. I set it to synchronize with the tempo of the song, and the rest is history. Listen specifically for it in the opening bars of the piece.

There's not a whole lot to analyze in the song structure this go-around. The piece starts out with the aforementioned effect, applied to a 6/8 eighth-note pattern in the bass. This is handed off to the midrange for a couple of plays that bounce between speakers. The song then gets underway in earnest, with a synthesized blast over a taiko drum rhythm and a midrange drone note.

The "melody" (if you can call it that) comes in with a Japanese-sounding flute after a couple of measures of the above intro. It plays four times, followed by some very tense chords that lead to a modulation. This leads to a new base chord, which plays for eight measures before switching back to the original root chord.

A choir comes in and sings inversions of the root chord for a few measures before letting the original instruments have the soundstage again. Eventually, the modulation to the new chord returns, as the song alternates between the two chords a couple of times. During the next-to-last modulation, an ascending note pattern plays in the upper voices, eventually settling on a rotation around a single note for a few measures as the song returns to the original root chord.

The remainder of the song - the last minute, in fact - is all "outro," fading the song out slowly, with different elements leaving the soundstage at different times as a wind effect slowly takes over and eventually dies out itself. (This was necessary because CD-based songs were unable to loop cleanly at this point in game development history.)

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And there you have it - the story behind Shellac. Now, please allow me to link you to a recording of the song. Thank you for reading, and thank you for voting for your "Song of the Weekend"!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xys7ZLqtwOU