

Justin - Indie Session



8-STEP MIXING PROCESS

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From Demo to Polished Mix – A Proven Workflow for Clarity, Depth, and Balance

Every producer, songwriter, or bedroom musician eventually runs into the same roadblock:

“Why doesn’t my mix sound professional?”

You’ve written a great song. The performance is solid. The vibe is there.

But when you hit play, something’s missing—clarity, energy, cohesion. The truth is, mixing isn’t just about tweaking knobs. It’s about **making your music communicate**.

That’s why I created this simple, repeatable **8-step mixing process**.

Whether you’re using Logic Pro, Pro Tools, Ableton, or GarageBand, this guide breaks down the exact workflow professionals use to bring songs from rough idea to polished mix—without second-guessing every move or drowning in plugins.

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is designed to help you:

- Mix **faster and more confidently** using a structured approach
- Focus on **what matters most** at each stage of mixing
- Avoid common mistakes like over-processing or mixing while writing
- Learn **top-down techniques** used by real engineers for efficiency and cohesion

- Understand when and why to use tools like EQ, compression, and automation
- Create a mix that translates well **on speakers, headphones, and streaming platforms**

Whether you're mixing your first song or looking to level up your workflow, these 8 steps will give you a professional foundation—and the freedom to stay creative while you work.

Let's dive in.

STEP 1

FINISH THE SONG

Before diving into EQs, reverbs, and compressors, **finish writing and arranging your song**. This is critical. Trying to write while mixing is like decorating a house while the walls are still going up—chaotic and inefficient.

Why this matters:

- You'll constantly second-guess mix decisions if the structure isn't set.
- Editing mid-mix wastes time and kills creative flow.
- A finished song gives you the emotional and sonic direction needed for effective mixing.

 *Tip: Bounce your final arrangement to a fresh track before you begin mixing. This separates the creative process from the technical process, and allows you to revert back to the original version for comparison as you work through your mix.*

STEP 2

CREATE A STATIC MIX

A static mix is the foundation of everything that follows. You're adjusting **only volume and pan**, no plugins yet.

What to do:

- Set all like-instruments (ones that you're likely to later group for bussing) to the same color.
- Start with all your fader levels all the way down (literally, all the way), and work them UP until they're quiet, but loud enough to mix. They should not exceed -8 db during this phase (ideally -10-12 db).
- Start setting volumes with your focal instruments (vocals, guitars), then work toward percussion and background instruments.
- Pan elements for width and separation.
- As a rule, vocals, drums, and bass stay in the middle. Guitars, keys, and backing vocals can pan to the outside, but you want R and L to be fairly balanced throughout the song.

 *Why start with volume all the way down?*

You want to start low and work your way up in terms of track volume to leave “headroom” for the rest of the mixing and mastering process.

STEP 3

MASTER TRACK PROCESSING

Instead of mixing from the bottom up (processing each track individually), start **from the top down**—apply subtle mastering-style processing on the mix bus early on.

What to add (gently):

- **EQ** for tone shaping.
- **Glue Compression** for cohesion.
- **Saturation** or tape plugins for warmth.
- **Limiter** to catch small peaks (not final mastering).

Why top-down?

You shape the overall mix early, which saves time and keeps you from over-processing individual tracks. It forces you to make smarter, more musical decisions.

STEP 4

CREATE BUSSES

Bussing is essential for top-down mixing and efficient workflow.

Common busses to create:

- **Drum Bus**
- **Guitar Bus**
- **Lead Vocal Bus**
- **Background Vocal Bus**
- **Synth Bus**

Why use busses?

- **Cohesion:** Treat similar elements together for unified tone.
- **Efficiency:** One plugin affects the whole group.
- **CPU:** Fewer plugins, less processing power needed.

 *When not to bus:*

- When instruments are too different in tone or purpose (e.g., lead vocal vs harmony vocal with effects).
- When you need completely separate effects chains.

 *Start EQing on busses rather than individual tracks (unless necessary).*

STEP 5

EQ - SCULPTING TONE

EQ is where clarity begins. Now that you've grouped tracks and applied top-down shaping, start carving space in the mix.

Goals with EQ:

- Remove mud (low-mid buildup around 200–500Hz).
- Cut unnecessary lows (high-pass filter).
- Soften harsh highs (2k–5kHz range).
- Boost sweet spots (vocals around 3kHz, snare around 200Hz, etc.).

Use **subtractive EQ first**. Boosting should be subtle unless for flavor.

STEP 6

COMPRESSION - ADDING CONTROL & PUNCH

Now that EQ has shaped your tones, it's time to apply compression for consistency and energy.

Why EQ first?

- EQ cleans the signal before compression.
- Compression reacts to frequencies—mud or harshness can cause over-compression if not addressed first.

Use compression on:

- **Individual tracks:** e.g., snare, vocals.
- **Busses:** e.g., glue on drums, vocals, or mix bus.
- **Parallel compression:** Great for drums or vocals to retain transients while adding body.

 *Top-down principle continues here—compress groups where possible.*

STEP 7

EFFECTS - CREATING SPACE & VIBE

Now that levels, tone, and dynamics are controlled, it's time to bring the mix to life with **effects**.

Common effects:

1. **Reverb** – Adds depth and space.
2. **Delay** – Creates echo, width, or rhythmic movement.
3. **Chorus** – Thickens sounds, great for guitars or backing vocals.
4. **Flanger/Phaser** – Adds movement and color.
5. **Distortion/Saturation** – Adds character and texture.

Create effects busses instead of inserting plugins on every track.

 Example:

- Send multiple vocals to one **reverb bus** and blend it in.
- Use a **delay bus** with automation for throw delays.

Why do this?

- Saves CPU.
- Gives your mix a cohesive sound (same reverb space).
- Easier to control and automate.

STEP 8

AUTOMATION - CREATING MOVEMENT & EMOTION

Automation brings your mix to life. It ensures your mix feels **dynamic and intentional**, not static.

Volume Automation Tips:

- **Fade in/fade out** your track cleanly.
- **Ride vocal levels** for consistent presence.
- **Automate solo sections** up slightly for impact.
- **Lower guitars/synths during vocal-heavy sections.**

Other automation ideas:

- Automate **reverb/delay sends** for emphasis only on key phrases.
- Automate **EQ cuts** in dense choruses to make vocals stand out.

 *Think like a live sound engineer—adjusting in real-time for emotion and clarity.*

SUMMARY

A great mix isn't built track-by-track—it's sculpted from the top down.

Mix smarter, not harder by:

- Finishing your song first.
- Starting with a static mix.
- Using top-down techniques.
- Grouping with busses.
- Applying EQ > Compression.
- Using shared effects spaces.
- Automating for dynamics and interest.

FAQ

7 COMMON MIXING QUESTIONS

Q1: Why is the order of these steps important?

A: It mirrors how sound naturally interacts in real environments—starting broad and refining gradually. It also prevents overworking individual elements.

Q2: What's the point of top-down mixing?

A: It shapes your entire mix early on, saving time and leading to more cohesive, musical results.

Q3: Should I EQ before compression?

A: Yes, because unwanted frequencies can trigger the compressor unnecessarily and alter its behavior.

Q4: When should I use busses?

A: Use busses when multiple tracks serve the same purpose (e.g., layered vocals). Avoid busses when the tracks need very different processing.

Q5: Can I mix while I write?

A: You *can*, but it's rarely efficient. Mixing decisions require context. Writing and mixing at the same time leads to unclear direction and wasted time.

Q6: Do I need expensive plugins for this?

A: No. Stock plugins in Logic, Ableton, or Pro Tools are more than capable of professional-quality mixes when used with intention.

Q7: How do I know my mix is “done”?

A: When your song conveys the emotion clearly, nothing sounds harsh or buried, and it translates well on different systems—your job is complete.