

SONG FINISHER

ROADMAP



BY
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///
LEVEL UP YOUR **RIFFS** TO
RELEASE-READY TRACKS
-

THE MODERN
GUITARIST'S

/// VISIT ERICKGERBER.COM
FOR MORE WAYS TO LEVEL UP



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WELCOME TO THE ROADMAP

Ready to level up your riffs and turn half-written songs into release-ready tracks? Follow this roadmap, and you'll save years of trying to figure out how.

You'll learn a structured, efficient method for taking raw ideas to finished songs. No more wandering around, trying to choose a direction.

I don't want to change what makes you you. My goal is to amplify your unique voice and turn your process into a well-oiled machine! One that pumps out the best songs you've ever made. Let's do this!

WHO IS THIS FOR?

If you're a **modern rock or metal guitarist** who wants to:

- Write and release pro-level songs consistently.
- Build a career making music that you love.

Has:

- An audio interface
- A DAW (Digital Audio Workstation)
- Basic experience in recording and/or mixing songs.

...And is tired of:

- Filling up hard drives with unfinished demos and guitar tabs.
- Abandoning songs for new ideas whenever you get stuck.
- Spending \$1000+ on every release, or feeling like you can't afford to make music.
- Wasting hours on YouTube, searching for the missing pieces to your process.
- Delaying your music goals, waiting for inspiration.

Then this roadmap is for **you!**

If the last 5 points felt like a punch to the gut, you're not alone—there are thousands of guitarists worldwide who face the same struggles.

The good news? By grabbing this roadmap, you've taken the first step to breaking free. You're going to learn exactly what you need to finish those riffs gathering digital dust, and discover the missing ingredients to your process.

HOW THIS ROADMAP WILL HELP

Level by level, this roadmap will teach you to conquer the **four obstacles** that stop most guitarists from finishing their songs. In a video-game style journey, you'll face and overcome each obstacle, with its own story, mission, and skill builder to help you finish any song.

These obstacles are:

1. **No Vision Beyond the Riff:** You rely on "feeling," and stumble through the maze of creativity without a map.
2. **Translation Failure:** You struggle to get ideas out of your head and onto your guitar/other instruments.
3. **Phantom Masterpiece Syndrome:** You cram in too many ideas or endlessly tweak, trying to make the "perfect" song
4. **Fear of imperfection** (a.k.a. fear of failure, or fear of rejection): You subconsciously avoid finishing, because letting the world hear your "imperfect" song is terrifying...

By completing every level of the roadmap, you'll turn one of your riffs into a finished song (or write one from scratch), hone your skills and gain a repeatable formula for writing and finishing better music, faster—every time.

ABOUT ME

My name is Erick Gerber. I'm an award-winning modern rock & metal composer, producer, and guitarist based in New Zealand (originally from South Africa).

My band Red Helen won *Best Album*, *Best Core Band*, and *Best Music Video* at the South African Metal Music Awards in 2017. More recently, a track I produced won Silver at the International Singer-Songwriter Awards, and several songs I co-wrote have charted on the DRT Global Radio Charts. I've written, produced, and arranged over a hundred songs for artists worldwide, with a 5-star average rating on freelance music platforms.

When I'm not writing, recording, or playing gigs, I'm either nose deep in a Sci-Fi book/video game, or on the beach with my beautiful wife and fur baby.

HOW TO USE THIS ROADMAP

This is **not** a quick read or cheat sheet. It's an action companion to motivate and guide you through *doing* the thing in the most effective and efficient way possible. The fastest point from A to B is a straight line. I've drawn the line for you but you still have to walk it yourself.

There are four different ways you can navigate this guide:

1. **Level Mode (Recommended for first timers):** Work through each level one at a time. Don't skip ahead until you've completed each set of action tasks. Skipping ahead will overwhelm and discourage you from taking action.
2. **Cheat Mode:** An accelerated version of Level Mode—skip the fluff and focus on the most important bits—the *Action Tasks*. You'll fly through the roadmap, but still get most of the value and skill building.
3. **Checklist Mode:** This is how I personally use it—as a visual reference and accountability system. Print the [roadmap overview page](#) and pin it above your workspace to make sure you don't skip any crucial steps. Having a clear process keeps you focused and consistent.
4. **Sandbox Mode:** For repeat readers who want to experiment, remix, or explore other creative options. Use the roadmap as a flexible playground—mix up the order of levels, revisit earlier stages mid-process, or use a single level as a focus exercise for a session.

Whatever you do, **don't** read it all in one go. Once you start, decide to be someone who finishes by committing to show up every day and putting in the work. Think of it like a video game—it's kind of pointless if you skip all the way to the end.

This guide is as simple as possible, but there are a few concepts that require basic music theory understanding. If you have questions or get stuck, please reach out to me at me@erickgerber.com.

Are you ready to press PLAY?

QUICK NOTE ABOUT AI

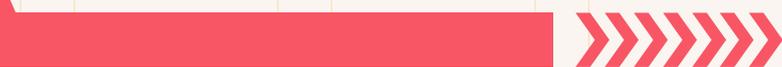
No AI-generated media was used in this roadmap eBook. A big thank you to the amazing Christi Du Toit for the illustration.

Also, don't be fooled by the m-dashes ("—"). Yes, chatbots helped, but I wrote most of this roadmap word-for-word and had it edited by a real human.



PROLOGUE:

THE BEACON'S CALL



THE CITY HUMS WITH RIFFS, MELODIES AND HALF-FORMED SONGS. THEY DRIFT LIKE GHOSTS, TRAPPED BETWEEN CREATION AND OBLIVION, UNABLE TO MOVE ON. ALL MUSICIANS IN THE GRID LIVE AMONG THEM, HAUNTED BY THE ECHOES OF SONGS THEY COULDN'T FINISH.

BUT LEGENDS SPEAK OF A TOWER OF LIGHT WHERE GHOSTS CAN BE FREED. RESONATING WITH THE SOUND OF EVERY FINISHED SONG—THE BEACON. THEY SAY THOSE WHO REACH IT SHED THE WEIGHT OF UNFINISHED WORK AND ASCEND, TURNING ECHOES INTO LEGACY.

NO ONE KNOWS IF THE BEACON TRULY EXISTS. BUT YOU'VE HEARD ITS TONE—FAINT, PURE, CALLING YOU THROUGH THE NOISE. AND NOW, GUITAR ON YOUR BACK AND YOUR WORLD HEAVY WITH GHOSTS, YOU BEGIN THE CLIMB.



ROADMAP OVERVIEW

THE CHRONOS GUILD

START
SET A DEADLINE.

LEVEL 01

THE CYPHER LAB

CHOOSE REFERENCES &
CREATE A SONG BLUEPRINT.

LEVEL 02

THE ORACLE

CREATE YOUR SONG
STRUCTURE & STORY ARC.

LEVEL 03

THE COMBAT SIMULATOR

USE A MIDI COMPOSITION
TOOL.

LEVEL 04

THE DARK MATTER SENTINEL

BUILD THE RHYTHMIC &
CHORDAL FOUNDATION.

LEVEL 05

THE TEMPLE

ENTER THE "CONTRACTIVE"
PHASE: REALIGN & EVOLVE.

LEVEL 08

THE GHOST SIREN

WRITE YOUR MELODIES &
MOTIFS.

LEVEL 06

THE MERCHANT

UPGRADE YOUR TOOLS
STRATEGICALLY.

LEVEL 09

THE GARDEN

ELIMINATE MUSICAL CLASHES.

LEVEL 07

THE ARMORER

GET YOUR GUITAR SET UP FOR
STUDIO.

LEVEL 10

THE FOUNDRY

RECORD YOUR SONG.

LEVEL 11

THE BOSS FIGHT

DEFEAT YOUR PERFECTIONIST
SELF.

LEVEL 13

THE SUMMONING

OUTSOURCE & COLLABORATE.

LEVEL 12

THE BEACON

CELEBRATE & BUILD A
FINISHING HABIT.

LEVEL 14

END

LEVEL 1:

THE CHRONOS GUILD

THEY RUN THE CITY'S CLOCKS—AN ANCIENT ORDER OF TIME BROKERS IN CHROME MASKS, TRADING MINUTES FOR LIFESPAN. TO AID IN YOUR QUEST FOR THE BEACON, YOU'VE BOUGHT A CHRON-LOCK, A NEURAL IMPLANT THAT BOOSTS FOCUS, BUT BINDS YOU TO A DEADLY COUNTDOWN. IF THE TIMER HITS ZERO BEFORE YOUR MISSION'S DONE, THE GUILD WILL HUNT YOU DOWN AND RECLAIM YOUR TIME—PERMANENTLY. YOUR WRIST PULSES RED. THE DEAL IS MADE. NO MORE WAITING. THE COUNTDOWN BEGINS.



OBJECTIVE

Set a deadline for your song release!

Deadlines are catalysts for growth. If you wait for inspiration or until the song feels ready, you'll wait forever. The amount of time spent on a song does not equate to its quality.

REALITY CHECK

Many guitarists and songwriters believe that the more time you spend perfecting a song, the better it will be. When, in fact, that couldn't be further from the truth. Here are some facts that might surprise you:

 **FACT:** Misha Mansoor and Jake Bowen have talked about how “Scarlet” almost didn't make the cut on *Periphery II: This Time It's Personal*. The band thought it was “too weird” and weren't sure fans would connect with it. It ended up being one of their most-loved songs and a live staple.

 **FACT:** Corey Taylor from Slipknot has said “Wait and Bleed” came together REALLY QUICKLY and wasn't thought of as their “big one.” It ended up being their breakout single, introducing them to the world.

 **FACT:** Kurt Cobain from Nirvana reportedly thought that “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was “kind of a rip-off” of Pixies and wasn't convinced it was special. Geffen Records didn't even push it as the main single initially. It exploded into a generational anthem almost by accident.

Even with my band Red Helen's album *Trading Past For Pathways*, the songs we spent the least time on ended up getting the most streams.

Moral of the story? As the artist, you can't objectively judge your own music. The songs you obsess over rarely connect with your audience the way you expect. So don't get stuck trying to make one perfect song. Write and release as many as you can, and you'll quickly figure out what works. For now, just make the song as good as you can within your time limit, and put it out there!

DEADLINES AND THINGS LIKE THAT ARE REALLY GOOD FOR CREATIVITY. THEY MAKE YOU GET DOWN TO IT. IF YOU DON'T HAVE RESTRICTIONS, YOU NEVER FORCE YOURSELF TO PUSH THE LIMITS.

—JACK WHITE (THE WHITE STRIPES)

ACTION TASK

Fill out the following deadline calendar template.

Choose your start and release dates (49 days or less apart). Then fill in the sub-deadline dates in-between. This template factors in time for outsourcing mixing & mastering, as well as your distributor's (CD Baby, Distrokid, etc.) lead time requirements for DSPs (Spotify, Apple Music, etc).

If you're writing a song to pitch to a label, artist, or sync library, consider “DSP Upload Date” as the date you send your submission. If this song is part of an album or EP, extend the timeline and batch tasks (i.e. all guitar tracking together, all mixing & mastering together, etc).

Write a corresponding date for each task:

SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Start Date (Deadlines & Planning):	Choose Song References:	Song Blueprint:	Structure/Sstory Arc:	Start Composing:		
		Composition Done By:	Import & Edit MIDI in DAW:	Sign Off MIDI In DAW:	Guitar Setup Done & Start Guitar Tracking:	
		Guitar Tracking Done By:	Guitar Editing:	Vocal Recording Day:	Start Vocal Editing:	Finish Vocal Editing:
Additional Creative Elements:	Recording Deadline (All):	Export Stems & Send In For Mixing:				
		Final Mix Deadline:	Send In For Mastering:			
Mastering Deadline:	Song Artwork Deadline:	DSP Upload Date:				
						Release Date:

This is the longest my process takes, but everyone’s different, so feel free to modify the schedule.

SIDE NOTE:
Levels 10 & 12 discuss outsourcing (luthier, vocalist, mixing engineer, etc.) Some of these professionals may be booked up far in advance and you’ll need to adjust some sub-deadlines depending on who you outsource and when.

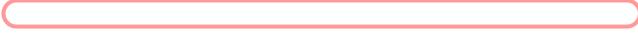
LEVEL 1 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **DISCIPLINE +2:** LEARNED TO DRIVE OUTPUT WITH EFFECTIVE DEADLINES.
- › **MOMENTUM +2:** DISCOVERED THAT DEADLINES SHARPEN CREATIVITY.
- › **DISCIPLINE +1:** REALISED THAT MORE TIME DOESN'T EQUAL HIGHER QUALITY.
- › **MOMENTUM +1:** ACCEPTED THAT SONG IMPACT CAN'T BE PREDICTED—ONLY EARNED THROUGH ACTION.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		3
MOMENTUM		3
CREATIVITY		0
CRAFT		0
PRODUCTION		0
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		0



LEVEL 2:

THE CYPHER LAB



DEEP BENEATH THE CITY LIES THE CYPHER LAB, WHERE SOUND AND DATA INTERTWINE.

YOU INSERT THE R.I.F.F. DRIVE—A MYSTERIOUS FILE SAID TO HOLD THE BEACON'S COORDINATES
—INTO THE DECRYPTOR CORE. THE MACHINE HUMS, CONVERTING NOISE INTO PATTERN, AND
PATTERN INTO PURPOSE. PATTERNS EMERGE: CHORD SEQUENCES, TEMPO BLUEPRINTS,
HARMONIC MAPS.

YOU REALISE YOUR DESTINATION ISN'T JUST A LOCATION. IT'S A SONG. AND THE ONLY WAY TO
FIND THE BEACON... IS TO FINISH WRITING IT.



OBJECTIVE

Create a song plan by analysing your favourite artist's songs.

Don't skip this step! You'll refer back to it at each stage of your song's development.

Originality isn't about reinventing the wheel or making every element unique. It's about connecting ideas from different inspirations to create something new. Study what works, analyse, create your own blueprint, then intentionally combine ideas in new ways. Listen actively to figure out exactly what your heroes are doing and how.

SIDE NOTE:

Use songs by established artists or bands other than yourself—the point is to use songs that an existing audience already loves. Songs that have impact.

REALITY CHECK

Reference tracks remind you of what pro-level songwriting and production sounds like. It's not cheating—it's smart—especially when you're feeling uninspired or stuck. You already draw from your inspirations anyway. Doing so intentionally will help you write music you truly love!

Similarly, creative limitations actually *improve* creativity. Having lots of creative ideas is great, but the best work paradoxically comes from limiting yourself to some degree. If you keep too many options on the table for where a song could go, you'll have no clear path to finishing.

 **GOOD ARTISTS COPY, GREAT ARTISTS STEAL**  —PICASSO

 **THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A NEW IDEA. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE. WE SIMPLY TAKE A LOT OF OLD IDEAS AND PUT THEM INTO A SORT OF MENTAL KALEIDOSCOPE. WE GIVE THEM A TURN AND THEY MAKE NEW AND CURIOUS COMBINATIONS.**  —MARK TWAIN

ACTION TASKS

STEP 1: CHOOSE REFERENCES

- › What famous song does your riff already kinda sound like?

- › If you had to pick one, what famous song would you love your finished song to kinda sound like?

- » What do you want the production (drums, synths, guitar tones, etc.) to sound like? Pick a famous reference track:

STEP 2: CREATE BLUEPRINT

Listen carefully to your chosen reference tracks and create a musical blueprint for each section of your song based on the 7 elements below. Focus on your favourite aspects of the song/s or the ones you'd like to draw from.

TIP:

Analysing by ear and theory are skills that take time to develop. While you're still learning, AI tools like ChatGPT can help analyse musical elements of songs. You can also [hire a professional](#) to help you analyse and learn while you're at it.

1. Scales & Intervals
 What scales are the riffs and melodies using? (think notes, not guitar shapes).
 What interval choices do they prefer? Large gap jumps or smaller movements?
 Do melodies favour certain notes in the scale more than others?

Intro/Main Riff:	
Verses:	
Chorus:	
Breakdown:	
Other:	

2. Chord Progressions:
 Don't just think guitar, think full arrangement.
 Tip: If you can, use roman numeral analysis, not frets or pitched chord names. This will make it much easier to translate to your own song later.

Intro/Main Riff:	
Verses:	
Chorus:	
Breakdown:	
Other:	

3. Rhythmic Choices

Tempo, time signature & subdivision, and phrasing choices.

Intro/Main Riff:	
Verses:	
Chorus:	
Breakdown:	
Other:	

4. Arrangement/Instrumentation

Besides the usual instruments, what else do you hear? E.g. Strings, brass, synth leads or synth bass, underlying pads, percussion, sub drops & cinematic effects, etc. List out each instrument or sound.

--

5. Expressions/Techniques

As a guitarist, this part will be easy. Tapping, hammer-ons, pinch harmonics, sweep picking, these are all things we tend to focus on, but they're only one of many aspects that make a great song.

Intro/Main Riff:	
Verses:	
Chorus:	
Breakdown:	
Other:	

**6. Production elements**

Think guitar tone, FX, EQ, volume, synth sounds, ambient textures, etc.

Intro/Main Riff:

Verses:

Chorus:

Breakdown:

Other:

7. How is everything working together?

E.g. harmonic & melodic arrangements between instruments, rhythmically locking in certain parts, etc.

Additional Notes (Optional):

LEVEL 2 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **MOMENTUM +2:** LEARNED HOW TO CHOOSE AND ANALYSE REFERENCE TRACKS.
- › **CRAFT +2:** BUILT YOUR FIRST MUSICAL BLUEPRINT.
- › **CREATIVITY +1:** PRACTISED "STEALING LIKE AN ARTIST."

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		3
MOMENTUM		5
CREATIVITY		1
CRAFT		2
PRODUCTION		0
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		0

ITEM ACQUIRED:

MUSIC BLUEPRINT



LEVEL 3:

THE ORACLE



THE DECODED FRAGMENTS LEAD YOU TO A SUBTERRANEAN CATHEDRAL WHERE THE ORACLE WAITS—A NEURAL SEER WIRED INTO THE COLLECTIVE HUM OF THE CITY. SHE LISTENS TO YOUR SONG'S SKELETON AND SMILES. "IT'S NOT THE COORDINATES YOU SEEK," SHE SAYS. "IT'S THE STORY BURIED INSIDE." VISIONS FLOOD YOUR MIND: ARCS, RISES, FALLS—THE EMOTION YOUR MUSIC WAS MEANT TO CARRY. THE LIVES YOUR GHOSTS WERE MEANT TO LEAD. YOU GLIMPSE YOURSELF AT THE BEACON—BROKEN, BUT TRIUMPHANT. WHEN YOU AWAKE, THE ORACLE IS GONE. ONLY THE ECHO REMAINS:

STRUCTURE WILL GUIDE YOU. EMOTION WILL CARRY YOU.



OBJECTIVE

Decide on your song structure and story arc.

When we try to match a song to a feeling or image in our heads, we often think of a single movie scene or real-life moment that captures its essence. But a song isn't just one looped idea—it's a journey. It has a beginning, middle, and end. Highs and lows. Builds and releases. Contrast and resolution. It's like a story that evolves through sound.

Many guitarists start with a single riff, but get stuck because they don't have a vision for where the song should go. Our goal is to reveal the bigger picture and compose with intention. When you do, your songs will feel more cohesive, purposeful and emotionally resonant.

A clear story arc helps you make better structural decisions, e.g:

- How long the intro should be.
- Whether you need a bridge, breakdown, or ambient part.
- When to change tempo, key, or feel.
- Whether a solo fits—and why.

REALITY CHECK

"Normies" (a.k.a. non-musicians) don't connect with riffs alone—they connect with stories. Storytelling is how humans shared meaning and made sense of the world long before music, theory and instruments existed. If you want your song to have impact, make it tell a story.

Inexperienced writers often loop a demo endlessly, trying to "feel" what's missing—but this creates two problems:

1. Familiarity bias: you get used to the song in its current form, losing perspective.
2. Micro-focus: you obsess over details before you have a foundation.

Your lyrics and story aren't "the things you add at the end"—they shape your structure and dynamics from the start. Skip that step, and your song will feel haphazardly stitched together. If you're unsure where to start, there's no shame in borrowing a proven structure from your genre's best artists (see [Appendix 1](#)). The pros learn to choose structures instinctively. But to create something truly distinct, start with your story arc—and let it shape the music.

ACTION TASKS

STEP 1: CHOOSE METHOD

There are three effective methods of defining your story arc and song structure. Choose **only one** and mark your choice with an X:

- Copy the structure of one of your reference songs (quick win)
- Choose a song structure template on the Song Structure Templates page (see [Appendix 1](#))
- Choose your lyrical theme and how you'll tell a unique "story" with your song. (See [Appendix 2](#))

APPENDIX 1: SONG STRUCTURE TEMPLATES

Here are some archetypes for song structures found in six common subgenres of modern rock & metal. These aren't strict rules. Use them as starting points or references.

Template Name	Structure	Description
Modern Metalcore	Intro → Main Riff → Verse 1 → Chorus → Main Riff → Verse 2 → Chorus → Breakdown → Chorus	Based on the song "Hereafter" by Architects. Reflects the approach of bands like Architects, Bad Omens, Spiritbox, etc, who blend ambience, heaviness, dynamics, clean/unclean vocals and breakdowns.
Progressive Metal	Intro → A → B → C → (Instrumental / Transition) → D → E → Solo → C reprise → Outro	Inspired by "Omega" by Periphery. Mirrors the multi-movement, evolving compositions of bands like Periphery, Veil of Maya, and SikTh, who emphasize thematic development over repetition.
Math Rock / Instrumental	Intro → A → B → A' (variation) → C → Solo → D → Outro	Inspired by "Euphoria" by Plini. Channels the fluid, riff-driven arrangements of artists like Polyphia and Intervals, with smooth transitions and minimal repetition.
Pop Metal / Alt Metal	Intro → Verse → Pre-Chorus → Chorus → Verse 2 → Pre-Chorus → Chorus → Bridge / Drop → Chorus → Outro	Based on "Mantra" by Bring Me the Horizon. Takes cues from pop-metal songwriting, combining catchy hooks, dynamic verses, and heavy drops.
Slow-Build Metal Ballad	Intro → Verse → Pre-Chorus → Chorus → Verse 2 → Pre-Chorus → Chorus → Break → Build → Heavy Drop → Chorus → Outro	Inspired by "Caramel" by Sleep Token. Captures the slow-build emotional arc that shifts from soft, ambient ballad sections to an intense metal climax.
Modern Rock / Alt Pop	Ambient Intro → Verse 1 (stripped) → Pre-Chorus → Band-out Chorus → Instrumental Hook → Verse 2 → Pre-Chorus 2 → Chorus 2 → Bridge (piano to full band) → Chorus 3 → Outro (vocal hook reprise)	Based on "The Emptiness Machine" by Linkin Park. Blends emotional piano and electronic textures with cinematic builds and recurring vocal motifs. It alternates between stripped verses, dynamic choruses, and a soaring outro.

APPENDIX 2: HOW TO WRITE A STORY ARC

THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE

The *Three-Act Structure* is one of the oldest and most reliable storytelling frameworks ever created—used in everything from Hollywood blockbusters to bestselling novels. It breaks a story into three clear movements: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Its power comes from simplicity: rising tension, a meaningful turning point, and a satisfying resolution. Because music is an emotional journey, this structure translates beautifully into songwriting.

The Three-Act Structure	
Act	Description
1. Setup	Establish the world, mood, and central problem. Introduce the emotional stakes: what's wrong, what's missing, or what the protagonist wants.
2. Confrontation	The tension rises. Obstacles appear. Emotions intensify. This is the heart of the journey—the struggle, conflict, doubt, or escalation.
3. Resolution	A climax or turning point brings emotional payoff, followed by transformation, clarity, acceptance, or closure. The journey completes with a new perspective.

Continue to next page...

HOW TO APPLY THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE TO A SONG

Here's a breakdown using my own single *Tear Down, Rebuild*'s story arc as an example:

	Section	Scene/Stage	Emotional Description of part	Musical Description of part
ACT 1: SETUP (Departure / Breaking from the Old Path)	Verse 1 (Lines 1–4)	Traveller arrives at the crossroads and burns the map, rejecting the old path.	Defiance, burden, desperation for change.	Lean, spacious opening. Moderate intensity. Rhythmic patterns stable but slightly tense.
	Verse 1 (Lines 5–8)	He admits the old road was turning him into someone he didn't want to be. Chooses the unknown.	Hope mixed with fear; determination; stepping into uncertainty.	Slight lift in melody. Add harmonic warmth or movement. Building tension release into "So here I go."
	Final Line "So here I go" & Band-In	Moment of decision—leaving the familiar behind.	Resolve, stepping forward, a breath before the plunge.	Sudden break after rise. Burst into full Band-In.
ACT 2: CONFRONTATION (Doubt / Regression / Internal Conflict)	Verse 2 (Lines 1–4)	He wanders lost in the desert. Regret creeps in.	Confusion, self-doubt, overwhelm.	Steady, busier groove. Staggered forward motion. Busier melodic phrasing.
	Verse 2 (Lines 5–8)	He arrives back at the crossroads—he's gone in circles.	Frustration, collapse, emotional low point.	Heavier or more dramatic instrumentation. More tension, more grit in vocals. Hi hats gradually open up, guitar lines getting higher.
	Chorus (First pass)	The emotional thesis: questioning whether he can let go and rebuild.	Inner conflict, longing, fear of change.	Big melodic hook with gang vocals. Full instrumentation. Strong emotional lift but still unresolved.
ACT 3: RESOLUTION (Realisation / Forward Motion)	Bridge	Storm of doubts, but he notices a "spark"—the realisation that he must move despite uncertainty.	Breakthrough, clarity, rising courage.	Band out, new rhythm and strange chords. Cinematic lift towards end. Technical rising guitar run.
	Final Chorus	He commits to the process: tear down, rebuild, move forward no matter the doubt.	Empowerment, momentum, acceptance.	Biggest, fullest chorus. Peak intensity, wide mix, confident vocal delivery.
	Outro	The forward motion continues beyond the song.	Resolve, continuation.	Chorus instruments continue with same intensity. Ends abruptly and decisively.

LEVEL 3 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **CREATIVITY +2:** UNDERSTOOD THE VALUE OF STORYTELLING IN MUSIC.
- › **CRAFT +2:** LEARNED TO WRITE STORY ARCS AND CHOOSE STRUCTURES THAT SUPPORT THEM.
- › **DISCIPLINE +1:** REALISED A SONG IS COMPLETE WHEN THE STORY FEELS TOLD.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		4
MOMENTUM		5
CREATIVITY		3
CRAFT		4
PRODUCTION		0
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		0

ITEM ACQUIRED:

SONG STRUCTURE & STORY ARC



LEVEL 4:

THE COMBAT SIMULATOR



ARMED WITH PURPOSE, YOU ENTER THE COMBAT SIMULATOR—A TRAINING GRID WHERE MUSIC ITSELF FIGHTS BACK. ENEMIES SPAWN IN TEMPO: DRONES OF DISSONANCE, MELODIC BLADES, PERCUSSIVE WALLS. YOU DODGE, ADAPT, AND STRIKE IN TIME, LEARNING TO SHAPE ALL INSTRUMENTS AS ONE. EVERY MOTION, EVERY PULSE DRAWS YOU DEEPER INTO THE MIND OF THE COMPOSER. WHEN YOU EMERGE, YOUR INSTINCTS ARE SHARPENED—THE STORM OF SOUND IS NO LONGER CHAOS. IT'S CONTROL.



OBJECTIVE

Get Guitar Pro or a similar MIDI composition tool.

Writing/composing in your DAW introduces a couple of serious problems that slow you down and reduce quality:

1. Distractions (trying to nail the part, technical recording issues, scope creep of mixing, editing, etc.)
2. The risk of using great production to hide bad songwriting.

Using a composition tool is the best way to solve these problems and streamline your workflow.

Use your [blueprint](#) and [story arc](#) (everything except 'Production Elements' for now) as a guide to construct your song. Get the creative decisions out of the way now, so when you record, you can focus purely on the technical and production aspects of your song.

REALITY CHECK

You might be thinking: "But Erick, MIDI composition software costs money, and I don't have the time to learn a new tool. How is this going to help me?" Yes, it costs money. Yes, there's a learning curve. But it'll be worth the countless hours and headaches you'll save during recording - trust me!

The recording phase is a place for precision and structure—getting the best takes with the best sound. On the other hand, you want creativity to flow freely in the early stages of songwriting.

Your composition space should feel like a playground, not a work site.

Using a MIDI composition tool also helps you to start thinking like a composer, not just a guitarist. Too many guitarists come up with an epic riff, but don't know how the other instruments fit into the picture. A guitar riff needs drums & bass like a car needs wheels and a steering wheel. An engine alone doesn't make it drive.

“

I INTENTIONALLY START COMPOSING WITH THE ABSOLUTE WORST, MOST BASIC SYNTH AND MIDI SOUNDS—CRAPPY KICK DRUMS, TERRIBLE PADS, ANYTHING HORRIBLE. THE GOAL IS TO PROVE THE CORE IDEA. IF YOU CAN TAP YOUR FOOT TO THE GROOVE AND SING BACK THE MELODY EVEN WITH BAD SOUNDS, THEN MOST OF THE 'MUSIC WRITING WORK' IS DONE, AND EVERYTHING THAT FOLLOWS (LIKE GREAT RECORDING QUALITY AND PLUGINS) WILL ONLY IMPROVE IT. STARTING WITH AMAZING SOUNDS AND TRYING TO BUILD A GROOVE AND MELODY BACKWARDS RARELY WORKS.

—MICK GORDON (CREATOR OF THE DOOM ETERNAL SOUNDTRACK)

”

ACTION TASKS

STEP 1: DOWNLOAD

Download a 7-day free trial of [Guitar Pro](#). You can use any MIDI composing software, but I think Guitar Pro is by far the best for modern guitar-forward music.

SIDE NOTE:

If you're enjoying this roadmap and want to support me, please use [this link](#). If you buy, I'll get a small commission.

STEP 2: LEARN

Watch [this YouTube tutorial](#) on how to use Guitar Pro (or find a tutorial if you've chosen a different tool).

STEP 3: CREATE

Tab out your current riff as-is into MIDI. This will help you get the hang of the software. You'll build the rest of the song as you move through the upcoming levels of this roadmap. Be sure to make a track for every instrument listed in your blueprint—or at least the core instruments (guitars, drums, bass and vocals).

LEVEL 4 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **CREATIVITY +2:** BEGAN THINKING LIKE A COMPOSER, NOT JUST A GUITARIST.
- › **MOMENTUM +1:** ENTERED LOW-FRICTION CREATIVITY MODE.
- › **CONFIDENCE +1:** RECOGNISED THAT GOOD IDEAS TRANSCEND SOUND QUALITY.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		4
MOMENTUM		6
CREATIVITY		5
CRAFT		4
PRODUCTION		0
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		1

ITEM ACQUIRED:

MIDI COMPOSITION TOOL



LEVEL 5:

THE DARK MATTER SENTINEL



YOU REACH THE CITY'S EDGE—AND THERE IT STANDS: THE DARK MATTER SENTINEL, KEEPER OF THE HARMONIC GATE. A LIVING VOID OF PURE GRAVITY, PULSING WITH INVISIBLE MASS, BENDING TIME ITSELF. TO MOVE PAST IT, YOU MUST BUILD A FOUNDATION OF RHYTHM, HARMONY AND STRUCTURE SOLID ENOUGH TO WITHSTAND ITS WEIGHT. EACH STRIKE OF YOUR GUITAR RIPPLES THROUGH SPACE, COUNTERING THE BEAST'S DISTORTION. WHEN IT COLLAPSES, THE GATE OPENS, AND THE SILENCE THAT FOLLOWS FEELS ALIVE—LIKE THE FIRST BREATH OF CREATION.



OBJECTIVE

Build the rhythmic and chordal foundations of your song.

At levels 2 & 3, you mapped out a detailed blueprint of what you want the song to sound like and how it should flow. Here's where you can start being creative within the constraints you've set for yourself. Use your blueprint to choose and form the chords and rhythm of your song—basically, everything except melody.

Only build the main sections for now (usually Intro → Verse → Pre-Chorus → Chorus → Breakdown) to set the foundation. The better, more detailed your blueprint, the easier this step will feel and the easier ideas will flow.

REALITY CHECK

Chords are omnipresent—whether intentional or not. Either you're aware and in control of them, or you let them control *you*.

"I don't like writing songs with chords"—ever heard this line? You might think that using riffs instead of chords helps you break free of conventional songwriting methods, but the truth is the chords are there either way. Chords don't always look like strummed strings with three fingers held down on the fretboard. They come in many shapes and wavelengths. If you have one or more pitched instruments in your song, it has *implied chords*—whether you chose them or not.

WHAT'S AN "IMPLIED CHORD"?

Every note implies a chord that exists in the context of the song, whether or not all notes of the chord are played.

Let's say you have a song that starts with a bassline and vocal melody. If the bass plays an E note and the vocal sings a G note, together they suggest an E Minor chord (The B note is omitted, but implied). As the melody progresses and the bass moves to different root notes, the harmonic picture becomes clearer. If a guitar enters with conventional chords, it'll complete the harmonic picture by reinforcing the song's key and chord progression.

The guitar chords don't change the picture; they only colour in what's already outlined.

Once the picture is perceived, it doesn't matter whether the guitar plays the missing B note, an E power chord, or a full E Minor 9th (add ♭ 13) chord—the implied chord remains the same because the surrounding melody and bass (root) note give it context. You choose the chord's density based on how clearly you want to articulate the song's harmony.

Now, I'm not saying you should shy away from single-string riffs or one-note breakdowns, but don't ignore the implied chords that they create either—chords shape the emotional foundation of your song. Rhythm, melody, and musical expressions simply determine the nuance and intensity of that emotion.

ACTION TASKS

- › Use the Best Practices below to create only the main sections of the song for now e.g. Intro, Verse 1, Pre-Chorus 1, Chorus 1, Breakdown.
- › Use parts 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 of your Blueprint to guide you.
- › Your riff may be a melody itself. That's okay—it's still part of the rhythm section. Just hold off on chorus melodies, lead guitars, and main melodic motifs for now.

//// BEST PRACTICES ////

1 Choose one tempo and stick to it.

Unless your story arc or genre calls for multiple tempo changes, choose a tempo similar to one of your reference tracks. Tempo makes a huge difference to the feel, and certain rhythmic elements of your references won't translate well to your song if the tempos are too far apart.

3 Copy the chord progression/s of your reference track/s if needed.

Chords cannot be copyrighted, and chord progressions are finite. You're not a fraud, you're just choosing from a limited number of options. Pairing chords with different rhythms, melodies and tempo will also result in a totally different feel. If you've analysed your blueprint's chords using roman numerals (not frets or actual pitched chords like C Major) then this part should be easy.

6 Don't overcompensate.

Don't overcomplicate the drums or other instruments to make the song more impressive. Keep it simple and your ideas will translate far better. If you're writing for a specific musician, a simple framework will allow them to add their own personality to the song. Your own guitar parts should be the most complicated thing you write.

2 Make sure your rhythms are kick-synced.

Meaning bass and rhythm guitar follow the kick exactly or vice versa. Of course, not all the time, but use this as a general rule.

4 Read up on "harmonic functions" and "cadences".

These concepts teach you how to use the different chords of a key. They help you understand the emotion and movement your chord choices create. With a solid grasp of them, you'll even be able to change the chords of your reference tracks while keeping the same emotion.

5 Riffs are all about rhythm and note choices.

When it comes to riffs, rhythmic feel and note choices are *everything*. Nail the syncopation style and interval choices of your references, and you've got a solid foundation for a great riff.

7 Let go of ego and serve the song.

Forget about which band member will come across as the "best musician on stage" or who the fans will admire the most. Ego gets in the way of a good song. It'll make you crowd out your best ideas with flashy bullshit. Just make sure each instrument works together and enhances the emotion or story.

BEST PRACTICES**8 A little rhythm theory goes a long way.**

If your riffs, breakdowns or entire songs aren't as groovy, heavy or bouncy as your reference tracks, it's likely your rhythm. Rock and metal are extremely rhythm-focused genres, so rhythm theory is an essential tool in your arsenal.

10 Avoid overwhelming or confusing the listener.

A chorus should have plenty of space for the vocal melody (or lead guitar) to shine. A focal riff shouldn't have distracting lead lines. A badass breakdown should have all the instruments synced to the same rhythm. Pick one focal point for each section of the song, and use the other elements to support it, rather than compete with it.

9 Serve the story arc above all.

Whenever you get stuck, go back to your song structure and story arc and ask yourself: "How can this part bring out the right emotion for this lyric?"

11 Stay in context.

Each section is not a song in itself, even when you've spent days on each one. The listener will not experience the song this way. Give them time and space to take it all in on the first listen. Pay attention to how each part fits the puzzle—either as a valley, build, peak, or something in between.

12 Create contrast.

If everything is a highlight, then nothing is. Not every part of the song needs to blow the listener away. In fact, in order to have song highlights, you need to tone it down in certain parts.

LEVEL 5 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- **CREATIVITY +2:** EXPANDED HARMONIC AND RHYTHMIC KNOWLEDGE.
- **CRAFT +1:** BUILT YOUR FIRST SONG SKELETON.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		4
MOMENTUM		6
CREATIVITY		7
CRAFT		5
PRODUCTION		0
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		1

ITEM ACQUIRED:

SONG SKELETON



LEVEL 6:

THE GHOST SIREN



YOU PRESS ONWARD AS THE DARK MATTER COLLAPSES BEHIND YOU. UP HEAD, A GLOW CUTS THROUGH THE HAZE—A VAST LAKE OF LIGHT, PULSING WITH AN EERIE MELODY. FROM ITS SURFACE RISES THE GHOST SIREN—A HOLOGRAPHIC REMNANT OF AN ANCIENT COMPOSER WHO DROWNED IN HER OWN UNFINISHED MASTERPIECE. HER VOICE WEAVES HAUNTING MELODIES THAT CLAW AT YOUR MIND, TEMPTING YOU TO CHASE PERFECTION. YOU COUNTER WITH YOUR OWN—RAW, HUMAN, FLAWED BUT TRUE. SHE FALTERS, SMILES, AND DISSOLVES, LEAVING BEHIND A GLOWING FRAGMENT OF HER CORE: THE SIREN'S CHORD. A GIFT, AND A WARNING.



OBJECTIVE

Write your melodies and/or main melodic motifs.

Decide whether your song will have vocals or just be instrumental, then write out the focal melodies. Don't worry about getting the lyrics perfect right now—you can edit them later—but keep your story arc in mind. Just make sure the melodies are solid and the lyrical meaning is clear.

REALITY CHECK

Too many guitarists overlook the importance of a good melody. They think awesome riffs and guitar solos are all you need. But the one thing that separates headliners from warm-up acts? Strong, catchy melodies that everyone (musician or not) wants to sing along to.

Ask yourself: “Do I want to make music that impresses musicians, or do I want to create a song that crowds will sing back to me at the top of their lungs?” Hint: you can have both, but the latter is much more rewarding.

CASE STUDY

Polyphia: arguably the most commercially successful instrumental band in the modern rock & metal world. Their songs regularly hit millions of streams and sell out massive venues. Yes, they have clever aesthetics and marketing. But listen to their melodies. Every album features simple, singable melodies amongst the technical guitar work. This makes their music relevant to a broader audience while securing admiration from guitarists and musicians around the world.

Moral of the story? It's not just Pop artists that write good, catchy melodies. Melody is the essence of any successful song in any genre. The next time you listen to your favorite album in the car, pay attention to which parts you can't help but sing or hum along to.

ACTION TASKS

STEP 1: CREATE A MELODY

Create an epic melody for your Chorus and/or melodic motif using the “CT:CT:TN” formula. Working out the chords (and implied chords) will help with this.

WHAT'S THE “CT:CT:TN” FORMULA?

It's a simple and effective way to write memorable melodies. Here's how it works:

A “CT” (Chord Tone) is when you play out the single notes of a chord (or implied chord) one at a time—also known as “arpeggiating”.

A “TN” (Tension Note) is a note that's not a chord tone but still in the same key or scale (usually referred to as 9ths, 11ths and 13ths).

Combine the two at a 2:1 ratio for every chord and you have a winning melody! It doesn't matter in which order you play them or how many notes you use per chord.

On the next page is an example melody using the CT:CT:TN formula...

Tension and resolve

The CT:CT:TN ratio isn't absolute. You can shift the balance to introduce more tension or resolution. In my example, I created more tension on the Em7 chord by adding in more... wait for it...*tension* notes! (Who would've guessed?) Then, I finished on a stable sound (resolving) by using only chord tones in the last bar.

SIDE NOTE:

If you can't read music notation or would just like to hear what this example sounds like, [Scan2Notes](#) can turn pictures of music notation into audio. The first 12 measures are free.

STEP 2: MATCH THE LYRICS (IF APPLICABLE)

If your song will have vocals, write a lyric draft that fits your story arc and refine your chorus. Try and match the lyrics and melody to the natural cadences of spoken word. Create a vocal track in your MIDI composition software and transcribe the vocals and lyrics so you can hear the full musical picture.

HOW TO AVOID AWKWARD LYRIC PHRASING

There are natural syllable-stress patterns for each word in a sentence. We want our lyrics to mimic them, as closely as possible. For example, if our line reads "Gravity keeps me tethered to the memories" we need to think about:

Rhythms: Certain syllables are spoken in fast succession such as "gravity", "tethered" and, "to the". While others like "keeps me" are said slowly. Structure your melody's rhythms accordingly.

Emphasis: Your melody's note choices and rhythms emphasize certain syllables. Pay attention to which syllables would be emphasized when spoken e.g. "gravity"s emphasis is on "gra-". Imagine how awkward it would sound if you emphasized "vi-" or "-ty". It would sound like you're trying to say an entirely different word.

Pitch: Do an experiment where you record yourself saying (not singing) a line from your song as if you were speaking to a crowd. Then hard auto-tune your voice and see what melodies naturally form from your spoken word. This will give you a good indication of how to naturally fit melody to your lyrics and vice versa.

SIDE NOTE:

Side note: If you're an inexperienced lyricist like me, then I highly recommend outsourcing a professional to edit your lyrics. But more on that at [level 12](#).

STEP 3: THE "MOM TEST"

After you've got a melody draft, ask yourself: "Would my mom be able to sing this melody?" Better yet, ask her to sing it. If the answer is "no" or she can't sing it after one listen, simplify or dumb it down. Strong melodies are easy to process and remember but not boring.

It doesn't have to be your mom—it can be anyone with basic singing ability who's not an experienced musician.

LEVEL 6 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **CREATIVITY +2:** LEARNED TO CRAFT STRONGER MELODIES.
- › **CREATIVITY +1:** UNDERSTOOD MELODY'S ROLE ACROSS ALL GENRES.
- › **CREATIVITY +1:** STRENGTHENED LYRIC-WRITING TECHNIQUE.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		4
MOMENTUM		6
CREATIVITY		10 
CRAFT		5
PRODUCTION		0
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		1



LEVEL 7:

THE GARDEN



YOU STEP INTO THE GARDEN—A BIOMECHANICAL FOREST WHERE FREQUENCIES BLOOM LIKE FLOWERS. EACH NOTE YOU PLAY GROWS A NEW COLOR, A NEW BRANCH OF SOUND. BUT UNCHECKED, THEY TWIST, TANGLE, AND CHOKE ONE ANOTHER. YOU LEARN TO PRUNE, BALANCE, AND BREATHE BETWEEN LAYERS—LETTING MELODY AND RHYTHM COEXIST. HARMONY ISN'T ABUNDANCE. IT'S INTENTION. WHEN THE AIR CLEARS, THE BEACON'S TONE RESONATES ONCE MORE—CLOSER NOW.



OBJECTIVE

Eliminate musical clashes.

By now, you should have a song prototype with the main sections of your song mapped out in MIDI. Here's where you make sure everything works together. Seek out and eliminate rhythmic and harmonic clashes between instruments (including vocals).

CLASH COURSE *(See what I did there?)*

WHAT IS A CLASH?

Clashes are dissonant interactions between pitches and rhythms.

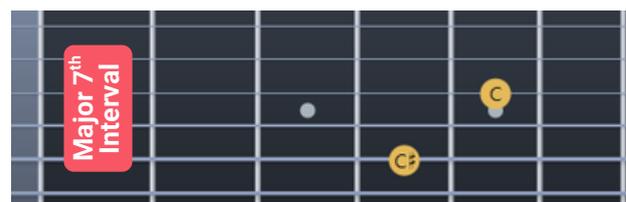
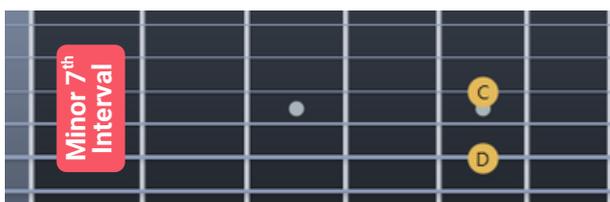
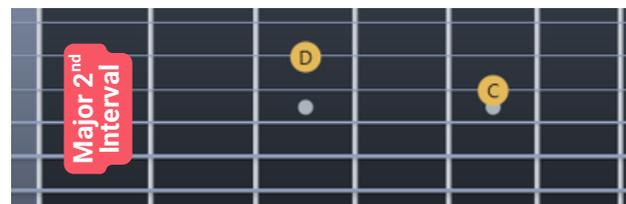
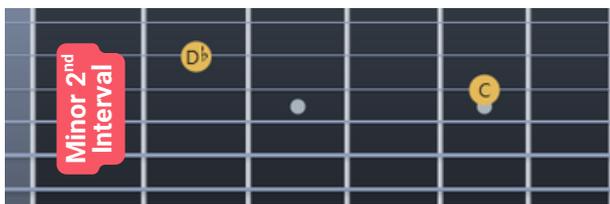
They're a staple of modern rock and metal, and sound amazing when used intentionally.

However, when clashes are unintentional, (often between different instruments e.g. vocals and lead guitar) they can ruin your composition, arrangement and mix. These bad clashes are either the result of poor communication between musicians or a composer's inexperience.

There are two types of clashes I want to address:

1. Harmonic clash
2. Rhythmic clash

Harmonic clash: occurs when two or more notes are played that create the following intervals:



Rhythmic clash: when two or more instruments play rhythms that land a small subdivision apart—the exact subdivision depends on the tempo and groove but normally the untrained ear will pick it up as sounding “weird” or “sloppy”. It's normal for different instruments to play varying rhythms that overlap but there are times when this disrupts the rhythmic flow.

Here's an example of a rhythmic clash between two guitars:



REMINDER:

[Scan2Notes](#) can turn pictures of music notation into audio.

GOOD CLASHES

Put simply, a good clash is an *intentional* one and usually sounds better when it's the same instrument clashing with itself (but not always). If clashes are occurring that you're unaware of, it's probably negatively affecting the arrangement. A good clash, however, sounds amazing when done right.

CASE STUDY

One example of both rhythmic and harmonic clashing is in the breakdown section of [Bland Street Bloom](#) by Sikth. The breakdown starts with a perfectly synchronised rhythm between the kick drum, guitars and bass—no clashes there—but then, about 9 seconds in, the lead guitar starts playing discordant chords in between the rhythmic gaps, perfectly placed to create a kind of “ping pong” between the rhythm and lead. This creates intentional clashing both rhythmically between the lead guitar and other instruments, as well as harmonically with itself.

HOW TO AVOID BAD CLASHES

To avoid harmonic clashing, either play the same notes between instruments or keep them a 3rd, 4th, 5th or 6th interval (major or minor) away from each other. This keeps them at a safe non-clashing distance. Alternatively, if one instrument plays an out-of-key note (on purpose), make sure the rest of the instruments follow. “Outside playing” only works when it doesn't clash.

Avoid rhythmic clashing by always syncing up the bass and guitars with the kick drum (at least as a starting point) then develop from there if you want some variation.

And above all: be *intentional*. This doesn't mean you shouldn't embrace happy accidents, but be aware of all the clashes in your song and decide whether or not to keep them. If it sounds good, it *is* good.



ACTION TASKS

STEP 1: IDENTIFY

Identify rhythmic and/or harmonic clashes (good or bad) in your MIDI composition.

STEP 2: HOLD FAST TO THE GOOD

Keep the clashes that sound good or makes the song “lose something” when eliminated.

STEP 3: ELIMINATE THE BAD

Fix unwanted clashes by syncing all the rhythms between instruments and avoiding unintentional 2nd or 7th intervals in your chords and melodies..

LEVEL 7 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- **CRAFT +2:** LEARNED TO IDENTIFY AND FIX CLASHES IN ARRANGEMENTS.
- **CRAFT +2:** STRENGTHENED OVERALL COMPOSING AND STRUCTURAL INSTINCTS.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		4
MOMENTUM		6
CREATIVITY		10
CRAFT		9
PRODUCTION		0
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		1

ITEM ACQUIRED:

FULL SONG DRAFT



LEVEL 8:

THE TEMPLE



BEYOND THE GARDEN RISES THE TEMPLE, SILENT AND GLOWING WITH WARM LIGHT. INSIDE, YOUR THOUGHTS ECHO LIKE CHANTS. FOR THE FIRST TIME, YOU HEAR HOW CROWDED THEY'VE BECOME. YOU CENTER YOURSELF WITH THE ORACLE'S WORDS:
STRUCTURE WILL GUIDE YOU. EMOTION WILL CARRY YOU.

YOU ARE AT THE HIGHEST POINT OF THE LANDSCAPE, AND THE REST OF THE PATH IS CLEAR: THE SONG IS ALIVE, A FINISHED FORM WAITING TO BE UNVEILED. NOW IT'S TIME TO RESTRICT, NOT EXPAND. MASTERY IS NOT JUST REACHING THE PEAK, BUT COMMITTING TO THE FOCUSED, DISCIPLINED DESCENT.



OBJECTIVES

1. Shift your mindset from “expansive” to “contractive”

We’ve reached the point where creativity gives way to productivity. Rick Rubin (famous producer) describes this as moving from the “expansive” phase of creation into the “contractive” phase—where you stop exploring ideas, and focus on finishing them. Every song *must* make this turning point in order to cross the finish line.

2. Re-align with your blueprint and story arc

At this point, you may have drifted from your initial song plan. Have another look and either get your song back on track, or adjust the blueprint (it’s okay for a plan to change, but it’s important to always have one).

3. Finish your song by *evolution*, not invention

By now, you’ve completed levels 2-7 which means your song already contains the DNA of everything it needs to become. Rather than adding new ideas, evolve what’s already there—twist it, stretch it, reframe it. This keeps your song unified and gives the listener the sense of a story unfolding from a single, emotional seed.

It also ensures you don’t cram too many ideas into one song. Whether you’re writing a contemporary banger or a progressive rollercoaster, from here on out, copy and modify existing sections of your song to create new ones—don’t pull them out of thin air.

REALITY CHECK

You need to let go of the excitement that comes from new ideas. It’s valuable in the beginning, but holds you back during the later stages of song creation. When you learn to make the switch and stop relying on inspiration, you’ll finish more songs. New songs call for boundless, playful creativity. *Almost-finished* songs call for decisive, “contractive” thinking where you refine, polish, and make hard choices.

Sometimes you’ll feel conflicted over an amazing idea that you’re struggling to make work in context. Ask yourself if it aligns with your song plan. If it doesn’t, cut it out and save it for the next song.

Sticking to your [blueprint](#) & [story arc](#) and finishing via evolution are forms of contractive thinking. You cut out decision fatigue by deliberately imposing restrictions on yourself. This breeds creative momentum. Don’t believe me? Just read these quotes below:

 **THE ENEMY OF ART IS THE ABSENCE OF LIMITATIONS.** 
—ORSON WELLES (FILMMAKER)

 **WHEN FORCED TO WORK WITHIN A STRICT FRAMEWORK, THE IMAGINATION IS TAXED TO ITS UTMOST—AND WILL PRODUCE ITS RICHEST IDEAS.** 
—T.S. ELIOT (POET)

 **THE MORE CONSTRAINTS ONE IMPOSES, THE MORE ONE FREES ONE’S SELF. AND THE ARBITRARINESS OF THE CONSTRAINT SERVES ONLY TO OBTAIN PRECISION OF EXECUTION.** 
—IGOR STRAVINSKY (COMPOSER)



**SOMETIMES WHEN WE'RE GIVEN EVERY OPTION, WE CREATE NOTHING.
WHEN WE'RE GIVEN LIMITED OPTIONS, WE GET INVENTIVE.**

—RICK RUBIN (MUSIC PRODUCER)



Remember: Less is more. Don't oversaturate. It's better to write many songs with one idea than one song with many ideas.

ACTION TASKS

STEP 1: MANTRA

Say this out loud to yourself (actually do it): **"The time for free creativity is over. Now begins the hard part—finishing the song. It's not as fun, but it's way more rewarding."**

STEP 2: PLAN

Look at your story arc and write notes on how you're going to adapt your existing song parts to create the remaining ones. There are endless possible ways to evolve a song by just recycling its core 3-5 sections. Here are just a few examples:

- Copy the melodic motif but change the chords
- Copy a rhythmic phrase but shift it one sixteenth note early or late
- Copy a chord progression but modify the melody
- Copy a melody but change the rhythm
- Play a melody or rhythmic phrase on a different instrument
- Play the same part in a different key or tempo

STEP 3: EVOLVE

Use [MIDI composition software](#) to write (evolve) the remaining parts of your song including vocals and lyrics if applicable. Literally copy and paste a section, then adjust it until it feels related but different.

STEP 4: RESTRICT

If a certain section doesn't serve the story, take it out or save it for the next song.

STEP 5: REST

Take a break from the song for three days (minimum 24 hours if your deadline is tight), then come back and listen to the MIDI composition one last time from start to finish. This will give you a fresh perspective on what the song still needs.

STEP 6: SIGN OFF

Make your final tweaks, refinements, transitions, etc. (Don't forget the sub deadline you set). Once time's up, sign off the composition and move on to the recording phase.

LEVEL 8 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **DISCIPLINE +2:** LEARNED TO SHIFT FROM EXPANSIVE TO CONTRACTIVE THINKING.
- › **MOMENTUM +1:** UNDERSTOOD THAT DISCIPLINE AND RESTRICTION FUEL FINISHING.
- › **CRAFT +1:** LEARNED TO FINISH THROUGH EVOLUTION, NOT ENDLESS INVENTION.

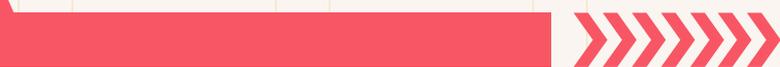
TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		6
MOMENTUM		7
CREATIVITY		10
CRAFT		10 
PRODUCTION		0
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		1



LEVEL 9:

THE MERCHANT



DESCENDING FROM THE TEMPLE, YOU VISIT THE MERCHANT—HALF FLESH, HALF CIRCUITRY, SURROUNDED BY RELICS OF CREATION. USING HIS HOLOSCANNER, HE IDENTIFIES THE PERFORMANCE LIMITERS IN YOUR SETUP: THE OUTDATED SOFTWARE, THE CLUTTERED INTERFACE, THE PIECES OF GEAR THAT QUIETLY DRAIN YOUR ENERGY. HOLOGRAMS MATERIALIZE INTO STEEL MOLDS AND WEAPONS. NEON WIRES TRANSFER UPDATED CODE TO YOUR SYSTEM. YOU STEP AWAY FEELING LIGHTER. YOUR WORKFLOW IS SMOOTHER, FASTER, AND BETTER. YOU'RE READY TO FACE YOUR REMAINING FOES.



OBJECTIVE

Upgrade your recording tools strategically.

Make sure your tools aren't holding you back. The Merchant's role isn't to sell you shiny toys—it's to equip you with gear and software that helps you move faster, sound better, and stay inspired. The goal isn't to buy everything, but to identify and remove your setup's bottlenecks.

REALITY CHECK

There's a popular belief that "it's not the gear, it's the ear." While that's mostly true, the wrong tools can seriously limit you.

Whether it's your gear or software causing friction, it shows up in your music. You spend hours fighting to get the tones and expressions you hear in your head, only to end up frustrated and exhausted. Great tools don't replace skill—they clear the overgrowth, letting your ideas move freely from imagination to reality.

Upgrading isn't about buying the most exciting gear; it's about removing friction so your ideas can move freely from your hands to your speakers. The right tools don't make you better—they just stop holding you back.

ACTION TASKS

STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR BOTTLENECK

Ask yourself, "Which part of the recording process usually feels the most difficult, takes the longest, or never sounds as good as it should?" Choose the most notable one and write it down. This is your bottleneck.

STEP 2: ENVISION THE SOLUTION

Ask yourself: "Is there a tool or upgrade that could eliminate or minimize my bottleneck?" Write down any that come to mind (even if you're not sure if they exist).

STEP 3: EXPLORE RECOMMENDED OPTIONS

See if any of the upgrade recommendations on the next page match your answer in step 2. They're my personal recommendations for DIY guitar-based artists. Is it finally time to upgrade?

SIDE NOTE:

I'm not endorsed by any of the brands mentioned on the following page—they're my honest, uninfluenced recommendations. However, if you'd like to support me in a small way, using the affiliate links in this eBook will send a small commission back to me (at no extra cost to you). Thank you for your support.

APPENDIX 3: UPGRADE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIY ARTISTS

Note: Affiliate links are [red and underlined](#), regular links are [underlined](#).

Item	Why	Top Pick	Alternatives
Audio Interface	Low latency and clean preamps.	UA Apollo Twin / Solo Pristine sound, near-zero latency tracking, amazing preamp emulation.	Focusrite Scarlett 4i4 , Audient iD14 , or SSL2 — All excellent budget interfaces
Monitors / Headphones	If you're using poor playback systems, mixing becomes guesswork.	Monitors: Yamaha HS5 Headphones: Audio-Technica ATH-M50x	Monitors: JBL 305P MkII (great value), M-Audio BX4 (budget-friendly) Headphones: Beyerdynamic DT 990 Pro (high quality), Audio-Technica ATH-M20x (good value)
Guitar & Amp Sims	A great amp sim will save you hours.	Neural DSP Archetype Series Realistic dynamics and killer tones.	IK Multimedia Amplitube & ToneX , STL Tones AmpHub , ML Sound Lab
Drum VSTs	Stock drum kits kill mixes. If your drums sound fake, your productions will feel amateur.	GetGood Drums (GGD) Punchy, mix-ready, realistic.	Superior Drummer 3 , EZDrummer 3 , or Steven Slate Drums 5.5
Bass VSTs	Often, what your guitar tone is missing is a good bass tone. It's the glue of your mix.	Submission Audio (Eurobass / Djinnbass)	MOD0 Bass (great realism) Toontrack EZBass (super flexible for songwriting), Ample Sound Bass P Lite II (free and effective).
DAWs	Don't switch DAWs if you're comfortable, but if it constantly slows you down, it might be time to reconsider.	Reaper Lightweight, customizable, ultra-efficient.	Cubase (incredible MIDI and arrangement tools), Studio One , or Logic Pro (Mac users).
Synth Plugin	Synth has become an important part of modern rock & metal production.	Xfer Serum Powerful, versatile, and intuitive.	Vital (amazing free option), Omnisphere (massive cinematic potential).

More on the following page...

OTHER MISCELLANEOUS UPGRADES OFTEN OVERLOOKED:

- **Mineral-wool-based acoustic treatment:** Acoustic treatment is one of the best things you can do for your recording and mixing environment. If pro mix engineers had to choose between a treated room and great speakers, most would take the room any day. But you need to choose the treatment that actually works. Acoustic foam is kind of a scam. It *sounds* like it works, but only absorbs high frequencies, doing nothing for the mid and lows. [Mineral wool](#) is by far the superior acoustic treatment and well worth the investment.
- **Guitar pickups:** Great amp sims are important, but it's only half the battle. Guitar tone begins with the [pickups](#). If you're not getting the tone you're after, look into which pickups your favourite guitarists use.
- **Sample libraries:** Layer your drums with electronic drum samplers like [Battery](#) for punch and modern edge. Use [Splice](#) for atmosphere, sound FX, sub drops and cinematic swells.

WORKFLOW ENHANCERS

- **UA Console amps (if you have a UA Apollo interface):** Near-zero latency monitoring outside of DAW makes tracking way more efficient, saves processing power, and just feels better.
- **Tuner & Utility Plugin:** Keep a good [tuner](#) and [utility](#) plugin on standby. Quick tuning and proper gain staging prevent small mistakes from derailing momentum.
- **Templatize Everything:** Use a DAW that allows you to create reusable templates with pre-routed tracks, colour coding, and your go-to plugins. Save presets inside your plugins too - favourite guitar tones, custom drum kits, bus inserts, bass EQs, etc.
- **MIDI keyboard with drum pads:** Even a compact controller like the [Arturia MiniLab 3](#) or [Novation Launchkey Mini](#) speeds up sketching last-minute ideas in the recording phase.

LEVEL 9 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **PRODUCTION +2:** IDENTIFIED BOTTLENECKS IN YOUR RECORDING WORKFLOW.
- › **PRODUCTION +1:** GAINED KNOWLEDGE OF THE BEST VALUE-FOR-MONEY TOOLS FOR DIY GUITAR ARTISTS.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		6
MOMENTUM		7
CREATIVITY		10
CRAFT		10
PRODUCTION		3
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		1

ITEMS ACQUIRED:

VARIOUS EQUIPMENT & UPGRADES



LEVEL 10:

THE ARMORER



EVERY BLADE NEEDS SHARPENING. IN THE FORGE'S DIM LIGHT STANDS THE ARMORER. CALM, DELIBERATE, HIS FACE HIDDEN BEHIND A TITANIUM MASK. HE STUDIES YOUR GUITAR, THEN DISASSEMBLES IT WITH SURGICAL GRACE. EACH STRIKE RESHAPES TONE AND BALANCE, MOULDING THE INSTRUMENT TO YOUR VERY ESSENCE. WHEN HE'S DONE, IT RESPONDS TO YOU ALONE—A WEAPON IMPRINTED WITH YOUR DNA, RESONATING WITH YOUR INTENT.

YOU LEAVE THE FORGE STEADY, SHARPENED, AND READY FOR BATTLE.



OBJECTIVE

Get your guitar professionally set up for studio work.

Make sure your guitars (and any other instruments you plan to record with) are ready to perform at their best. You want to eliminate all the small physical problems that can ruin a great take.

You can have the best riffs, ideas, and tone plugins in the world, but none of that matters if your instrument isn't playing cleanly or staying in tune.

REALITY CHECK

Most recording problems don't start with plugins—they start with your hands and instrument. Even the best mix engineer can't make a great track out of a poorly intonated guitar. A clean, reliable setup will do more for your recordings than a new amp sim ever will.

If your guitar isn't properly intonated, your chords will sound out of tune. Similarly, excessively low action causes buzzy strings, and scratchy pots can ruin otherwise clean takes.

It's worth paying a good luthier for a professional setup—especially if you're recording soon. Tell them what tuning and string gauge you're using, your action preference, and they'll dial it in to play and sound its best.

If you're on a tight budget, you can do the basics yourself, but be methodical. Learn how to adjust your truss rod, bridge height, and intonation safely, and always take notes or photos before you make changes.

The goal isn't to get it "perfect"—it's to make it stable, consistent, and comfortable. That way, you can focus on the performance instead of fighting your gear.

ACTION TASK

Get yourself acquainted with these important aspects of a good studio guitar setup—whether you're sending it in to a luthier, or doing it yourself.

1 Fresh Strings

Brand new strings make your guitar sound brighter and harmonically richer. They dramatically improve the most important part of your tone—the DI signal. You can change Amp sims and effects after recording, but without a good DI tone, you'll be polishing a turd.

2 Tuning & Intonation

The most important part of a studio guitar setup. An out-of-tune take is simply unacceptable. Using a tuner, play a note on the 2nd fret, then play the same string on the 14th fret. You should get the same note (an octave apart) within a few cents. If not, your intonation needs work. Repeat across all strings.

3 Action

Your guitar's action is determined by the bridge height, saddle height, and neck bow. There's no such thing as a perfect action—only the action that best matches your needs.

Consider how technical your guitar parts will be (how much energy you need to minimize between notes). Then, think about the predominant style you'll be playing—is it mostly distorted, hard attack, chord melodies, lots of lead guitar? Is there some clean strumming too? Nothing sounds worse than a clean strummed C chord with an overly-buzzy 5th string. On the other hand, highly distorted tones can often mask a slight buzz and sometimes sound pretty cool. It's all about playability vs clarity and finding the right balance for your situation.

Play through all the parts of your song/s and look for any disruptive string buzzing and/or places on the neck where you're really fighting with the guitar to nail the take.

4 Resonance

Your guitar strings vibrate throughout the whole guitar. The less resistance those vibrations have, the richer your tone will sound. A big bottleneck for resonance is the nut on the guitar neck. If your strings aren't sitting snug inside the grooves of the nut, they lose sustain too quickly or may even produce some discordant overtones.

Upgrading to a more resonant nut material like Tusq is a cheap and effective **upgrade**.

5 Pickup Height

Pickup height is about finding a balance between clarity and gain. Pickups set too high result in a louder output, but introduce oscillation from the magnetic pull on the strings. Pickups set too low give you more clarity but cause a low output gain.

Personally, I like a low-gain, high-clarity setup. I get most of my gain from amp sims, but you still need balance, because too much gain from the amp can introduce hissing.

6 Electronics

Make sure your guitar's electronics are in good shape. Scratch-free pots, well-soldered connections of wires, quality batteries (if using active pickups), etc. This is also true for your signal chain—make sure your cables are in top shape as well as any outboard gear you may use, such as preamps, DI boxes, compressors, etc.

7 Additional Prep

Avoid any situations that may disrupt your momentum when recording. Have spares at hand—cables, batteries, picks, strings, etc. Don't let small issues disrupt your flow state.

LEVEL 10 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- **PRODUCTION +3:** LEARNED WHAT MAKES A GREAT GUITAR SETUP AND HOW TO TAILOR IT FOR ANY SITUATION.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		6
MOMENTUM		7
CREATIVITY		10
CRAFT		10
PRODUCTION		6
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		1

⬆ ITEM UPGRADE

GUITAR



LEVEL 11:

THE FOUNDRY



YOU DESCEND INTO THE CITY'S MOLTEN HEART—THE FOUNDRY, WHERE SONGS ARE FORGED INTO PERMANENCE. EVERYTHING YOU TRAINED FOR IS PUT TO THE TEST. THIS IS NO SIMULATION; THIS IS THE REAL FIGHT. CUTS WILL BLEED, BONES WILL BREAK, YOUR WILL SHALL FALTER AS YOUR DEEPEST IMPERFECTIONS PEEK THROUGH. YOU'LL FACE WAVES OF ENEMIES—BAD TAKES, TIMING ERRORS AND DISCOURAGING SOUNDS. THE ONLY WAY TO WIN IS THROUGH FOCUSED, PATIENT, AND PERSISTENT EFFORT. WHEN YOU EMERGE, YOUR SONG BREATHES: IMPERFECT, ALIVE, REAL, AND NEARLY COMPLETE.



OBJECTIVE

Record and program your song!

Every prior level has prepared you for this moment. Up to now, you've:

- ✓ Mapped out your [blueprint](#) (including Arrangement/Instrumentation and Production Elements)
- ✓ Shaped your song idea into a [fully fleshed-out MIDI composition](#)
- ✓ Equipped yourself with [new gear](#) and a [fresh setup](#)
- ✓ Gained a ton of momentum toward finishing your song

Now, it's time to capture your song's final form! The best practices listed on the next page will save you a ton of time, frustration, and revision in the long run.

But be warned: it won't be easy! Creating a great recording takes time, persistence and resilience. It's like a battlefield.

Aim for "good enough" over "perfect" or risk losing momentum. You'll get a little better with every song, until one day the quality of your recordings will sound indistinguishable from your favourite bands.

PLEASE NOTE:

This level covers recording and programming only—not mixing or mastering. Your goal here is to deliver the cleanest, most intentional stems possible for the mixing phase.

REALITY CHECK

One of the biggest roadblocks I see for guitarists is the "I'm not good enough to record" mindset. During recording, many start to feel like frauds because they can't play the song flawlessly from start to finish.

News flash: almost no one gets a perfect take from start to finish—not even the pros. Not unless the part is super simple or repetitive (which most modern rock & metal songs *aren't*).

Nearly every professional modern guitarist records in small, focused fragments—sometimes bar by bar. The goal isn't to perform the whole song perfectly; it's to capture the best version of each part. Back in the day, bands would play songs hundreds of times before stepping into a studio. Now, recording usually comes first, and live performance later.

Most of the time, people fall in love with your recorded songs first, then come to your show—not the other way around. Record them. Release them. Then worry about getting stage-ready.

Also, don't panic when parts that sounded great at first suddenly feel off under studio scrutiny. That's normal. I call it "studio ego burn." It happens to everyone. Recording exposes weak spots you never noticed—and that's a good thing. It's an invitation to refine, not to give up.

The Foundry tests patience, precision, and humility. If you refuse to quit, you'll walk away with a near-finished product and the confidence that comes with it.

ACTION TASK

Follow these best practices to get your recordings sounding professional and mix-ready:

1 Stick to the plan.

Keep everything as close to your MIDI arrangement and blueprint as possible. This isn't the time for creative detours—it's about execution, not experimentation. Precision now means fewer headaches later. You can reassess creative decisions *after* everything is recorded.

2 Follow the pro order.

Record/program in this order:
Drums → Bass → Guitars → Synths & Keys → Pads/Ambience → FX (Swells, booms, risers, etc.)

This is the industry standard for both DIY and professional studios.

3 Stay true to your vision.

Refer back to the 'Arrangement/instrumentation' and 'Production elements' parts of your [blueprint](#) to ensure you stay focused on your song vision. It's okay if things change along the way, but make sure that familiarity bias isn't coloring your judgment.

4 Use muting tools.

Unwanted overtones happen, even when you have a good muting technique. Use [fret wraps](#), [velcro](#), or [microfiber cloths](#) to mute unused strings. Do the same for your headstock and trem springs (if applicable). You'll instantly sound 3× cleaner.

5 Edit with intention.

No one is perfect—and modern production standards are brutally high. Every pro edits their guitars. Learn it, do it well, or get left behind. Just don't "jippo" (South African slang for quick fix) so much that you can't play it live.

6 Set time limits.

Allocate no more than 1–2 days per instrument/vocal per song. It keeps tone and gain consistent and stops perfectionism from derailing you.

7 Double-track rhythms.

Always record rhythm guitars twice (separate takes), then pan one hard left and one hard right. This creates a wide, powerful sound. Keep leads mono and centred.

8 Humanize your MIDI.

Tweak velocities, timing, and articulations. Use subtle flams for stacked hits. Vary samples to avoid robotic repetition. The goal: make your MIDI feel like a real performance.

9 Outsource your weak spots.

If you're not great at certain tasks yet (like editing, mixing, or singing)—outsource them. Don't fall for the "I'll just learn how to do it first" trap—that's where most songs go to die. Get it done now; refine your skills later.

"No man is an island" —John Donne

Note: more about this in the next level.

10 Take a break, then refine.

When done, step away for 3 days (or at least 24 hours if deadlines are tight). Come back with a fresh perspective and make any final tweaks needed. This helps avoid familiarity bias and gives more creative clarity.

11 Templatize everything.

Save your FX chains, plugin settings, and workflow templates. Build your own "recording machine" that gets faster and more efficient with every track.

LEVEL 11 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **PRODUCTION +2:** IMPROVED GUITAR RECORDING AND MIDI PROGRAMMING.
- › **DISCIPLINE +2:** STRENGTHENED RESILIENCE AGAINST EGO ATTACKS.
- › **CONFIDENCE +1:** GAINED COMPOSURE UNDER CREATIVE PRESSURE.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		8
MOMENTUM		7
CREATIVITY		10
CRAFT		10
PRODUCTION		8
COLLABORATION		0
CONFIDENCE		2

ITEM ACQUIRED:

FULLY-RECORDED SONG



LEVEL 12:

THE SUMMONING



THE TIME FOR SOLITUDE ENDS. IN THE NEON CIRCLE OF SUMMONING, YOU CALL FORTH YOUR ALLIES—ENGINEERS, WORDSMITHS, COLLABORATORS. EACH ADDS THEIR CRAFT TO YOURS, WEAVING STRENGTH WHERE YOU WERE WEAK. CREATION BECOMES COMMUNION. TOGETHER, YOUR SONG ASCENDS INTO SOMETHING GREATER THAN ANY ONE HAND COULD BUILD.



OBJECTIVE

Outsource strategically—summon allies with the skills to bring your song to life.

At this stage, your job is to set aside your desire to do everything yourself, make the right calls and delegate effectively.

Mixing and mastering, especially, should almost always be outsourced unless you're highly skilled in those areas. The same goes for vocals if you can't sing or don't have access to a solid vocalist. Your role here is to focus on the vision and loosen control. Let specialists handle the finer craftsmanship that elevates your work from good to professional.

REALITY CHECK

You can't (and shouldn't) do everything yourself.

Many musicians hit a ceiling when they try to go it alone. Music is, and has always been, a collaborative art form.

Being a DIY artist is one thing, but trying to master every skill—songwriting, recording, mixing, mastering, artwork, and promotion—will only spread you thin and weaken your impact. You're not cheating by outsourcing; you're doing what every great artist does: assembling a team. The best producers know when to step back and let others handle the technical magic.

Even as a full-time guitarist/producer, I often outsource mixing and mastering—when I want a fresh perspective, when I'm too close to the song, or when my time's better spent writing the next one. It's never a bad idea to hire a good engineer.

On a tight budget? I get it. Quality help can be pricey, but you don't need Nolly Getgood or Dan Lancaster to get a great mix. Hire the best you can afford right now. Platforms like [Fiverr](#) and [SoundBetter](#) have experienced engineers and producers who deliver amazing results at reasonable rates.

ACTION TASKS

STEP 1: CHOOSE ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING TASKS TO OUTSOURCE:

A. Song critiques

If you're unsure whether your song is ready for mixing or release, book a song critique. Having a second set of trained ears is a great way of cutting through familiarity bias. You can also ask a trusted musician or listener for feedback.

The key here is not to chase praise—it's to identify objective issues.

B. Mixing & mastering

Unless you're already confident and experienced in mixing and mastering, hire a professional engineer who understands your genre. A good engineer will fix small flaws, enhance your tones, and make your song sound massive. Think of them as the alchemist who transforms your creation into gold.

C. Consider lyric editing

Good lyrics can be the difference between a hit and a miss. I always get my lyrics edited. Remember: every non-musician listens to the lyrics & melody above all else. An amazing melody feels hollow without good lyrics.

D. Commission authentic artwork

Avoid AI visuals. Real artwork—photography, illustration, or design—carries emotional weight and communicates that your song is the real deal. People feel the difference.

E. Hire session musicians or vocalists (if needed)

If you can't perform or program a part convincingly, hire someone who can. Great drums, bass, or vocals can elevate a track more than any plugin or effect ever could.

F. Get a synth guy

Synths have become a massive part of modern rock and metal—they add texture, width, and cinematic energy that guitars alone can't always deliver. If sound design isn't your thing, or you don't have great synth software or hardware, hire someone who does.

STEP 2: GET QUOTES

Research who worked on some of your favourite albums/singles and get quotes. If they're all out of your budget, try [Fiverr](#), [SoundBetter](#), or similar marketplaces.

Also, check out this curated list of pros, many of which I personally use:

Task	Name	Link
Mixing & Mastering	Clint Watts	wattsproductions.co.za ↗
Song Critique	Erick Gerber (Me)	erickgerber.com/song-critique ↗
Lyric Editing	Greg Van Kerkhof	gregvk.com ↗
Artwork Illustration	Christi Du Toit	christidutoit.co.za ↗
Session Musicians	Various	Vocals ↗ Bass ↗ Guitar ↗ Drums ↗
Synth Design	Filipe	Synths ↗

SIDE NOTE:

If you use any of my recommendations, please let them know I sent you. This will earn you brownie points and also earn me a small referral commission.

STEP 3: BOOK

Book the collaborators who will get your song across the finish line. Give them your song plan and references, and make sure they understand your vision.

STEP 4: DON'T OBSESS

Ask for revisions if your collaborators don't deliver what you've asked for, but try not to obsess over small details, which will kill your momentum. Remember: having an expert's input is a good thing. Stick to your vision but keep an open mind.

LEVEL 12 COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **COLLABORATION +6:** LEARNED HOW TO OUTSOURCE EFFECTIVELY.
- › **COLLABORATION +4:** EMBRACED THAT MUSIC IS A COLLABORATIVE ART FORM.
- › **PRODUCTION +2:** FINISHED PRODUCING THE SONG WITH HELP FROM OTHERS.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		8
MOMENTUM		7
CREATIVITY		10
CRAFT		10
PRODUCTION		10 ⚡
COLLABORATION		10 ⚡
CONFIDENCE		2

ITEM ACQUIRED:

CURATED OUTSOURCING DIRECTORY



LEVEL 13:

THE BOSS FIGHT



YOU STEP BACK OUT ONTO THE ROAD, READY TO FIND THE BEACON, AND YOU'RE MET WITH... SILENCE. THE SKY TURNS BLACK, THE HAIRS ON YOUR ARMS STAND UP, AND A CHILL RUNS DOWN YOUR SPINE. YOU TURN AT THE SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS AS YOUR FINAL ENEMY STEPS OUT OF THE SHADOWS. YOU FALTER, UNABLE TO BELIEVE YOUR EYES AS YOU REALIZE—IT'S YOU. A TWISTED, DARK TWIN, THE EMBODIMENT OF THE PERFECTIONIST AND THE MOUNTAIN OF UNFINISHED SONGS. YOU FIGHT, EACH STRIKE MATCHING THE OTHER'S. "IT'S POINTLESS!" THEY SHOUT. "WE'RE EVENLY MATCHED IN EVERY WAY. GIVE UP!"

THEN IT HITS YOU: YOU CAN'T WIN WITH FORCE, BUT WITH RELEASE. THE ENEMY CRAVES PERFECTION; THE CHAMPION CHOOSES COMPLETION. AS YOU FINALLY LET GO, THE MIRROR SHATTERS, AND LIGHT FLOODS THROUGH. DONE BEATS PERFECT. COMPLETION IS YOUR VICTORY.



OBJECTIVE

Decide to FINISH!

This is both the hardest and most important step in the entire roadmap. You've written, refined, and shaped your track into something real—but it only becomes complete once you decide it is. Finishing isn't about perfection; it's about closure.

By finishing this song, you prove to yourself that you can finish songs—a skill that will transform everything you create from here on out.

REALITY CHECK

Finishing a song is terrifying – it means it's time to lay your soul out for the world to see. It could get stomped on or worse: completely ignored. And so, to avoid emotional damage, you try to fill any and all holes that can be poked. But being your own worst critic is not only exhausting, it creates an impenetrable forcefield around your song, which completely defeats the point.

A song is meant to show vulnerability and raw emotion. It's imperfect because you are imperfect—and that's a good thing. That vulnerability is what connects people with you through art. It's also what pushes some away—and that's okay.

Here's the thing - music is polarising – always has been, always will be. The reason some hate Justin Bieber is the same reason why so many others adore him. If you can accept that, then you might be able to overcome your fear of imperfection.

Every artist struggles with knowing when something is “done.” But remember the lesson at [Level 1](#): you'll never have objective context for your own music. You're too close to it. You've heard your song a hundred times, dissected every note, and your brain is incapable of hearing it the way a new listener would.

That's why perfection is an illusion. The audience decides what's great—not you. A song that feels imperfect to you could be someone else's favorite track of the year.

At this point, you've already overcome the hardest challenges:

- ☑ **No Vision Beyond the Riff:** you've learned how to build songs with purpose and structure.
- ☑ **Translation Failure:** you can now turn your ideas into real music.
- ☑ **Phantom Masterpiece Syndrome:** you understand that a song needs to evolve from a single seed, not a pile of ideas.

Now there's only one obstacle left: **the fear of imperfection.**



 **ACTION TASKS****STEP 1: STOP TRYING TO PROTECT YOURSELF**

Perfectionism is fear wearing armor. Every “fix” after a certain point is just an emotional defense mechanism. Recognise it—and stop.

STEP 2: DEFINE “DONE”

A song is finished when it communicates what you intended—not when it’s flawless. Repeat these words like a mantra.

STEP 3: REFRAME THE RISK

You’re not risking failure by releasing; you’re risking failure by holding back. Each time you finish a song, you get faster, more confident, and more consistent. Finishing is a muscle—the more you train it, the stronger it gets.

STEP 4: AVOID SHARING IT PRIVATELY FIRST

Most artists show their song to friends or family before releasing it. But those closest to you are rarely your true audience—and their feedback, while well-intentioned, can often do more harm than good. If you’re not ready to hit publish yet, share it with an [experienced professional](#) in your genre who can give you constructive, relevant feedback that actually moves the song forward.

STEP 5: DETACH YOUR WORTH FROM THE OUTCOME

The song is not you—it’s just something you made. Once it’s out there, your job is to learn from the process and start the next one. As Ryan Tedder (OneRepublic) puts it, “Divorce your songs”.

STEP 6: FINISH AND MOVE FORWARD

Momentum beats mastery. One finished, imperfect song will teach you more than a thousand unfinished “masterpieces.”

LEVEL 13 COMPLETED

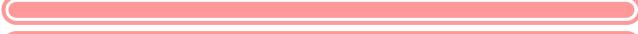
 FINAL BOSS DEFEATED!

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- › **DISCIPLINE +2:** STRENGTHENED THE FINISHING MUSCLE.
- › **MOMENTUM +1:** EXPANDED MUSIC PORTFOLIO AND CONSISTENCY.
- › **CONFIDENCE +4:** ACCEPTED THAT FINISHED BEATS PERFECT, AND THE AUDIENCE CROWNS THE MASTERPIECE.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		10 
MOMENTUM		8
CREATIVITY		10
CRAFT		10
PRODUCTION		10
COLLABORATION		10
CONFIDENCE		6

ITEM ACQUIRED:

RELEASE-READY TRACK!



LEVEL 14:

THE BEACON



WITH THE FINAL ENEMY DESTROYED, YOU STAND BEFORE THE BEACON, ITS LIGHT CUTTING INTO THE DARK LIKE A BLADE THROUGH FOG. AROUND YOU, EVERY FRAGMENT YOU'VE CARRIED—EVERY RIFF, EVERY VOICE, EVERY GHOST—STIRS. THEY'VE FOLLOWED YOU ALL THIS WAY, WAITING TO BE FREED.

ONE BY ONE, YOU LIFT THEM INTO THE LIGHT. THE BEACON HUMS, RESONATING WITH THE CHORUS OF FINISHED SONGS, EACH ONE FOLDED INTO THE PULSE LIKE A STONE SET IN A MONUMENT. THEY DISSOLVE—NOT LOST, BUT TRANSFORMED—RELEASED INTO THE WORLD AS SOMETHING THAT ENDURES. FOR THE FIRST TIME, THERE'S PEACE. THE GHOSTS ARE GONE. THE CITY ANSWERS WITH A NEW SOUND: THE BEACON'S CHORUS—WARM, BRIGHT, AND ALIVE. YOU ARE WHOLE.

THE BEACON STILL GLOWS—WAITING FOR THE NEXT LOST SOUL TO FIND IT.



OBJECTIVE

Celebrate!

Every finished song is a victory. You need to reinforce your identity as someone who finishes what they start. As James Clear wrote in *Atomic Habits*, rewards are how your brain learns which behaviors to repeat. So do something special to celebrate this moment—your effort, your persistence, and your growth—because it teaches your mind that creation is worth the journey.

Whether you plan to release your song, pitch it, upload it to a library, or save it as part of a larger project, do something with it. Every finished song deserves purpose, even if its only purpose right now is to prove that you can see something through to the end.

REALITY CHECK

Don't let the post-project void trick you into thinking it wasn't good enough. Finishing a song is one of the hardest things in music—and the feeling of "it's not perfect yet" never fully goes away.

You've built momentum. Protect it! The best creators in the world aren't the ones who chase one perfect work; they're the ones who keep creating after the celebration ends. The biggest difference between you and your heroes is *song output*. Today, you've started to bridge that gap.

ACTION TASKS

STEP 1: PAUSE AND ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR WIN

Smile. Play your song once more, and let it sink in—you finished it.

STEP 2: REWARD YOURSELF

Go for a walk, grab a coffee at your favourite café, watch or read something you love. Small, intentional rewards are how you turn finishing into a habit, not a one-time event.

STEP 3: SHARE THE LIGHT

If this roadmap helped you, share it with another musician who's stuck. Be the Beacon for someone else still trapped in the loop of unfinished songs.

STEP 4: REFLECT AND IMPROVE

Note what worked, what didn't, and how you felt along the way. These reflections are fuel for your next run. Also look at your released catalog as a whole and note which songs have performed the best and why. Then, repeat what worked.

STEP 5: MOVE FORWARD IMMEDIATELY

Momentum compounds. Start your next project as soon as possible—aim to be just 1% better at each level. That's how mastery is forged.

LEVEL 14 COMPLETED

ALL LEVELS COMPLETED

SKILL POINT SUMMARY

SKILLS EARNED:

- **MOMENTUM +1:** FORMED A LASTING SONG-FINISHING HABIT THROUGH INTENTIONAL REWARDS.
- **MOMENTUM +1:** GAINED UNSTOPPABLE CREATIVE MOMENTUM.
- **CONFIDENCE +4:** BOOSTED POSITIVITY AND SELF-BELIEF.

TOTAL SKILL STATS:

DISCIPLINE		10
MOMENTUM		10 ⚡
CREATIVITY		10
CRAFT		10
PRODUCTION		10
COLLABORATION		10
CONFIDENCE		10 ⚡

 **ALL SKILLS MAXED OUT!**

TRUE SONG FINISHER ACHIEVED 

THE JOURNEY BEYOND THE BEACON

You've reached the end of *The Modern Guitarist's Song Finisher Roadmap*, but this is really just the start. If you've made it this far, you've proven you're serious about becoming a finisher, not just a riff collector. You now have the framework, tools, and mindset to take any musical idea from spark to release. Use it. Refine it. Make it your own.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A clear roadmap and repeatable process turns chaos into consistency.
- Restriction fuels creativity; deadlines build mastery.
- Every song needs a midway mental shift from expansive to contractive.
- The right tools reduce friction.
- Collaboration isn't weakness—it's your greatest multiplier.
- A song is finished when it communicates what you intended—not when it's flawless. Finished beats perfect.

What your key takeaway from this Roadmap? I'd love to know! Drop me an email at me@erickgerber.com.

STAY CONNECTED

If you found this roadmap valuable, join my email list to get more songwriting tips, behind-the-scenes content, and early access to upcoming courses and masterclasses designed to help modern guitarists write, produce, and finish better songs—faster.

[Join the mailing list here](#) ↗

WORK WITH ME DIRECTLY

Need hands-on help bringing your next song to life? I offer the following services:

- **Song Critiques:** get honest, actionable feedback on your songs. [Learn more](#) ↗
- **One-On-One Mentoring:** personalized guidance for your creative process. [Learn more](#) ↗
- **Composition & Production:** I'll personally turn your ideas into fully produced songs. [Learn more](#) ↗

HELP ME IMPROVE

If you feel something is missing from this guide, let me know. Your feedback helps me make this roadmap even better for the next wave of guitarists.

[Share your feedback here](#) ↗

FOLLOW THE JOURNEY

Stay inspired and keep learning:

- YouTube: [youtube.com/@erickgerbermusic](https://www.youtube.com/@erickgerbermusic)
- Instagram: [instagram.com/erickgerbermusic](https://www.instagram.com/erickgerbermusic)

KEEP FINISHING. KEEP GROWING.

AND NEVER FORGET: THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR HEROES ISN'T SKILL OR TALENT—IT'S SONG OUTPUT.



ERICK GERBER
COMPOSER | PRODUCER | GUITARIST