

VM345 DISTRIBUTION

The Independent Artist Guide

A practical playbook for releasing, distributing and earning from your music

Rights & ownership · Release planning · Distribution and ingestion · Playlists & pitching · Royalties, splits and payouts · Protecting your catalogue

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read part 1 once — it is the part that is expensive to get wrong and cheap to get right. After that, treat parts 4 and 10 as your working documents: the timeline tells you what to do when, and the checklists are meant to be printed and ticked for every release you put out.

PART 01

Own What You Make

Almost every avoidable loss in an independent career traces back to not knowing which rights exist and who holds them. This is the foundation everything else sits on.

Two rights, two royalty streams

Every piece of recorded music contains two separate copyrights, owned separately, paying separately. Confusing them is the single most common and most costly misunderstanding in independent music.

	The recording	The composition
Also called	Master, sound recording, ®	Song, publishing, ©
What it covers	The specific recorded performance — this take, this mix	The underlying music and lyrics, however it is performed
Who typically owns it	Whoever paid for and made the recording — usually you	The songwriters and their publisher, split by contribution
How it earns	Streaming and download royalties, paid through your distributor	Mechanical and performance royalties, collected by PROs and publishing administrators
If you do nothing	You still get paid — distribution is automatic	You do not get paid. Publishing must be registered and claimed

THE MONEY MOST INDEPENDENT ARTISTS NEVER COLLECT

Distribution pays out your recording royalties automatically. Your publishing royalties are a separate stream that nobody collects on your behalf until you register — as a songwriter with a PRO, and your works with a publishing administrator. Artists routinely leave years of this money uncollected simply because they did not know it existed. Register before your first release, not after your tenth.

What a distributor does and does not own

A distributor delivers your recordings to stores and collects what those stores pay. That is a service, not a transfer of ownership. Read any distribution agreement for three things before you sign it:

- 1 **Ownership.** A distribution agreement should never assign your master rights. If it does, that is a record deal wearing a distributor's name.

- 2 **Term and exit.** How long the agreement runs, how you leave, and — the part people miss — whether your releases stay live at stores while you move, or come down and go back up with new identifiers and reset playlist history.
- 3 **The split, and what it is a split of.** A percentage of gross and a percentage of net are very different numbers. Ask which, and ask what is deducted before net.

Splits, agreed before release

If anyone else played on, wrote, produced or engineered the record, agree the splits in writing before it comes out. Not because collaborators are untrustworthy, but because memory is unreliable and goodwill is easiest to spend while nothing is at stake. A split agreed before release is administration; the same conversation after a record is earning is a dispute.

PART 02

Getting Release-Ready

What stores require, what they reject, and the metadata decisions that are hardest to change once a release is live.

Audio

Requirement	What to supply
Format	WAV is the safe default. FLAC and AIFF are also lossless. Deliver MP3 only if the lossless master genuinely no longer exists
Resolution	16-bit / 44.1 kHz minimum. Deliver 24-bit at its native sample rate if you have it — stores down-convert better than you will
Loudness	Master for the music, not for a number. Streaming services normalise playback loudness, so an over-compressed master is turned down and simply arrives smaller and flatter than a dynamic one
Headroom	Leave a little below full scale and avoid inter-sample peaks. Lossy encoding at the store's end can push a maximised master into distortion that was not in your file
Silence	Trim dead air at the start. Leave natural decay at the end

Artwork

Cover art is reviewed before delivery and is one of the most common reasons a release is rejected — almost always for reasons that cost nothing to avoid.

- Square, minimum 3000 × 3000 pixels.** Not 2999. Not 3000 × 2998.
- RGB, not CMYK.** A CMYK file is a print file and will be refused.
- No URLs, social handles, or store logos.** No Spotify logo, no “out now on all platforms”, no @yourhandle.
- Text must match the metadata.** If the cover says *Night Drive (Deluxe)* then the release title must say that too.
- No blur, no pixelation, no stretched images, no uneven borders.**
- Clear any image you did not make.** A photograph you found is somebody's copyrighted work, and so is an image of a person who has not consented.

Metadata that stores actually read

Metadata is what listeners search, what stores index, and what your royalty statements are matched against. It is also the hardest thing to change after release, because a correction has to travel back out to every store.

- bullet **Capitalisation matters and is delivered exactly as typed.** “NIGHT DRIVE” in all caps is delivered in all caps.

- bullet **Do not put featured artists in the title field.** Credit them as featured artists — that is how they appear on the right profile and get the release in their listeners' feeds.

- bullet **Version information belongs in the version line** — Remix, Radio Edit, Live, Acoustic — not appended to the track title.

- bullet **No years, dates, emojis or promotional text** in titles.

- bullet **Explicit content must be flagged accurately.** Mislabelling is a compliance issue, and unflagged explicit lyrics can get a release pulled.

- bullet **Songwriter and producer credits belong on every track.** They feed publishing registration later, and retrofitting them is tedious.

DECIDE YOUR ARTIST NAME BEFORE YOUR FIRST RELEASE, NOT YOUR THIRD

Your artist name is how stores match every future release to the same profile. Changing it later does not rename your profile — it usually creates a second one, splitting your listeners, your playlist history and your follower count across two pages. Check the name is not already taken by an established act before you commit to it.

PART 03

Identifiers and Store Profiles

The codes that identify your music, and the single step that most often goes wrong on a first release.

Code	Identifies	Notes
ISRC	One specific recording	A new ISRC for every distinct recording. A remix or a re-record gets its own; the same master re-released keeps the one it has
UPC / EAN	One release as a product	The album, EP or single as a whole. A different release is a different UPC
ISWC	One composition	The song rather than the recording. Assigned through publishing registration, not distribution
IPI / CAE	One songwriter or publisher	Your identifier as a writer, issued when you register with a PRO

Never reuse an ISRC across different recordings. It is the key your royalties are matched on, and a duplicated code sends two recordings' earnings to one place — or to nobody, when the mismatch cannot be resolved.

Link your store profiles before you deliver

This is the step most worth getting right, and the one most often skipped. When a release is delivered, stores have to decide which artist profile it belongs to. If all they are given is a name, they guess — and a common name, or one shared with an existing act, is a guess they get wrong.

There are exactly two honest answers to give:

The artist already has a profile there. Supply the Spotify artist ID and the Apple Music artist ID, and the release is ingested onto the existing page.

The artist is new to that store. Say so, and the store creates a profile from the delivery.

Getting this wrong produces one of two outcomes, both expensive. A duplicate profile splits your monthly listeners, your playlist history and your follower count across two pages that stores treat as different artists. A misattribution puts your record on a stranger's profile — and theirs, potentially, on yours. Both are corrected through a store's support queue, after the release is already public, on their timetable rather than yours.

WHERE TO FIND YOUR ARTIST IDS

Spotify: open your artist page, then ... > Share > Copy link to artist. The 22-character code at the end is your artist ID. An album or track link will not do.

Apple Music: open your artist page, then ... > Share > Copy Link. The number at the end of the URL is your artist ID.

Claim your artist accounts

Spotify for Artists and Apple Music for Artists are free, and give you listener data, profile control and — on Spotify — the editorial pitching form. Claim both as soon as your first release is delivered. You cannot pitch without access, and access can take days to be granted.

PART 04

The Release Timeline

Eight weeks is comfortable. Four is workable. Under two and you have given up editorial playlist consideration entirely.

When	What happens
8 weeks out	Masters locked and final. Artwork finished. Splits agreed in writing with every collaborator. Register as a songwriter with a PRO if you have not already
6 weeks out	Release delivered to your distributor with complete metadata, credits and store profile links. Set the release date far enough out that the next two steps are possible
4 weeks out	Pitch to editorial through Spotify for Artists — this is the hard deadline, and it must be done before the release goes live. Approach independent curators and press with a private link
2–3 weeks out	Pre-save campaign live. Announce with artwork and the date. Begin teasing audio on short-form video
1 week out	Confirm the release appears correctly at stores. Prepare release-day assets in advance so the day itself is execution, not production
Release day	Update every bio and link-in-bio. Post the smart link. Thank people who share it. Reply to everyone — early engagement is a signal
Week 1	Watch your saves-per-listener and playlist adds. Push the content that is working rather than the content you planned
Weeks 2–6	Keep working the record. Most independent releases are abandoned by their own artist within days, which is the single biggest self-inflicted wound in independent music

WHY THE RELEASE DATE IS NOT JUST A DATE

Editorial playlist consideration requires the pitch to be submitted before the release is live, and curators plan weeks ahead. A date chosen so it is only days away removes that option entirely — the delivery still works, the record still comes out, but you have opted out of the largest discovery surface available to you. Give yourself the room.

PART 05

How Distribution Actually Works

What happens between pressing publish and the record appearing, and the elections you make along the way.

From publish to live

- 1 Submission.** Your release enters a quality control queue. Review checks artwork, metadata, rights and audio. Expect this to take a few days, and longer if something needs correcting.
- 2 Delivery.** The approved release is sent to each store as a structured package — audio, artwork and metadata together, in the industry format stores ingest.
- 3 Ingestion.** Each store processes the package on its own schedule and attaches the release to an artist profile. This is where the store profile links from part 3 do their work.
- 4 Live.** Stores go live at their own pace. Not all of them arrive on the same day, and that is normal rather than a fault.

Territories

Worldwide is the right answer unless you have a specific reason otherwise — a licence limited to one market, or an existing regional deal. Restricting territories without a reason simply makes your record unavailable to people who would have listened to it.

Optional services worth understanding

Service	What it does	Before you enable it
YouTube Content ID	Fingerprints your recording and claims revenue on videos that use it	Requires 100% exclusive rights . Do not enable it on a track containing uncleared samples, a leased beat, or anything you do not wholly control — false claims have consequences
Meta Rights Manager	The same protection across Facebook and Instagram	Same rights requirement
SoundExchange	Collects US digital performance royalties for recordings	A genuinely separate revenue stream most independents never register for
Publishing administration	Collects mechanical and performance royalties on the composition	Not part of distribution. This is the money from part 1 that nobody collects for you

DO NOT ENABLE CONTENT ID ON MUSIC YOU DO NOT FULLY OWN

Content ID claims revenue on every video using your recording. If your track contains an uncleared sample or a beat you licensed rather than own, you are claiming money against work that is not entirely yours. This is one of the fastest ways for an independent artist to end up in a rights dispute, and it is entirely avoidable — leave it off unless you own everything.

PART 06

Pitching and Playlists

Where placements actually come from, and how to approach each one without wasting your effort.

Type	How you get on it	What it is worth
Editorial	Pitch through Spotify for Artists before release. Human curators, one pitch per release	High reach, and a strong signal to algorithmic surfaces afterwards
Algorithmic	Earned, never pitched. Driven by saves, completion rate, repeat listens and playlist adds	The most durable long-term source of streams for most independent artists
Independent curators	Approached directly and personally. Research who genuinely fits	Variable, but real. A small engaged playlist beats a large indifferent one
Listener playlists	Earned by people actually liking the record	The strongest signal of all, because it cannot be gamed

Writing a pitch that gets read

Lead with the music, not your biography.

Be specific about genre and mood. Curators are filling a defined slot, not discovering you in the abstract.

Name comparable artists honestly. Overreaching costs you credibility immediately.

Say what is actually happening — a tour, a sync, a previous release that performed. Momentum is the argument.

Keep it short. A curator is reading hundreds of these.

NEVER BUY PLAYLIST PLACEMENTS

Paid placement services deliver streams from accounts that are not real listeners. Stores detect this, and the consequences land on you rather than the seller: streams stripped, royalties withheld, releases removed, and in serious cases the account closed. It also poisons your algorithmic profile by teaching the system to recommend you to people who do not want you. There is no version of this that works.

PART 07

Getting Paid

Where the money comes from, how long it takes, and what to do so that all of it reaches you.

Why a stream is not a fixed amount

There is no fixed per-stream rate, and anyone quoting one precisely is simplifying. Most services pool subscription and advertising revenue for a period and divide it by share of total streams, so what one stream earns varies with the listener's country, whether they pay for the service, and how much everyone streamed that month. Two identical months can pay differently.

The lag is real

Stores report to distributors on monthly or quarterly cycles, and reporting arrives well after the streams happened. Money from this month typically becomes visible to you a few months later. Plan around that lag rather than being surprised by it.

Royalty splits

Splitting revenue automatically at source is better than one person receiving everything and paying others manually. It removes the awkwardness, the delay and the bookkeeping, and it means nobody has to trust anybody's spreadsheet. Agree the percentages before release and let the platform route each share directly.

The checklist for collecting everything

- Register with a PRO as a songwriter.** One per territory of residence. This collects performance royalties on your compositions.
- Register your works,** not just yourself. An unregistered song earns nothing even when the writer is registered.
- Arrange publishing administration** to collect mechanical royalties worldwide, including the ones that require claiming rather than arriving.
- Register with SoundExchange** for US digital performance royalties on recordings.
- Keep your payout details and tax information current.** Earnings that cannot be paid out sit unpaid, and unclaimed royalties do eventually expire.

PART 08

Protecting Your Work

Impersonation, misattribution, fraud and takedowns — what to watch for and how to respond.

Watch your own profiles

Releases are occasionally delivered to the wrong artist profile — sometimes through an honest name collision, sometimes deliberately. Check your store profiles periodically and confirm everything on them is yours. The sooner a misattribution is reported, the easier it is to unpick.

Streaming fraud will cost you, not just the seller

Artificial streaming — bought streams, bot farms, click services — is detected by stores and penalised at the artist's account. Penalties include stripped streams, withheld royalties, removed releases and closed accounts. It also arrives uninvited: if you notice implausible streaming you did not pay for, report it rather than hoping it goes unnoticed.

Samples and interpolations

Using someone else's recording requires clearance from whoever owns that recording *and* whoever owns the underlying composition — two separate permissions from potentially different parties. Re-playing a melody rather than sampling the recording still requires the composition side. There is no duration below which sampling becomes automatically legal, and the widely repeated idea that a few seconds is safe is simply false.

AI-assisted content

If a recording uses generative AI in any meaningful way, declare it. Stores increasingly require the disclosure, several treat undeclared AI content as grounds for removal, and the flag costs you nothing when declared honestly up front.

Keep your own archive

Keep lossless masters, layered artwork files, signed split agreements, sample clearances and licences in storage you control, backed up in more than one place. Platforms change, accounts get lost, and services close. Your archive is the thing that survives all of that.

PART 09

Building an Audience

The part no distributor can do for you.

Release consistently

A steady release schedule outperforms occasional large drops for almost every independent artist. Each release reintroduces your catalogue to the recommendation systems and gives returning listeners somewhere to go. Momentum compounds; long silences reset it.

Own your audience relationship

Followers on any platform are borrowed from that platform, on terms it can change without telling you. An email list is the only audience you actually control. Start it early, even if it is twenty people, and write to it like a person rather than a marketing department.

Read the right numbers

Metric	What it tells you
Saves per listener	Whether people want to hear it again. The single best early indicator of a record's legs
Completion rate	Whether the arrangement holds attention. Persistent early drop-off is usually an intro problem
Listeners vs followers	Whether discovery is converting into an audience or passing through
Source of streams	Which surfaces are actually working, so you spend effort where it returns

DO NOT ABANDON A RECORD AFTER RELEASE WEEK

Most independent releases stop being promoted by their own artist within days, while the recommendation systems are still deciding what to do with them. The weeks after release are when a record either builds or disappears, and that window is largely decided by whether anyone is still working it.

PART 10

Checklists

Print these. Tick them for every release.

Before you deliver

- ☐ Masters final, correctly ordered, correctly titled
- ☐ Artwork square, 3000 × 3000 or larger, RGB, no logos or URLs
- ☐ Every title spelled and capitalised exactly as it should appear in stores
- ☐ Featured artists credited as featured artists, not written into titles
- ☐ Songwriter and producer credits complete for every track
- ☐ Explicit content flagged accurately
- ☐ AI-assisted content declared where applicable
- ☐ Samples and interpolations cleared in writing, both sides
- ☐ Splits agreed in writing with every collaborator
- ☐ Spotify and Apple artist profiles linked, or the artist marked as new
- ☐ Release date far enough out to pitch — at least four weeks
- ☐ ® and © lines correct, with the right year and owner

Release week

- ☐ Pitched to editorial before the release went live
- ☐ Pre-save live and shared
- ☐ Every bio and link-in-bio updated
- ☐ Release verified as live and correct at every major store
- ☐ Credits correct on your store profiles
- ☐ Assets ready and scheduled rather than made on the day

After release

- ☐ Registered as a songwriter with a PRO
- ☐ Works registered — the songs themselves, not just you
- ☐ Publishing administration arranged
- ☐ Registered with SoundExchange
- ☐ Payout and tax details current
- ☐ Analytics reviewed at one week and one month
- ☐ Store profiles checked for anything wrongly attributed to you
- ☐ Masters, artwork, agreements and clearances archived and backed up
- ☐ Next release already scheduled

PART 11

Glossary

Term	Meaning
Algorithmic playlist	A playlist generated per listener from behaviour. Earned through engagement, never pitched.
DDEX	The industry standard format distributors use to deliver releases to stores.
DSP	Digital Service Provider — a streaming or download store such as Spotify, Apple Music or Amazon Music.
Editorial playlist	A playlist curated by people at a store. Pitched before release.
Ingestion	A store processing a delivered release and attaching it to an artist profile.
IPI / CAE	The number identifying you as a songwriter or publisher, issued by your PRO.
ISRC	International Standard Recording Code — identifies one specific recording.
ISWC	International Standard Musical Work Code — identifies one composition.
Master	The recording itself, as distinct from the song written.
Mechanical royalty	Paid to songwriters and publishers for reproduction of a composition, including streams.
Metadata	The information describing a release — titles, credits, genre, identifiers, dates.
Performance royalty	Paid to songwriters and publishers when a composition is performed or broadcast publicly. Collected by PROs.
PRO	Performing Rights Organisation — collects performance royalties. ASCAP and BMI in the US, PRS in the UK, and equivalents elsewhere.
Publishing	The rights in the composition, as distinct from the recording.
Split	The agreed division of revenue between collaborators.
Takedown	Removing a release from stores. Not instant, and identifiers do not always survive redelivery.
UPC / EAN	The barcode identifying a release as a product.
© line	The sound recording copyright — the year and owner of the recording.
© line	The composition copyright — the year and owner of the song.

ONE LAST THING

Nothing in this guide is a substitute for reading what you sign. Distribution agreements, publishing deals, sample clearances and collaborator splits are all contracts, and the terms vary enormously between providers. When a decision is significant or irreversible, take proper legal advice — this guide is general information, not legal or financial advice.

VM345 Distribution · Distribution for independent artists and labels

This guide is general information about the music industry and is not legal, tax or financial advice.