

7 Music Production Challenges to Help Finish Your Songs



It's easy to get lost in the unlimited possibilities offered by music production software. There are always new presets worth trying and effects to tinker with. Exploration is a big part of what makes music production fun. But if you don't know where to stop, it becomes very hard to complete projects. If you want to be more productive in the studio, consider following rules that narrow down your options and spark new ideas.

But what do you choose to let go? Here are seven production challenges that breed focus through restriction and get you into music-finishing-mode.

1. Use one synth for everything

Having a strong understanding of synthesis allows you to produce the sounds

you hear in your head without the need to rely on presets (not that there's anything wrong with that, either!). Once you have a strong foundation with one synth, you can apply this knowledge to others.

Get to know your synth inside-out by producing an entire track using one editable patch. Switch between oscillator waveshapes to generate leads, pads, and basses. Smash that LFO knob to produce slinky SFX. Finesse ADSR controls to sculpt drums and percussion. You will be a synth wizard by the time your track is done.

For inspiration, check out this [list](#) of albums made with a single synthesizer, and this iZotope blog on [how to learn any synth](#) in just three steps.

2. Use only found sound

Earlier this year, we wrote an article on how to use [Foley](#) as a supplement or even replacement for drums and percussion. It's an increasingly popular approach used by artists like [Jon Hopkins](#) and [Bonobo](#).

For the second challenge, we suggest taking this approach one step further: produce an entire track using only Foley and found sound. You can get just about any recording you want from creative commons libraries like [freesound](#). Or you can record bits around your house and neighbourhood for a more personal feel. With portable recording studios like [Spire](#), you can capture music whenever (and wherever) inspiration strikes.

Pro tip: produce lightly. Keep your sound selection between ten and twenty short recordings or hits.



3. Play it live

Punch in your beats in real-time and don't make any additional adjustments. In a world of quantized, to-the-grid music, a little natural [swing and shuffle](#) makes a big difference. The first few tries might be sloppy, but you will find your own groove in no time. This challenge will force you to place more trust in your own creative instincts and decisions.

You can try the same thing with melodic elements too. It will be harder if you don't have any theory training or live experience, but what are rules for anyway?

4. Reverse (or scramble) your process

We all have a preferred process for making music. Most producers follow a similar formula: start with drums, add a bassline, then move onto chords and

melodies. If this works for you, then stick with it. But sometimes, our own formulas fail us, and we need a creative boost to get us back on track.

An easy way to do this is to reverse, or simply switch up the sequence of your workflow. Start your track with an element you usually leave for last, and let your ears guide the order of everything else that follows. This challenge will nudge you out of your comfort zone and spur original ideas.

5. Speed up or slow down

More than ever before, music genres and styles overlap, mix, and borrow from each other. Now is a prime opportunity to explore new tempos in your DAW. Labels and listeners want to hear music that breaks convention.

Revisit unfinished sessions and drag the global tempo up or down at least 15-20 BPM. You'll get a new perspective on an old project, along with the inspiration to finish it. The results can be comical at already fast tempos, so use your best judgement here. Alternatively, you can begin a new session from scratch at a tempo you're unfamiliar with. This is usually a bigger challenge, but the payoff is worth it.



6. Start to finish in 60 minutes

For most producers (myself included), [finishing music](#) is the hardest part of the entire creative process. But the reality is, without a set of completed tracks you can't release music or tour. Hold yourself to the challenge of completing an entire track in 60 minutes. You'll be pleasantly surprised at just how much you can achieve when working within time constraints.

It's important here to not get stuck on details. Once you come up with an idea that makes you nod your head, tap your foot, or better yet, dance around, save it, and move onto the next element. Many producers have tight deadlines for remixes, EPs, and singles. This speedy approach is good practice once commercial projects come your way.

7. Turn off your DAW loop function (sort of)

I usually build entire tracks in a loop, then spread the separate elements

across my DAW timeline to structure them. Unfortunately, what works in a loop format doesn't always translate to a complete track.

Consider working in a linear fashion right from the start of your DAW session. This will strengthen your sense of progression. Granted, there will be some moments you need to loop parts of your song, but keep these to a minimum. Always be moving forward.

Rise to the challenge

For most music producers, creativity ebbs and flows. If you find your inspiration is lacking, use one of these challenges in restriction for a boost. DAWs give us a myriad of options to produce music, but it's easy to get stuck if you don't have a little direction or discipline. Set rules for yourself. You will quickly know what to do and this will help you make more music.