

How a Song Gets Released

Seven miles from a finished song to one the world can hear, and that pays you back.

● THE PAPERWORK

● THE REGISTRATIONS

● THE RELEASE

● THE MONEY

THE PAPERWORK

Register the lyric

With the U.S. Copyright Office, before you share it widely.

THE RESULT *Your best proof the song is yours*

THE REGISTRATIONS

Register with The MLC

A separate step. ASCAP and BMI don't cover it.

COLLECTS *Streaming royalties for the song*

THE RELEASE

Upload it right

Studio-quality audio, cover art, every name spelled right, honest answers on AI.

TIP *Set the date a few weeks out*

THE MONEY

MILE 1

MILE 2

MILE 3

MILE 4

MILE 5

MILE 6

MILE 7

HEARD AND PAID

Get it in writing

Work for hire with a hired singer or producer. A split sheet with co-writers.

THE RESULT *You know who owns what*

THE PAPERWORK

Join ASCAP or BMI

Pick one. Register every song before it comes out.

COLLECTS *Performance royalties*

THE REGISTRATIONS

Pick a distributor

Spotify and Apple Music don't take uploads from you. A distributor delivers them.

CHOOSE *A yearly fee, or a one-time fee and a cut*

THE RELEASE

Collect what's yours

Own the recording? Join SoundExchange too. Then read your statements.

THE RESULT *Every kind of royalty has a home*

Who pays you for what

DISTRIBUTOR

Streams and sales of the recording.

ASCAP OR BMI

The song played on radio, TV, in public and on streaming.

THE MLC

The song's share of U.S. streams and downloads.

SOUNDEXCHANGE

The recording on internet and satellite radio.

The story behind each mile

A finished song is only half the road. The rest is paperwork, and it's easier than it sounds.

MILE 1 Get it in writing

THE PAPERWORK

If you paid a singer or producer a flat fee, get a work-for-hire agreement that says you own the recording, the melody and the arrangement, and how they will be credited, if at all. If you wrote with someone, sign a split sheet the same day: who wrote what, and each person's share.

MILE 2 Register the lyric

THE PAPERWORK

You own a song the moment you write it, but registering with the U.S. Copyright Office is your best proof and gives you stronger rights if someone copies it. Leave out any line written by AI; the Office asks you to disclose it.

MILE 3 Join ASCAP or BMI

THE REGISTRATIONS

These groups collect performance royalties for the song when it plays on radio, TV, in stores and on streaming. You join one, not both. Register each song with its writers and shares before it comes out, so the first plays are counted.

MILE 4 Register with The MLC

THE REGISTRATIONS

Every U.S. stream also earns the songwriter a second royalty, called a mechanical. The Mechanical Licensing Collective pays it, and ASCAP or BMI won't collect it for you. Opening an account isn't enough; you register each song.

MILE 5 Pick a distributor

THE RELEASE

Spotify, Apple Music and Amazon Music don't accept uploads from individuals. A distributor delivers your song to all of them at once and passes the recording's earnings to you. Some charge a yearly fee and take down your songs if you stop paying. Others charge once per song and keep a share. Check prices on their own sites.

MILE 6 Upload it right

THE RELEASE

You'll need studio-quality WAV files, square cover art, and every title and name spelled exactly the same everywhere. Distributors now ask whether AI was used for the vocals, lyrics, melody or music. Answer honestly. Set the release date a few weeks out, so you have time to pitch it to playlist editors.

MILE 7 Collect what's yours

THE MONEY

If you own the recording, join SoundExchange. It pays recording owners when songs play on internet and satellite radio. Claim your artist profile on Spotify and the other services, and read your statements to make sure every song shows up.

GOOD TO KNOW

- ❑ **Spotify's rule.** A play counts after 30 seconds. A song earns nothing until it reaches 1,000 plays in a year.
- ❑ **YouTube is different.** Anyone can upload a video for free. Ad money starts only after you join YouTube's Partner Program, which takes 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 hours watched in a year.
- ❑ **Small numbers.** 1,000 plays on Spotify pays only a few dollars. Do this for the song, not the money.

REALITY CHECKS

- ❑ **A distributor isn't protection.** It delivers your music. Registration protects it.
- ❑ **Your singer's choice.** A hired singer can be credited, use another name or stay unnamed. Put it in writing.
- ❑ **Rules change.** Check each group's own website before you sign up.

Haven't written it yet? Start with the first guide.

HOW A SONG GETS WRITTEN