

# How to make **Electronic Music**

*(for beginners)*

19 essential  
steps to take as  
a new producer



By Neel Erickson & Will Darling

**EDM**tips.com

# How to Make Electronic Music (for beginners)

Getting started can seem a bit daunting if you're a new producer, so here are 19 steps to take that will get you on your way to the main stage!

Almost every producer runs into this realisation at some point in their musical journey: Producing dance music is way more complex than they'd originally thought.

If you're a new producer, it can seem overwhelming. The software is daunting, the process is a mystery, and it seems like there are an infinite number of choices (spoiler: there are) - where do you even begin?

I remember that feeling, and I want to help ease that pain - so I've laid out 19 steps to take as a new producer that'll leave you with a completed song idea and get you started on your journey.

I'll be walking you through:

- 1. Preparing your mindset and approach**
- 2. Picking your tools**
- 3. Learning the basics**
- 4. Producing future bass - a full idea**
- 5. The fastest road to success**

We've also included some free samples and other goodies to really help you jump-start your journey, so don't forget to grab them here. OK... Let's get to it!

# About the Authors

First, a really quick introduction to the authors of this guide:

*Neel Erickson*



Neel is the primary author of this guide. He is an Icon Collective alumni, and a music producer who lives in L.A. California.

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*Will Darling*



Will is the EDMtips head honcho. He has been writing dance music for over twenty years, and has worked on Grammy shortlisted dance music, as well as music that has hit the top spots in many download charts. He has also DJed all over the world, and spent the last 3 years running EDMtips to help aspiring producers seriously up their game and achieve their production goals. His role in the guide you are reading has been primarily as editor, so full props to Neel for his hard work!

# Preparing Your Mindset and Approach

## 1) Write down your mission

As your first step as a new producer, figure out why you want to make music, and write it down. Sure, this might seem like a strange first step, but think about it: your mission will become the centerpiece for your music - for your *art*.

Do you want to spread a message of love? Do you want to throw the sickest parties everywhere you play? Whatever it is, write it down and keep it somewhere you'll see it every day. It will start to feed into your music, and people will flock to it.

If you're only in it for the fame and money, you'll eventually burn out. Consider something deeper than tangible wealth for your mission.

## 2) Figure out what type of music you want to make

My advice? Make whatever you goddamn feel like. As a new producer, it really doesn't matter, and it's important that you just enjoy the process.

Nonetheless, if you're looking for some guidance: look back at a collection of your favourite songs over the past year, and look up what genres they belong in. Pick the most common as your starting point.

If you don't want to pick a genre, don't worry - you don't have to decide now (or ever, for that matter). Any successful producer will be able to produce more than just one type of music.

### 3) Lay down your vision and goals

The mission from step 1 was identifying *why* you wanted to produce music. Now, it's time for the *what, where, when, and how* behind all of it.

Where will you be when you consider yourself to have "made it"?

What does your day-to-day look like?

What do you define as success?

When do you want to achieve all of this?

How do you make it happen?

Start by writing down at least five big 5-year goals. Be specific and concrete: goals like "play the headline slot at EDC main stage" are awesome; goals like "be popular" aren't.

Reach for the stars.

Once you've done that, figure out what you need to do within the next 3 years to be on the right path. Write those goals down too.

Now, you'll want to come up with at least ten *achievable* goals for the next year to make sure you're on track to reach those 3-year goals.

It's important to make sure you can feasibly reach these, so don't be too overzealous. You won't hit them all - and that's completely normal and totally fine - but having them to work towards will give you fuel in the tank when you hit tricky bits.

# Picking Your Tools

## 4) Choose a DAW

The DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) is the software you make music in - naturally, it'll be the first thing you need. As a new producer, your DAW is your first instrument, so put some time into choosing the right one for you.

To help you pick, I've outlined the strengths of the four most popular DAWs:

- **Ableton Live** is best for live performance and for playing with ideas. Flume, Diplo, Skrillex, and Deadmau5 all use Ableton.
- **Logic Pro** is great for laptop producing (and if you like keyboard shortcuts) and live recording. Hardwell, Flosstradamus, Calvin Harris, and David Guetta are some of Logic's notable users.
- **FL Studio** has great in-the-box content, and a ton of producers enjoy the creative workflow it allows. Martin Garrix, Porter Robinson, and Afrojack produce in FL.

- **ProTools** isn't as common for dance music production, but it's the professional standard for the music industry. If you're considering a broader career in audio production (and not just making dance music), consider learning ProTools.

Take note that each DAW has a number of highly successful users, which clearly shows that great music can be made in any DAW.

None of them are definitively "better" than the others - each has its own set of strengths and its own unique workflow.

Many of them have free trials so you can have a play first to find out which you prefer, and decide a bit later.

Here is a [good article](#) to help you choose.

## 5) Find your listening system

The first part of this step is deciding between monitors and headphones. Truthfully, having both is preferred, but here's a quick comparison if you need to choose:

Headphones will give you the most controlled listening environment, and they're portable. However, they can be fatiguing over longer production sessions, and interpreting panning in your mix can be a bit tricky.

Monitors provide a less-controlled listening environment (unless you're in an acoustically treated studio), though unlike headphones they do provide the benefit of hearing what your

song sounds like in a real room. Monitors won't tire your ears as quickly, and panning is more natural.

The second part of the step is actually deciding which brand and model to get. For both, it's important to shop around, and I recommend going to a local music store to test out a few options.

When you're looking, try to find flat frequency response production-quality speakers, and stay away from consumer-grade options (Like "Beats by Dre", for example). The latter tend to emphasize certain frequencies, which can lead to an imbalanced mix when used for production.

Some brands to consider are: Sennheiser, M-Audio, Shure and Audio Technica, although there are many other excellent choices.

## 6) Get a MIDI controller

MIDI controllers are the physical pieces of equipment you use to affect your DAW, and having one can greatly speed up your workflow and lend to a lot of creativity. The two most common forms of MIDI controllers are keyboards and drum pads - though plenty of others exist.

If you have a musical background (such as playing the piano) or want to make music with a lot of chords and melodies, then I'd recommend getting a MIDI keyboard.

If you've never touched the keys, consider a pad controller (such as the Ableton Push or the Novation Launchpad). Pads are great for sequencing and playing in drums, but they can still be used to play melodies and chords.

## 7) Pick your first synthesizer

The synthesizer is what we use to make sound (literally, it synthesizes sound) - especially in electronic music. Even as a new producer, it's likely you've already heard of a few: Serum, Massive, and Sylenth. These are known “soft-synths”, as they are software, as opposed to hardware synthesizers (which nowadays are not necessary).

You *can* start off just using the synths included in your DAW, but investing in at least one decent third-party synth is a really good investment.

Much like the different DAWs, these different synthesizers are all capable of producing a great sound - the main differences lie in their workflow.

If you're a new producer, I recommend starting with Serum - it's incredibly powerful, and the visual feedback it provides is great for understanding how your sound works.

# Learning the Basics

## 8) Familiarize yourself with your DAW

Once you've gotten all of your equipment, you'll want to learn how to use it. Considering the DAW is the centerpiece of music production, it's best to start by learning its basic functionality. Keep this initial part light - you don't need to read the full manual or anything of the sorts. I recommend searching "[DAW Name] Tutorial" on Youtube and watching one or two of the top videos.

Within an hour or two, you should learn what you need to know to get started.

## 9) Understand the core components of music

When you break it down, music is really just comprised of three things: melody, harmonic content, and rhythm.

The melody is the main idea - it's what people hum when they think of your song. There's a plethora of theory out there on what makes a good melody, but for now you just need to know this one simple rule of thumb: the best melodies can be sung back easily. Harmonic content largely consists of your chords and your bass. A harmony is at least two different notes playing simultaneously.

For the most part, these elements are used to support the melody, but they can still get the spotlight from time to time. Rhythm is the pace and groove of a song - it's what makes people feel like moving their bodies. In dance music, rhythm is arguably the most important element. People can dance to a simple drum groove without melody or harmonic content playing (that's how breakdancing began), but dancing to something without rhythm is downright impossible.

## 10) Learn the fundamentals of sound design

When I say fundamentals here, I mean it. If you're a new producer, it's not as important to learn sound design as it is to

focus on mastering your DAW and the core components of your music.

I'd recommend using presets to start, as designing your own sounds from scratch can be nigh on impossible if you don't know what you're doing. However, you should be able to understand the basics of what your synthesizer is doing, so that you can tweak those presets to fit your song.

Most synthesizers you'll encounter will consist of at least one **oscillator**, a **filter**, an **envelope/ADSR**, an **LFO**, and some **effects**. The **oscillator** is what's primarily responsible for generating the sound. It works by repeating a specified waveform (the green lines in the image below) at a frequency typically from 20Hz to 20kHz (the audible range of the human ear). Each waveform has its own distinct sound, and your synthesizer will have a handful to choose from. The frequency corresponds to the pitch - as you play higher frequencies (higher notes on the keyboard), you'll hear higher pitches.

The **filter** is primarily responsible for shaping the tone of the sound. Filters work by removing certain frequencies; they can turn a bright piercing sound into a mellow warm tone. Or flip them around and they can turn the most aggressive bass into nothing but a high whisper. The two main controls you'll need to worry about are the type (in the image below, specified as MG Low 12) and the cutoff. The type will dictate which frequencies will be cut (lows, highs, mids, or some combination thereof), and the cutoff will specify at what specific frequency to begin cutting those frequencies.

The length of your sound and the way it's played (slow and smooth, or sharp and plucky) is governed by the **envelope**, which is comprised of four main parts: the Attack, the Decay, the

Sustain, and the Release (ADSR). The attack is how long the sound takes to reach its peak level. The decay and the sustain work in conjunction with one another - the sustain is the level the sound will remain at so long as the note is held, and the decay is the amount time taken to reach that level. Finally, the release is the amount of time taken for the sound to completely quiet out once you've let go of the note. For example, a pad might have a slow attack, a moderate decay and sustain, and a slow release; a pluck on the other hand would have a short attack, a faster decay with no sustain, and a short release. It's worth noting that in many synthesizers, additional envelopes can be assigned to parameters other than just the volume (for example, the filter cutoff).

To help understand the envelope better, I've created a few examples with a simple saw wave (You can listen to each example):

- The first has a fast attack, low sustain, and fast decay with no release ([Click here to play](#)).
- The second has a fast attack as well, but with a medium sustain and decay. No release ([Click here to play](#)).
- The third has the same attack, decay, and sustain as the second, but with a long release ([Click here to play](#)).
- The fourth has a slow attack, high sustain, and low release ([Click here to play](#)).
- The fifth and final has a slow attack, a medium sustain, a medium decay, and a long release ([Click here to play](#)).

**LFO** stands for Low Frequency Oscillator. That's right - it's an oscillator. But unlike the oscillators above, which we played at higher frequencies of up to 20,000Hz, these LFOs function at much slower rates, down to as low as 0.001Hz (meaning it would take 1,000 seconds just to complete a single cycle). Since we can't hear anything below 20Hz, LFOs aren't intended to generate sound. Instead, we use them to manipulate other parameters over time in a repeated fashion. For example, we could assign an LFO to our filter so that the sound opens and closes back and forth forever.

Most modern digital synthesizers will also include an **effects (FX)** section. This is where you can further manipulate your sound, such as adding a flanger or compressor. As a new producer, don't worry too much about this section - it's mostly used to further sweeten the sound, as opposed to really defining it.



# Producing a Full Idea (Future Bass)

Now that you've acquired your gear and know how to use it, let's get to making music. In these next 9 steps, I'm going to walk you through the creation of a full 8-bar idea in the future bass genre. You can follow along using the resources included in this pack, or you can use this as a template to create your own unique idea.

## 11) First, make your drum groove

The first step in programming your drum groove will be setting your tempo. Future Bass typically rests around 140-150 bpm; I'll use 140.

Next, I suggest programming in your snare. In Future Bass, this tends to hit on the 3rd beat of every measure.

Lastly, program your kick drum in per your preference. I've done my kick and snare as follows:

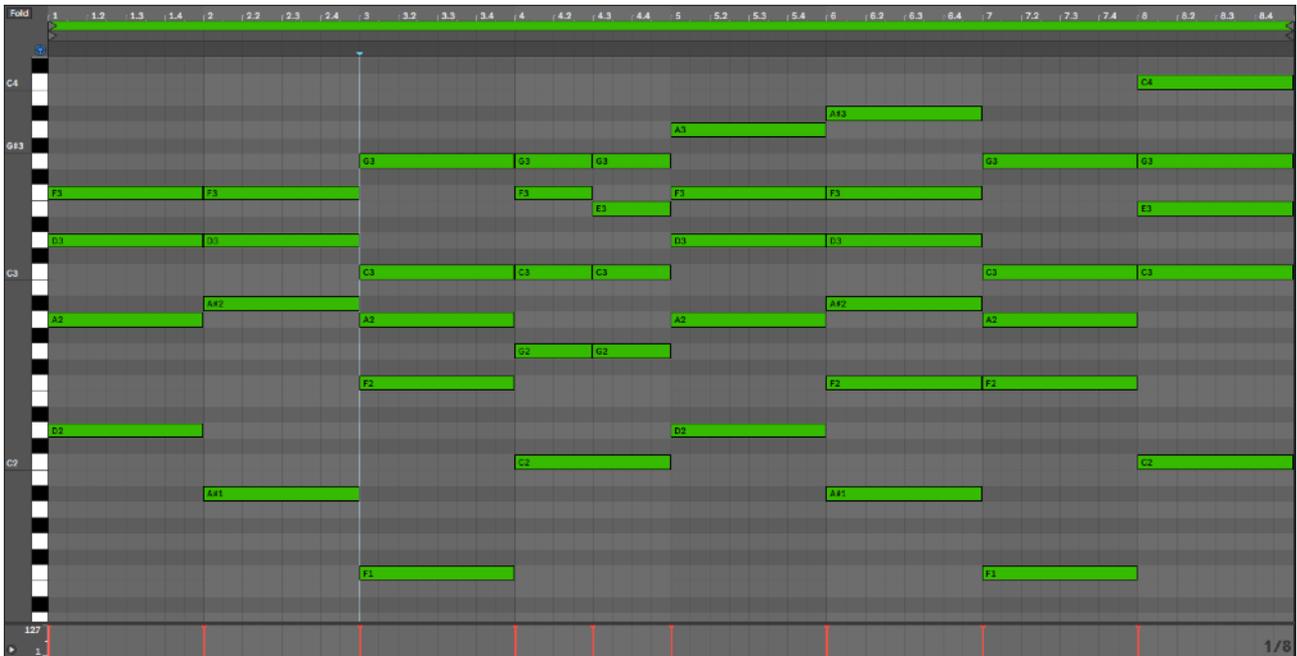


## 12) Next, write your chord progression

Chord progressions can be tricky if you lack a music theory background, but don't worry - Will's written a separate post on [creating killer chord progressions](#).

Read it if you haven't already, and add a chord progression to your drum beat.

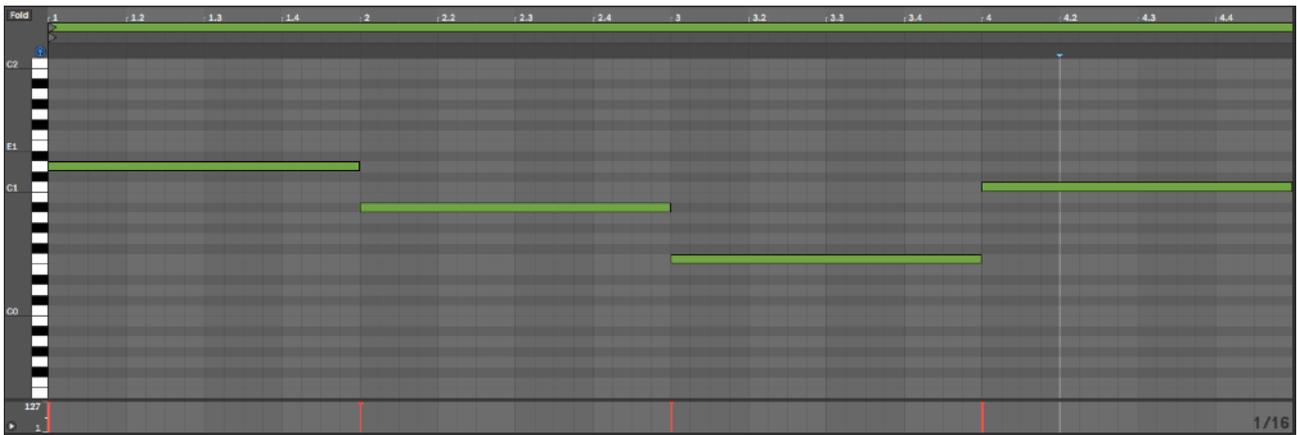
Here's mine:



## 13) Add in a bass line

After writing your chord progression, you should try layering in a bass. Luckily, bass lines are a bit more straightforward than chord progressions (after all, basses only play one note at a time).

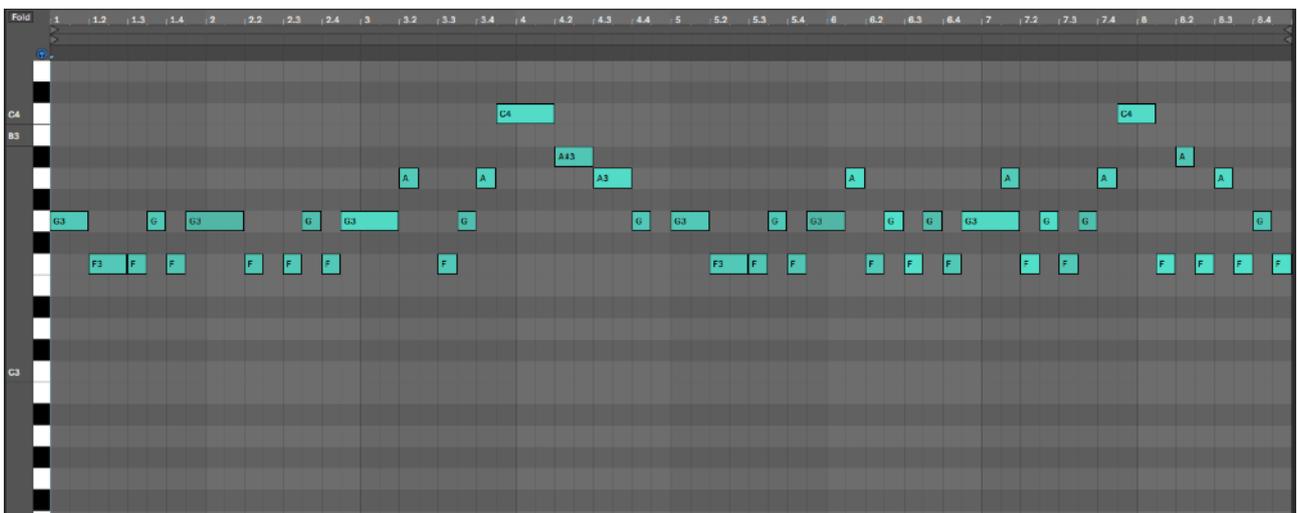
Since the bass in this context is meant to support the chords, all you need to do is copy your root of the chord down an octave or two. Here's my bass line (it repeats the 4 bars twice).



## 14) Come up with your melody

This is the most important part of your track; it's how people will remember your song. If you've already got an idea in mind, great - add that in. If you're struggling, check out this post by Will: [How to Write a Melody](#).

Alternatively, feel free to copy mine for now and make some of your own modifications!



## 15) Toss in some percussion

Now, you've gotten the main idea down - people can listen to what you have so far and still get a feel for your track. However, it's definitely missing some movement and energy, which we can achieve with the addition of percussion and cymbals.

Percussion serves to keep the groove going when your melody, kick, snare, and bass aren't active, so be sure to add little exciting fills in some of the open spaces. Here's my percussion, added on top of the kick and snare pattern; like before, feel free to copy and modify!



## 16) Layer in background FX

The addition of FX layers can be a subtle but nice touch to your track, making it seem more “real” to the listener. These layers can be things like vinyl noise, the hustle of a busy city, the sound of a babbling brook - pretty much anything. Subtlety is key here; too much can be distracting from the actual song.

If you've been following along with the example, I simply added three layers of audio at low volumes:



## 17) Sweeten up your sounds with processing

Now that the idea is written down in full, it's time to make it sound professional. We can achieve that extra polish with processing tools such as saturation and compression. Good use of processing will separate the amateur from the professional, so take your time and experiment with this one.

I'd definitely recommend dissecting the processing I've added into the example project. Turn devices on and off, and see if you can hear the differences they're making.

As a general rule of thumb, you can use the following order:  
Starting sound input → Equalization to remove bad frequencies → Saturation to warm up the sound → Equalization to remove bad frequencies → Compression to even out the sound → Final polished sound output

## 18) Perform a basic mix-down of your idea

Even with the processing from the previous step, you might notice that your idea is lacking clarity. It's difficult to distinguish what is happening in the lower frequencies and with your drums, and a lot of your elements are competing with each other for attention.

The process of balancing and cleaning up your sounds to work with each other is known as mixing, and it's so important that we've dedicated an entire course to it.

Similar to processing, this is such an in-depth topic that I won't go far into it in this post, so spend time examining what I've done in the example.

Here are some guidelines to help with your mix:

- Each element should occupy its own space, much like actual instruments in a real band would. Consider front-to-back, top-to-bottom, and side-to-side.
  - The biggest determining factor of front-to-back space (how close an element is) is volume. Higher volumes lend to a more in-your-face sound, while lower volumes seem farther away.
    - Reverb, chorus, and delay can also be added to push an element farther away in the mix.
  - The biggest factor of top-to-bottom space (how high or low an element is) is frequency. The lower in frequency an element is, the lower to the ground it will seem.

- The biggest factor in determining side-to-side space (whether it appears on your left, right, or in the center) is panning. Negative pan values will push sounds to the left, and positive values will push sounds to the right.
- Muddiness occurs when elements are overlapping in the space they occupy - the combination of front-to-back, top-to-bottom, and side-to-side.
  - The first thing you should do is to remove unwanted or unnecessary frequencies from elements - particularly in the lower frequencies. In our example, the melody had a lot of excess frequency information below 220Hz, so I used an EQ to cut those out. This will tackle a lot of the top-to-bottom conflicts.
  - After removing unwanted and clashing frequencies, it's best to adjust the volume levels of each element so they sit in the front-to-back space properly. This step will account for about 80% of your mix's overall quality, so spend time getting this right.
  - After accounting for the top-to-bottom and front-to-back, you can adjust your panning levels to get elements to sit a bit more separately horizontally.
- Mixing is a dynamic process - what you do in a later step might require you to re-do something in an earlier step. For example, after adjusting the panning, you may find that you'll need to readjust the volume levels - and that's okay.

## 19) Master your idea

Mastering is the process of making your track loud and listenable on any set of speakers. This is the final stage in the music production process, and the quality of the master is wholly dependent on the quality of the production and mix beforehand. If you're a new producer, you don't need to worry too much about this stage yet - but it's fun to have a loud track so here's a good mastering chain option:



Breaking it down, I have some mild EQ to shape the frequency content → a glue compressor to even out the sound slightly and reign in the harsh peaks → Multiband Compression to help each element sit a little more separately and clearly → A limiter to add volume.

As you wrap up your idea, take a moment to celebrate your progress and results. If you're a new producer, a lot of new information has been thrown at you - take the time to review everything you've done.

But don't get too comfortable quite yet - if you truly want to play main stage, there's a lot left to do....

# The Fastest Road to Success – Next Steps

In going from the “new producer” stage to the professional stage, there are a million paths you can take. Unfortunately, many of these paths can lead you down unproductive rabbit holes in which you’re not actually improving your productions; with so many different subject areas, it’s tough to decide what to learn first and in what order.

As a bonus to the 19 steps I’ve just laid out, here are the four biggest things you can (and should!) focus on moving forward:

## 1) Drum Programming and Groove

As I mentioned earlier, groove is what makes people dance. You can have the most beautiful melodies and chords out there, but people won’t dance if there isn’t any groove.

Since groove is the foundation for dance music, I recommend nailing your understanding of drum programming and the application of swing and groove.

## 2) Chord Structure and Progressions

Music is an emotional experience, and most of our perception of emotion comes from harmonic content. If drums and groove give movement, then chords are what give emotion.

Luckily for you, Will has a strong background in [chord progressions](#) and has written [multiple posts](#) on the topic. I recommend reading every one of them and spending time simply writing chord progressions.

### 3) Melodic Development

Earlier I'd said that the melody was the most important part of the track - and I still stand by that. Groove and chord structure might create the foundation for your idea, but the idea itself lies in the melody.

The melody is what makes a song memorable and meaningful; that's why we get songs stuck in our head and also why we can appreciate covers (the melody can still be enjoyed with different background content).

Once you've nailed down your chord progressions and groove, spend a ton of time on melody writing. One of the most effective things you can do is to break apart your favourite songs - copy their melodies and find out why you like those in particular.

### 4) Intermediate Music Theory

Almost everything I've discussed in this post relates in one way or another to music theory. Simply put, music theory is the study of rhythm, melody, and harmony and how they work together to create good, pleasing music.

Music theory might sound daunting to consider, but having a simple understanding doesn't require too much effort, and it can significantly improve the speed and quality of your work.

So far, we've covered the basics of music theory, but actually understanding and mastering it requires more attention than an article can provide.

That's why I recommend checking out the [Music Theory for EDM Producers course](#), which is filled with actual video lectures going into depth on each of the core components of music I've discussed. In it, you'll learn specific techniques for improving your drums, chords, basslines, and melodies.

Plus, you'll learn the methodology to take your 8-bar idea from this article and turn it into a full-length song... [learn more about the course here](#).

Here are just some of the comments from the 1000's of students who have taken Music Theory for EDM Producers:



Hey will..I try to produce at least a year without success, your course helped me very much. I sent you my first track. I repeat the course every day. Thank you, my teacher.



#### Highlighted comment

**Alberto Hilsaca** 15 hours ago

amazing stuff. have been applying all your tips, my tracks have improved more in 1 week than in the past year.



**Jonathan Alfred Jabbour** ▶ EDMtips

15 November 2017 · 🌐

I did the music theory course which was the first course out of thousands of videos i watched they actually helped me haha. Will is an amazing teacher!!! He explains every thing in detail... I rate this video 5/5. Thanks for everything 😊😊

👍 EDMtips

1 Comment





**Paul** <pminn0034@gmail.com>

16:33 (1 hour ago) ☆



to Will ▾

Will,

Your course on Music Theory is killer! I love it! You break everything down so eloquently and specific and it's great that you do the walkthrough. Amazing!

Sent from my iPhone

On Apr 13, 2018, at 10:06 AM, Will (EDMtips) <[will@edmtips.com](mailto:will@edmtips.com)> wrote:



**Patrik Putte Vestman** ▶ EDMtips



21 January · 🌐

Thank you for a amazing course!  
(Music Theory for Edm Producers)  
I am a beginner in Edm but this course is easy to follow and understand,  
im learned a lot of valuable information.  
It´s an awesome course for Edm producers!

❤️ EDMtips

1 Comment



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EDMtips



**Sarie Bott** <sariebott@gmail.com>

23 Feb (3 days ago) ☆



to Will ▾

Honestly, your course and tutorials are amazing!

Im taking an expensive course online right now at the "world's best online music school" and I was watching tutorials on youtube to get better understanding. I cant put my finger on what it is about how you explain stuff but its really great and its helping me so much!

That just about wraps up the 19 Steps to Take as a New Producer!  
We hope you've enjoyed it, and until next time...

Cheers, and happy producing!

Neel & Will – [EDMtips.com](http://EDMtips.com)