

VIDEO GAME MUSIC ANALYSIS  
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# Theme of Onett

*from*

*Earthbound AKA: Mother 2*

Composed by Keiichi Suzuki

Transcription/Analysis by Seventh Sam

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**INTRO**

♩ = 116

Staccato bassline gives the music a "wonky", whimsical feeling.

The musical score is for the Intro of Earthbound, featuring an E. Bass line and a Drumset line. The tempo is marked as 116 beats per minute. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The E. Bass line is written in bass clef and consists of a staccato bassline. The Drumset line is written in treble clef and consists of a simple drum pattern. The score is divided into four measures, each with a chord symbol and a Roman numeral below it.

Measure	Chord	Roman Numeral
1	C	I
2	Dm7	ii <sup>7</sup>
3	C	I
4	Dm7	ii <sup>7</sup>

A wonky, almost "dopey" sounding staccato bass line introduces the listener not only to the town of Onett (in which the game proper begins), but to the sound and mood of the game itself. First impressions make a difference, and this track aims to make quite an impression indeed:

Earthbound (AKA: Mother 2) is a JRPG that doesn't take itself too seriously, and the music reflects that. The soundtrack as a whole is a massive, whimsical hodgepodge of blues, jazz, funk, and...*avant garde electronica* (to put it mildly). It's another prime example of the delicious eclecticism that 16-bit era afforded game composers. This track in particular is a strange mash-up of timbres and harmonies (although it is quite intelligible compared to some of the *other* tracks the game has in store).

That said, there is a great deal of pathos buried beneath the quirkiness that suggests a deeper message beneath the deconstructive, 4th-wall-breaking, comedic tone of this one-of-a-kind game. The game isn't *just* silly: it's also sincere. Through the trippy lens of absurdist humor, a heartfelt story about courage, friendship, and coming of age is told. It's a very long and involved story, and this track sets the journey off with a fanfare that - in my opinion - perfectly captures this duality between sincerity and silliness.

The musical score is arranged in five staves:

- Guit.**: Treble clef, 3/8 time signature. Features a melodic line with a blue note labeled "chordal 9th".
- ???**: Treble clef. Features a melodic line with a red note labeled "chordal 11th".
- Uk.**: Treble clef. Features a rhythmic line with blue notes labeled "chordal 5th" and red notes labeled "chordal 7th".
- E. Bass**: Bass clef. Features a rhythmic line.
- D. Set**: Drum set notation. Features a rhythmic line.

Chord diagrams are shown below the staves, alternating between **Cmaj7** and **Dm11**. Roman numerals **I<sup>7</sup>** and **ii<sup>11</sup>** are also indicated.


**(1)** - Harmonic ambiguity is created by the emphasis of extended chord tones in the highest registers. E and G (see above) are the third and fifth of the tonic chord, yet they are sounding clearly and melodically over the supertonic chord. What's more, the supertonic chord is extended by a seventh to begin with, meaning it contains the notes of the predominant chord (F-A-C), giving this big, fat eleventh chord many simultaneous diatonic functions. All this confounding of straightforward, common-practice harmony makes the music feel very modern.


Why is this important? Because harmonic ambiguity of this nature gives subtlety and nuance to the sound; it makes it hard to place it in a particular style or genre. This, in turn, helps Suzuki craft a sound unique to the setting, one that is memorably and iconically "Earthbound".


**(2)** - Placing the ukelele stabs on the offbeats of each measure creates a "forward" momentum that rushes the listener on to the next measure. It makes the music feel slightly restless, as if it's saying, "C'mon, let's go! We've got places to get to!" This is a great fit for a track that's meant to accompany overland travel.


To hear what I mean, try downloading this score and placing the stabs on the downbeat. I think you'll find that the music sounds much more *inert*. It's amazing how the tiniest detail can change so much!


7

Guit. 

① ??? 

Uk. 

E. Bass 

D. Set 

Cmaj<sup>7</sup> Dm<sup>7</sup> Cmaj<sup>7</sup> Dm<sup>7</sup> Cmaj<sup>7</sup> Dm<sup>7</sup> Cmaj<sup>7</sup> Dm<sup>7</sup>

I<sup>7</sup> ii<sup>7</sup> I<sup>7</sup> ii<sup>7</sup> I<sup>7</sup> ii<sup>7</sup> I<sup>7</sup> ii<sup>7</sup>

(1) - You've probably noticed at this point that this instrument is labeled "???". This is because I have no clue what it's supposed to be. (*Perhaps it's supposed to be a Vibratone?...*)

If you listen to the original version of the track, you will hear a lovely, lyrical, and almost alien "crooning" sound. This sound doubles the melody (mostly) at the third, but due to its very unusual timbre it injects the melody with such a distinct feeling that just *nails* the tone of the game. I highly recommend listening to the original version to get an idea of what I mean.

(2) - On the subject of timbres:

Suzuki utilizes many "folk" type sounds (Guitar, Ukelele, Marimba, etc.) These choices are most likely due to him liking how they sound, but there's no denying that they keep the music "grounded" and "down to earth" in the sense that nothing ever takes on a grand, epic, or orchestral flavor. If the music did, that would go very much against the tone established by the other elements of the game.

11 **B**

Mrm.

Vox.

Bb Tpt.

E. Bass

D. Set

**(a)**

**(b)**

**(c)**

**(d)** three notes derived from F Lydian matches Fmaj7#11 chord

**(e)**

chordal b9

Fmaj7 G7 Em7 Am Bb7 Dm7 G7b9 Fmaj7#11

### Where are the roman numerals?

Roman numeral analysis doesn't *quite* apply to this section, so I've omitted them. In searching for a modern, quirky, and unique sound, Suzuki is using (mostly) diatonic sevenths and extended chords to harmonize his chosen melodies and provide (mostly) smooth voice leading. Of note:

- a) The marimba is melodically sequenced, introducing an element of stability to the section
- b) Meanwhile, the bass is angular, irregular, and all over the place, which *destabilizes* the music in the most delightful way
- c) A chromatic shift (somewhat of a side-slip) is thrown into measure 12, beat 3 and interrupts both the harmonic flow and rhythm, catching the listener off-guard.
- d) The passage ends on a lovely maj7#11 chord. *I guess* this could be thought of as a very extended plagal back to the A section, but the voice leading doesn't suggest anything more than a "soft landing" for the passage.
- e) The drums chill out considerably, allowing the dense harmony to take the spotlight.

All in all, this passage serves as a brief "splash of water" for the listener, introducing much needed contrast, spice, and interest to what has thus far been a fairly repetitive track.

A

15

Guit.



???



Uk.




E. Bass





D. Set




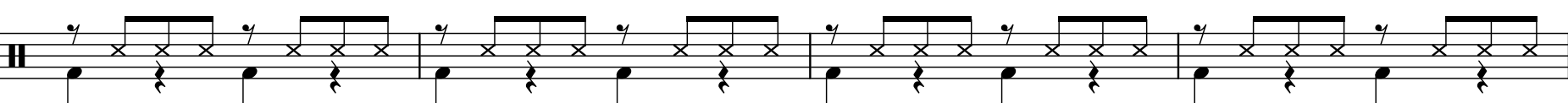
The A section repeats exactly.

Guit. 

??? 

Uk. 

E. Bass 

D. Set 

23 C

Vox.

Bb Tpt.

E. Bass

D. Set

①

②

suspensions from IV chord

anticipations of tonic chord

Descending step-wise into A minor again.

Am      A $\flat$       Am $^7$ /G      D $^9$ /F $\sharp$       Fmaj $^9$       G $^7$       C

vi       $\flat$ VI      vi $^7$       V $^9$ /V      IV $^9$       V $^7$       I

(1) - The Vox and Bass mirror each other almost completely. This reinforces the chromatically descending root movement. This reinforcement helps the harmonic foundation be heard clearly over the hyperactive trumpets in mm. 24

(2) - Triumphant trumpet arpeggios catapult the music into hopeful and heroic territory. The player is just starting on their journey, and the music gives them hope and motivation to keep going.

27

Vox.

Bb Tpt.

E. Bass

D. Set

Am      A<sup>b</sup>      C/G      Bm<sup>7</sup>/F<sup>#</sup>      Fmaj<sup>7</sup><sup>#9</sup>      D<sup>9</sup>      Gmaj<sup>7</sup>

vi      <sup>b</sup>VI      I<sub>4</sub>      vii<sup>7</sup>      IV      V/V      V

sharp 9th

accented chr. passing tone

F<sup>#</sup> is leading tone to G

(1) - Suzuki sprinkles some chord alterations in the bass-line to add jazz-inspired spice to the final cadence before the bridge. Even so, the dissonances are embedded in fairly standard diatonic cadence. There are plenty of tracks in this game that "go off the rails" so to speak, but this isn't one of them.



A short, two-measure bridge section repeats the bass lick and mirrors the introduction of the track before re-entering the A section. By making the bridge resemble the introduction, Suzuki prevents it from sounding like the track is coming to a close. This is a simple, seamless way to loop the track.