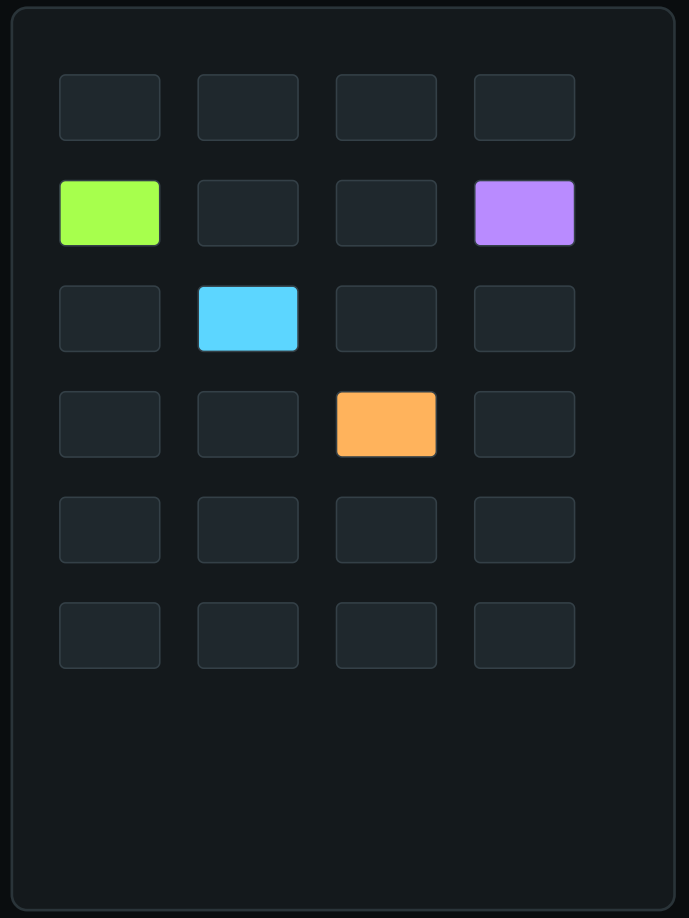
BUILD THE SYSTEM.
FINISH THE SONG.

My Ableton Live workflow for speed, structure, mixing & completion

PRODUCTION | MIXING | TEMPLATES | SOUND DESIGN



Orlando DJ Summit

Jose Santiago / DJ Freefall

“Ableton isn’t scary. It only feels big until you shape it to fit you.”

WORKSHOP MAP

The workflow at a glance

Your workshop reference, followed by visual lessons and the new Extensions beta.

1 **Origin Story**
Why Ableton became home

2 **Workflow Philosophy**
Finish. Move quickly. Reference.

3 **Template System**
Prepare sounds and processing

4 **Signal Flow**
Tracks → groups → mix bus

5 **Mix Philosophy**
Balance. Flow. Transients.

6 **Wax On / Wax Off**
Rebuild a complete reference

NEXT Pages 17–25: Live essentials • Pages 26–30: Extensions, examples + sources

2010–2011

Why Ableton became home

The change started because the old workflow literally could not come with me.

1 • Acid Pro

My primary DAW was Acid Pro on Windows. Moving to a MacBook forced a decision: stay attached to the old system or rebuild.

2 • Mentorship

Dominick Morrison — along with DJ Cova — helped make the transition less intimidating and gave me a real path into Ableton.

3 • The hook

Two things immediately stood out: the Warp engine and the live-performance side of Ableton.

The forced transition became the long-term advantage.

That is the first theme of this workshop: adapt the software to how you think — not the other way around.

TODAY

Ableton Is Not One Job For Me

The same environment supports several parts of my creative work.

Production

From idea to full record

Mixing

Balance, dynamics, space

Stem Work

Preparation & rebuilding

DJ Edits

Custom performance versions

Artist Templates

Systems built for other creators

Sound Design

Patches, textures & processing

Processing Racks

Reusable creative chains

Song Template Kits

Including Pandora’s Box

MY WORKFLOW PHILOSOPHY

Three rules that shape the whole system

01 Finish the idea

A finished song teaches you more than a perfect eight-bar loop. The system should keep you moving toward a complete record.

02 Don’t take too long

Remove repeated decisions. Put the common tools, routing and sounds where you need them before inspiration arrives.

03 Have a reference

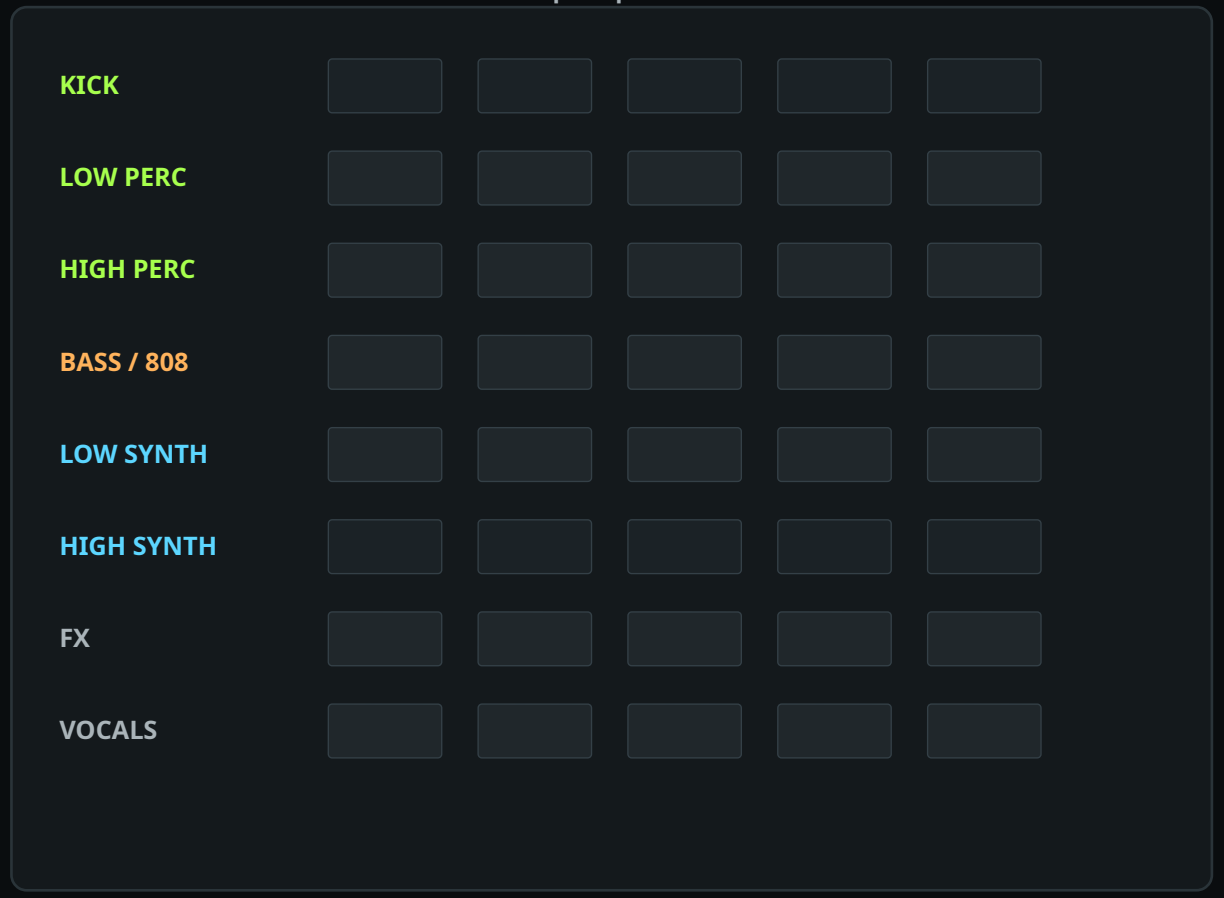
A reference gives context. It anchors decisions about balance, energy, density and the direction of the record.

Speed is not rushing. Speed is removing unnecessary decisions.

TEMPLATE-FIRST WORKFLOW

Start with decisions already made

I would rather choose from a prepared environment than rebuild the same environment every session.



Processing already lives on the buses

The repeatable utility work is there before the idea starts.

Preset loops are ready in Session View

Drums, kicks, bass/808, low percussion, high percussion and more can be auditioned immediately.

Then I choose — instead of rebuild

The creative question becomes “which sound belongs?” rather than “where do I find everything?”

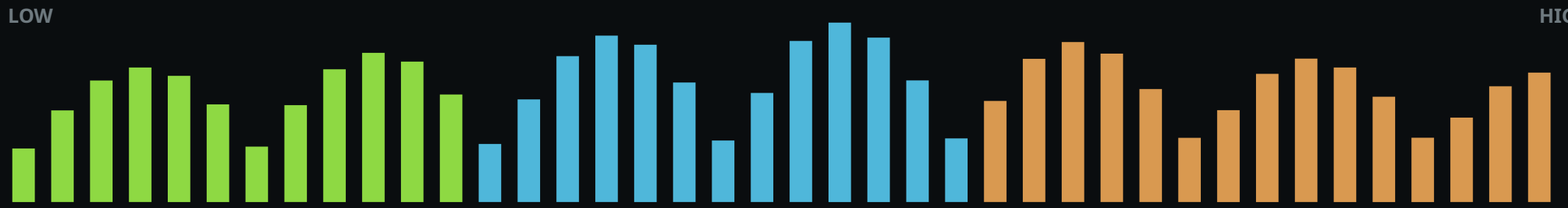
WHERE DOES THE SOUND LIVE?

Organize the session by frequency territory

The fundamental frequency determines the neighborhood. The mix becomes easier to read — visually and sonically.

KICK	LOW PERC	HIGH PERC	BASS / 808	LOW SYNTH	HIGH SYNTH	FX	VOCALS
lowest impact	< ~500 Hz	hats / tops	low-end body	~500–1k	upper tone	space / motion	lead / support

MAKE THE COLORS YOURS Assign unique colors to your groups. Use them consistently to remember and find elements faster.



I also use a graphic EQ overlay to see where the other buses are already occupying space.

INDIVIDUAL TRACK CHAIN

Every default track starts simple

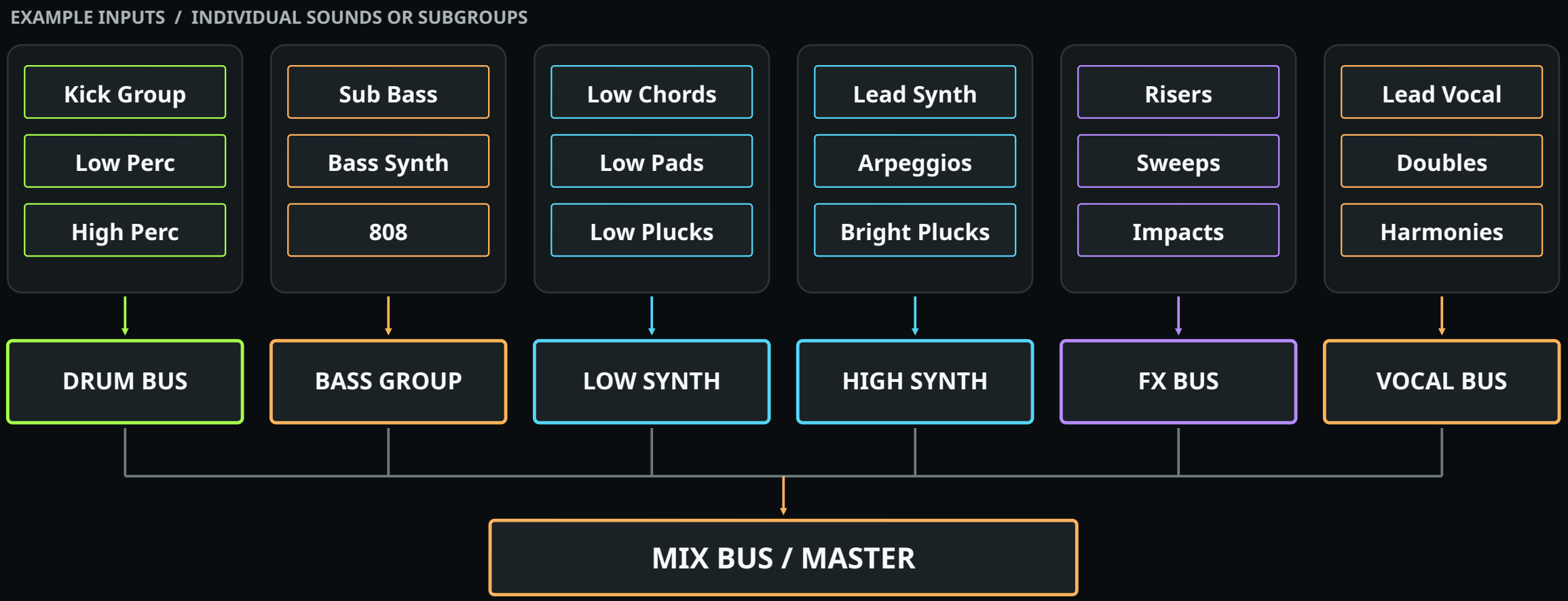
Utility first. Character later.



The track stays readable. The bus is where I usually start making bigger tonal decisions.

I mix the buses as complete elements

Example inputs: choose each group by the sound's frequency territory and role.



Once sounds are summed, I tend to think of the bus as one musical object.

WHERE PROCESSING LIVES

Control low. Character higher.

Not a rule — a default direction. The importance of the sound determines the exception.

INDIVIDUAL TRACK

Gain / level
Peak control
Quick cleanup
Visual references

Keep the sound functional and readable.

BUS / GROUP

Tonal character
Glue
Bigger EQ decisions
Movement / width

This is where I usually shape the “identity” of the group.

Case-by-case always wins.

DAILY DRIVERS

The tools I reach for without thinking

Ableton • Auto Filter

Movement, filtering and quick frequency control.

Oszillos • Mega Scope

On every bus so I can see the waveform evolve in real time.

FabFilter • Pro-Q 4

Visual EQ and spectrum overlays to see where each element sits.

Slate • VSX

A monitoring reference for hearing the mix in different environments.

THE POINT

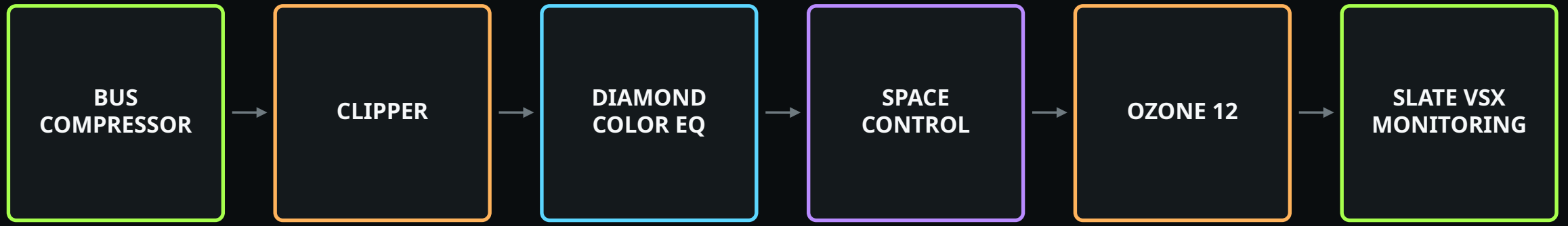
The “best” plugin is the one that gives you information quickly and helps you make a decision.

My template keeps those tools close enough that I do not have to stop creating to go find them.

MIX BUS

I like to hear the record through the final context

My mix bus is part of the working environment — not an afterthought at the very end.



Bus processing gives me context while I balance — especially when I'm working with very little headroom.

Space Control is part of how I manage width and depth; it was created by my mentor Luca Pretolesi with Hardwell.

FIRST PASS

Before processing, I listen for three things

BALANCE

Do the important elements already feel correctly weighted before I start solving problems with processors?

FLOW

Does the record move naturally? Do the sections feel connected? Is the energy telling the same story?

TRANSIENTS

Where is the impact? Which transients are leading the groove — and which ones are getting in the way?

My approach: bring the main element up to the loudest useful level, then subtract around it to carve the mix.

I prefer hearing the mix close to its final density so I understand what actually has to make room.

LOW-END RELATIONSHIP

Kick + bass: let the genre decide

The solution can be simple or surgical — the musical role comes first.



How important is this sound in relation to the mix?

The plugin is rarely the real problem

OVER-OBSESS

Which plugin?
Which compressor?
Which saturation?
Which chain?

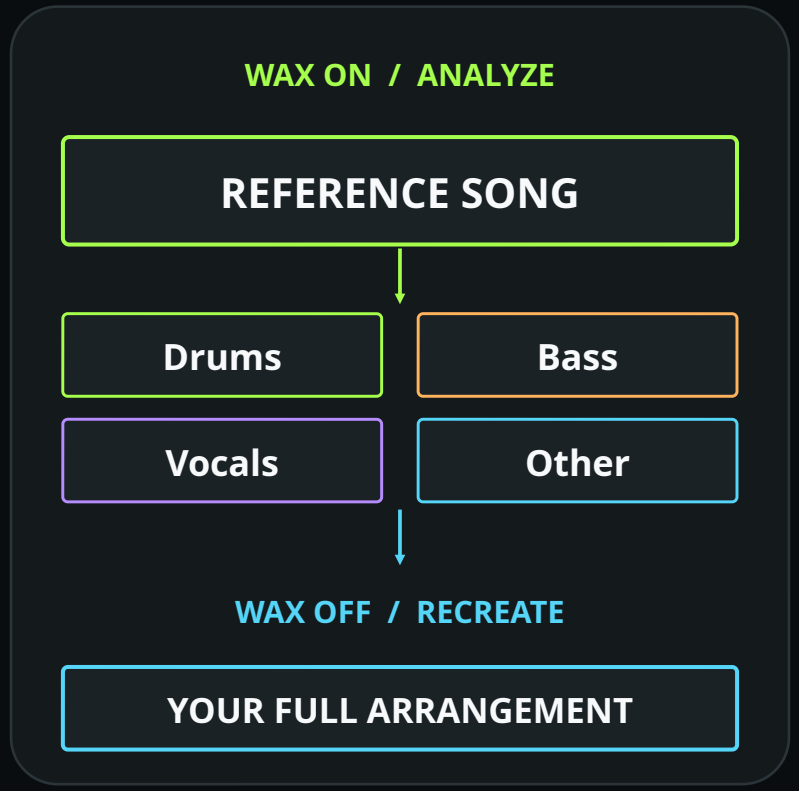
MOVE FORWARD

Songwriting
Arrangement
Sound design
FINISHING

Complete songs teach you what eight-bar loops cannot.

Learn a song by rebuilding it

Break a reference into stems, study the decisions, then recreate it as a writing exercise.



1 Choose + Separate

Pick a reference you love. Break it into drums, bass, vocals and other stems.

2 Listen + Map

Study each stem. Mark sections, phrase lengths, entrances, exits and energy changes.

3 Rebuild + Compare

Recreate the parts with your own sounds. Compare balance, groove and sound design.

4 Finish + Repeat

Finish and export the full arrangement. Compare, refine and repeat.

My most important exercise: recreate a complete reference song.

Not just a drop. Not just a loop. A full arrangement.

The five pieces of a Live Set

Learn the pieces first. Your template is simply a useful arrangement of them.

BROWSER

Find instruments, effects, samples and saved presets.

TRACKS

Lanes for audio or MIDI, each with its own device chain.

CLIPS

Containers for audio or MIDI ideas.

DEVICES

Instruments and effects that generate or shape sound.

MIXER

Levels, pan, sends, groups and the Main output.

A SIMPLE PATH FROM IDEA TO MUSIC

Find a sound → Add a track → Make a clip → Shape it → Balance it

A Live Set (.als) stores your song setup. A project folder keeps its related files together.

TRY IT Create one audio track and one MIDI track. Locate each track's clips, devices and fader.

SOURCES Live concepts Official video lessons

Audio and MIDI are not the same thing

Audio contains a sound. MIDI tells an instrument what to play.

AUDIO TRACK



Record a microphone or import a sample. The clip plays the recorded waveform.

Audio clip → Effects → Main out

MIDI TRACK



Edit notes, timing and velocity. A software or external instrument turns the instructions into sound.

MIDI notes → Instrument → Audio out

TRY IT Play the same MIDI clip through two instruments. The notes stay the same; the sound changes.

SOURCES Live concepts Instruments + signal flow

Session vs. Arrangement

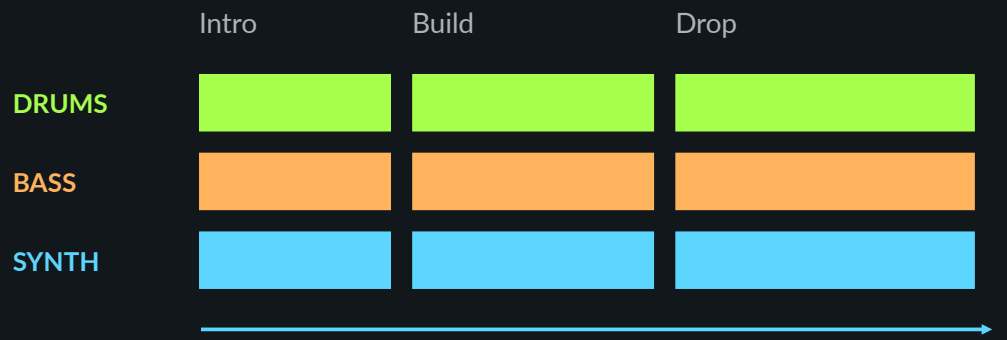
Try combinations in Session. Shape a full song on the Arrangement timeline.

SESSION: LAUNCH IDEAS

DRUMS	BASS	SYNTH	
Intro	Intro	Intro	→ Scene 1
Build	Build	Build	→ Scene 2
Drop	Drop	Drop	→ Scene 3

Columns = tracks; rows = scenes. A scene launches a row together. Each track plays one Session clip at a time.

ARRANGEMENT: BUILD THE SONG



Time runs left to right. Record Session launches into Arrangement to capture a performance.

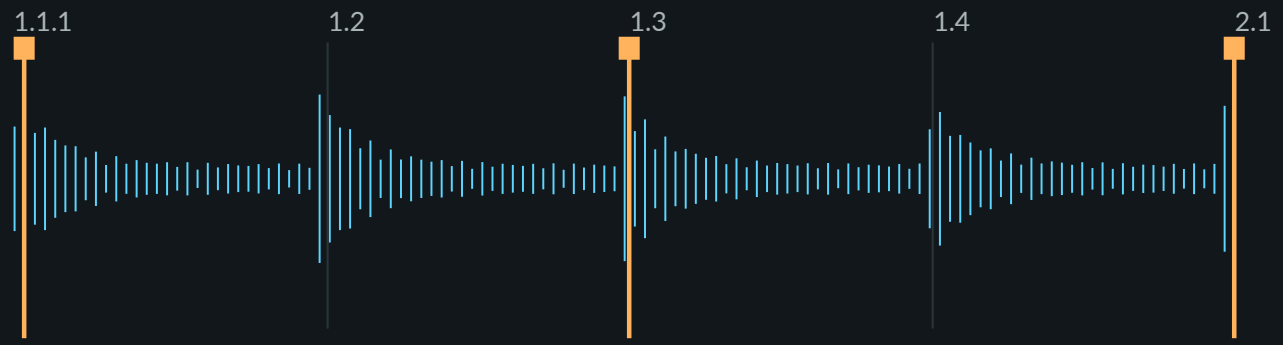
TAB ≠ PLAYBACK Tab changes the view. “Back to Arrangement” restores timeline playback after Session takes over.

SOURCES Session View manual

Put the audio on the song’s timeline

Warping maps points in an audio file to musical beats.

WARP MARKERS = TIMING ANCHORS



Anchor the downbeat, then correct drift only where needed. Too many edits can change the groove.

A FIRST WARPING PASS

1. Open the audio clip; enable Warp.
2. Locate the real downbeat. Set 1.1.1 Here.
3. Check against the metronome near the start, middle and end.
4. Choose a Warp mode; compare by ear.

MODE STARTERS Beats: rhythmic material. Complex/Pro: full mixes. Re-Pitch changes pitch with playback speed.

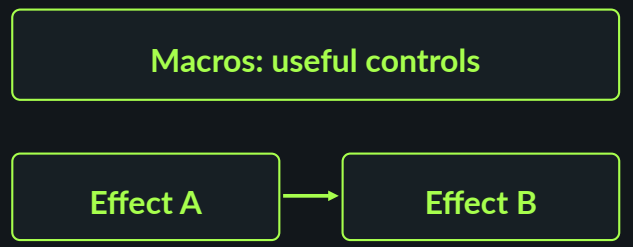
SOURCES Tempo + warping manual

Racks, Groups and Returns

They solve different problems. The diagrams show where the sound goes.

RACK

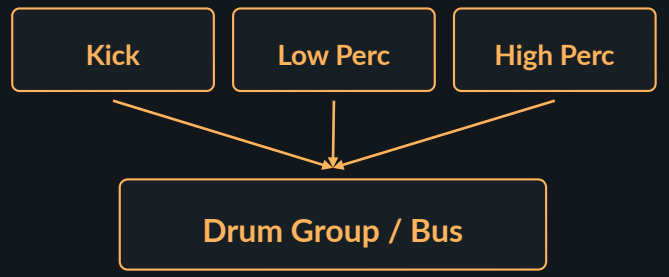
Tools inside one track



A reusable device container with serial or parallel chains. Save it as .adg.

GROUP

Several tracks, one bus



Member tracks sum here. Use the group fader and devices to mix them together.

RETURN

A shared parallel effect



Blend an effect beside the dry signal. A conventional reverb Return uses 100% wet.

TRY IT Use a Rack for your processing chain, a Group for drums, and a Return for a shared reverb.

SOURCES Racks manual Mixing / routing

A template you can actually finish music in

Start small. Add only the decisions you repeatedly make before the music begins.

01	**Create your lanes**	Try Kick, Low Perc, High Perc, Bass, Low Synth, High Synth, FX and Vocals.
02	**Name, color and route**	Choose memorable colors. Route drums into a group; add a shared reverb Return.
03	**Add useful defaults**	Place your metering, gain and favorite tools. Start with sensible levels, not a fixed loudness target.
04	**Prepare sound options**	Save a few loops or instruments to audition. Keep the template useful rather than crowded.
05	**Save it as a template**	File → Save Live Set As Template. Name it clearly; reopen it from Templates in the Browser.

BEFORE SHARING Use Collect All and Save for referenced samples. Check required plug-ins and devices on the other computer.

SOURCES Templates + file management

File endings tell you what you are saving

These are file types. The new “Extensions” workflow feature is a separate topic on page 26.

.als

LIVE SET / TEMPLATE

Song structure, devices and references to its media.

.alp

LIVE PACK

A packaged collection of content or a packed project.

.alc

LIVE CLIP

A reusable clip with associated settings.

.adg

RACK PRESET

A saved Rack and its device configuration.

.adv

DEVICE PRESET

Settings for one device.

.asd

ANALYSIS FILE

Analyzed audio data; it is not the audio itself.

.amxd

MAX FOR LIVE DEVICE

A Max-based instrument, MIDI effect or audio effect.

.ablx

EXTENSION PACKAGE

Used by the new beta tools shown later.

SAVE THE MEDIA An .als file is not a bundle of every sample. Keep the project folder and collected audio together.

SOURCES Live file types Files + Sets Extension package example

My Favorite Keyboard Shortcuts

Mac first, with Windows equivalents. The focused view or selection matters.

Rename

MAC **Cmd + R** WIN **Ctrl + R**

Select a track, clip or other renamable item, then give it a useful name.

Hide / Unhide Return Tracks

MAC **Cmd + Option + R** WIN **Ctrl + Alt + R**

Show or hide the Return tracks to change how much of the mixer you see.

Hide / Show Browser

MAC **Cmd + Option + B** WIN **Ctrl + Alt + B**

Close the Browser for more workspace. Press the same shortcut again to bring it back.

Undo History

MAC **Cmd + Option + Z** WIN **Ctrl + Alt + Z**

Review the available undo / redo steps since opening the Set. Select an entry to return to that point.

Play Selection / Stop at End

MAC **Option + Space** WIN **Ctrl + Space**

With a time range selected, stops at its end. In Clip View: starts from the clip's insert marker.

HISTORY NOTE Undo History is not saved with the Set; it starts fresh each time you reopen it.

SOURCES Live keyboard shortcuts Undo History

ABLETON ISN’T SCARY.

It only feels big until you shape it to fit you.

Build a template you understand.
Trust your ears.
Finish ideas.
Let the technology become invisible.

You already have enough to start.

QUESTIONS?

Keep the conversation going.

DJ FREEFALL

EMAIL

djfreefall@gmail.com

INSTAGRAM

@djfreefall

@humanfreefall

@futurescapemedia

AVAILABLE FOR

Private Consultations

Ghost Production

Mixing + Mastering Services

Custom Production Templates

Thank you for being part of the Orlando DJ Summit.