

LIVE SESSION COMPRESSION CHEAT SHEET

Starting points for controlling dynamics, adding punch, or deliberately smashing a source. Set threshold by watching gain reduction.

KICK

Style	Ratio	Attack	Release	Aim for GR	Character
Control	3:1-4:1	20-40 ms	60-120 ms	2-4 dB	Keeps hits even while preserving the front-edge punch.
Punchy	4:1-6:1	25-50 ms	50-100 ms	4-6 dB	Lets the transient through, then clamps the body for extra impact.
Smashed	8:1-12:1	5-20 ms	40-100 ms	8-12+ dB	Aggressive, dense kick; useful as an effect or parallel sound.
COMMON MOVES: If the kick loses punch, slow the attack. If it stays pinned down between hits, shorten the release. Match makeup gain by ear.					

SNARE TOP

Style	Ratio	Attack	Release	Aim for GR	Character
Control	3:1-4:1	10-25 ms	60-150 ms	2-4 dB	Tames inconsistent hits without making the snare feel flat.
Punchy	4:1-6:1	15-35 ms	50-120 ms	4-7 dB	Lets the crack through and thickens the body behind it.
Smashed	8:1-12:1	3-15 ms	40-100 ms	8-15+ dB	Explosive, dense snare; can pull up ring and bleed.
COMMON MOVES: More crack = slower attack. More controlled/rounded = faster attack. Heavy compression will bring up hi-hat bleed, so listen before chasing gain reduction.					

BASS

Style	Ratio	Attack	Release	Aim for GR	Character
Gentle	2:1-3:1	20-50 ms	100-250 ms	2-4 dB	Smooths level while keeping natural note dynamics.
Steady	4:1	10-30 ms	80-180 ms	4-7 dB	Keeps bass planted and consistent in the mix.
Dense	6:1-8:1	5-20 ms	60-150 ms	7-10 dB	Very even, forward bass with less dynamic movement.
COMMON MOVES: If the initial pluck disappears, slow attack. If notes swell or pump awkwardly, adjust release. Bass often benefits from compression before reaching for lots of EQ.					

LEAD VOCAL

Style	Ratio	Attack	Release	Aim for GR	Character
Natural	2:1-3:1	10-30 ms	80-180 ms	2-4 dB	Controls peaks while staying open and expressive.
Present	3:1-4:1	5-20 ms	60-150 ms	4-7 dB	Keeps the vocal consistently forward.
Tight	5:1-8:1	2-10 ms	50-120 ms	6-10 dB	Dense, controlled vocal; useful for louder rock performances.
COMMON MOVES: Aim for consistency, not a permanently buried gain-reduction meter. Too dull = slower attack. Audible breathing/pumping = usually release or threshold needs attention.					

LIVE SESSION COMPRESSION CHEAT SHEET - BUS COMPRESSION

When the individual tracks already behave, compress the group instead. Bus compression is usually about cohesion rather than fixing one microphone.

DRUM BUS

Style	Ratio	Attack	Release	Aim for GR	Character
Glue	2:1	20-40 ms	100-300 ms / Auto	1-3 dB	Subtle cohesion; keeps transients alive and makes the kit feel like one instrument.
Punch	4:1	20-40 ms	80-200 ms	2-5 dB	More obvious movement and impact without fully crushing the kit.
Crush / Parallel	8:1-12:1	3-15 ms	50-120 ms	8-15+ dB	Brings up room, sustain and excitement. Best blended underneath the clean drums.

COMMON MOVES: For normal drum-bus glue, 1-3 dB of reduction is plenty. If cymbals pump, back off the threshold or lengthen release. Parallel crush can be ugly by itself and great underneath.

GUITAR BUS

Style	Ratio	Attack	Release	Aim for GR	Character
Glue	2:1	20-50 ms	100-250 ms	1-3 dB	Smooths a pair or stack of guitars without flattening them.
Dense	3:1-4:1	10-30 ms	80-180 ms	2-4 dB	Makes layered guitars sit together more consistently.

COMMON MOVES: Often skip compression entirely on distorted guitars - the amp is already compressing heavily. Use the bus only when the group needs level control or cohesion.

VOCAL BUS / BGV BUS

Style	Ratio	Attack	Release	Aim for GR	Character
Glue	2:1-3:1	10-30 ms	80-200 ms	1-3 dB	Makes multiple vocals move together while retaining expression.
Tight	4:1	5-20 ms	60-150 ms	3-5 dB	More controlled stack for dense arrangements.

COMMON MOVES: Useful when individual singers are already controlled but the vocal stack still moves around. Don't solve one bad singer with aggressive bus compression.

MIX BUS

Style	Ratio	Attack	Release	Aim for GR	Character
Gentle Glue	1.5:1-2:1	20-40 ms	Auto / 100-300 ms	1-2 dB	Subtle cohesion and movement without obvious compression.
Firm Glue	2:1-4:1	10-30 ms	Auto / 100-300 ms	2-4 dB	More audible density; easier to overdo during tracking.

COMMON MOVES: If using mix-bus compression, set it early and keep it subtle. For a live session, 1-2 dB of gain reduction can be enough. Don't use the mix bus to repair uncontrolled individual sources.

WHAT THE CONTROLS FEEL LIKE: **Ratio** = how hard the compressor pushes back once above threshold. **Attack** = how much of the initial hit gets through; slower usually means more punch, faster means more control. **Release** = how quickly it lets go; too slow can flatten the next hit, too fast can pump or chatter. **Threshold** = use it to reach the desired gain reduction rather than copying a number from a chart. **Makeup gain** = restore level after compression, but compare at roughly equal loudness.

GOOD DEFAULT: If you aren't hearing a dynamics problem, don't compress just because a channel exists. Start with the sources where level control or punch matters most - kick, snare, bass and lead vocal - then use bus compression for cohesion. Overheads, rooms, guitars and other channels can stay uncompressed unless the sound specifically calls for it.