

Song of the Weekend

By Lee Jackson

From the Lee Jackson Audio Community Discussion Group

(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ljackaudiogroup>)

Entry: 20200710 – Grabbag

This week's "Song of the Weekend" is Grabbag, from the 3D Realms hit, "Duke Nukem 3D."

Grabbag has been covered countless times. I feel honored that people have taken it upon themselves to try and tackle what is admittedly a difficult piece (and horribly written in spots). As a result, I have told the story of Grabbag over and over again through the years. Fortunately, I've got it written down someplace linkable. Go to the following link for the complete history of Grabbag:

<https://dleejackson.lbjackson.com/music/the-history-of-grabbag/>

For the purposes of "Song of the Weekend," I am going to concentrate on the musical side of Grabbag.

Musical Analysis:

Buckle yourselves in, because this is going to be a bumpy ride.

Grabbag is written in a terrible key: F# minor. To complicate matters, it mode-switches to the F# Phrygian scale in places, where the G# of the F# minor key is played as a G natural. This is the source of much of my frustration with cover versions of Grabbag - they don't bother to dip down into the Phrygian mode and choose to stay in the minor key all the time instead, making for an easier to play (but not as good sounding, IMHO) version of the song. The Megadeth cover is one such example.

See? One paragraph in, and we're bumpy as hell already.

One technicality that those folks who have downloaded the original General MIDI/Roland GS files of the song from <http://leejacksonaudio.lbjackson.com/> will recognize right away: the tempo of the piece is set to a plodding 86 beats per second. The song uses mostly 16th and 8th notes, however, giving it a much faster feel.

(con't)

Another technicality that must drive cover artists insane is the fact that Grabbag was in fact written for **two** guitars - a lead guitar and a rhythm guitar. The two parts interact, so it's kind of hard to separate them completely and cover just one. It must drive some folks crazy trying to cover it by ear alone. My apologies go out to them.

I must confess that at the point in my career at which Grabbag was written, I knew next to nothing about how to play the guitar. I'd owned one and had tried like hell to learn how to play, but beyond learning a couple of chords, I could never untangle my fingers enough to call myself a performer. Stringed instruments are my Kryptonite®. In the end, I went with what I thought **sounded** good, and hoped & prayed that I'd got it right.

One other thing: a performance of Grabbag **really** needs a keyboard player, and not just as an afterthought. The first part of the song can sail through with only guitars up to the 32nd-note keyboard riffs at measures 9 and 10, but from that part on the keyboard provides a harmonic underpinning that is vital to the sound of the song.

Cover artists, I implore you: put a combo together. Lead, rhythm, and bass guitar, keyboardist (a good one with maybe a couple of synths or with a computer), and a drummer. Try playing Grabbag that way. Expand on the solo section if you want. Make it longer. It'll be worth it.

This is as much musical analysis I can get into without expanding this write-up to a four-page thesis. There's just too much going on in Grabbag, with all of the mode-switching in both the melody and the accompanying chords, the solos, and everything else. If you have any questions about Grabbag, do not hesitate to ask them in the group.

With that, please allow me to leave you with a link to the 2018 high quality remaster of Grabbag as posted on Bandcamp. Thank you for reading, and thank you for voting for your "Song of the Weekend!"

<https://leejackson1.bandcamp.com/track/grabbag-96khz-24bit-2018-remaster>