THE MODERN GUIDE TO MUSIC DISTRIBUTION

CD BABY

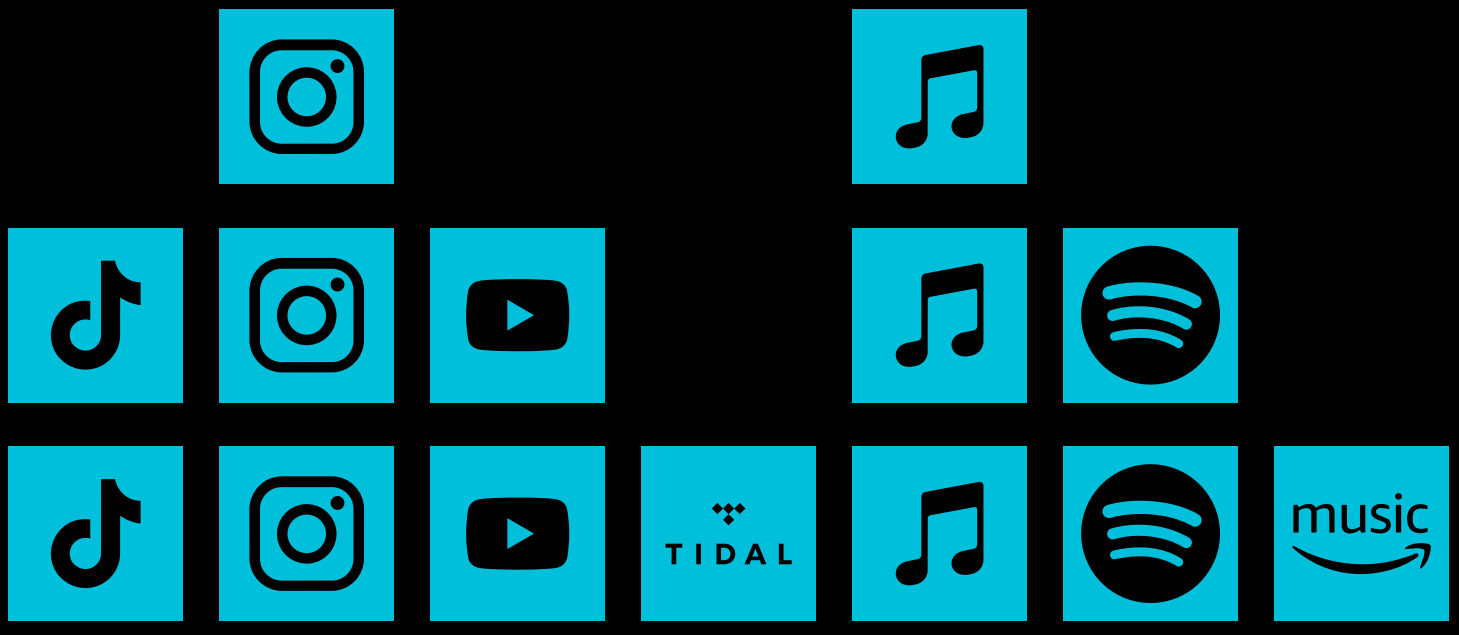


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INTRODUCTION

We all have a moment that inspired us to start making music. If not an exact moment, it was a confluence of sparks — mentors, influences, emotions, ideas — that urged us to think, what do I need to say?

We carried that question with us as we picked up a pen, plugged in a guitar, sat down at the keys, or grabbed a pair of drumsticks to start making something from nothing.

But from there, the process has changed almost every decade. Recording a demo has gone from tape machines to smartphone voice memos. Studios have given way to bedroom setups. Physical formats evolved from vinyl and CDs to digital files. And social platforms have reshaped how music is marketed, loosening the grips of traditional gatekeepers. Today, the industry offers more opportunities than ever for independent artists.

As a result, it's never been easier to release your music around the world — and the system making that possible is independent music distribution.

What is music distribution?

Simply put, music distribution is the process of getting music out into the world. Today, that predominantly means getting artists' recorded music onto streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music and ensuring they get paid for their streams.

In this guide, you'll learn how distribution works, how to make the most of every release, and how to build the foundation for a strong independent music career.

Whether you're putting out your first track or refining your approach as an experienced professional, this guide is built to support you.

Let's get started.



MUSIC DISTRIBUTION IN THE MODERN LANDSCAPE

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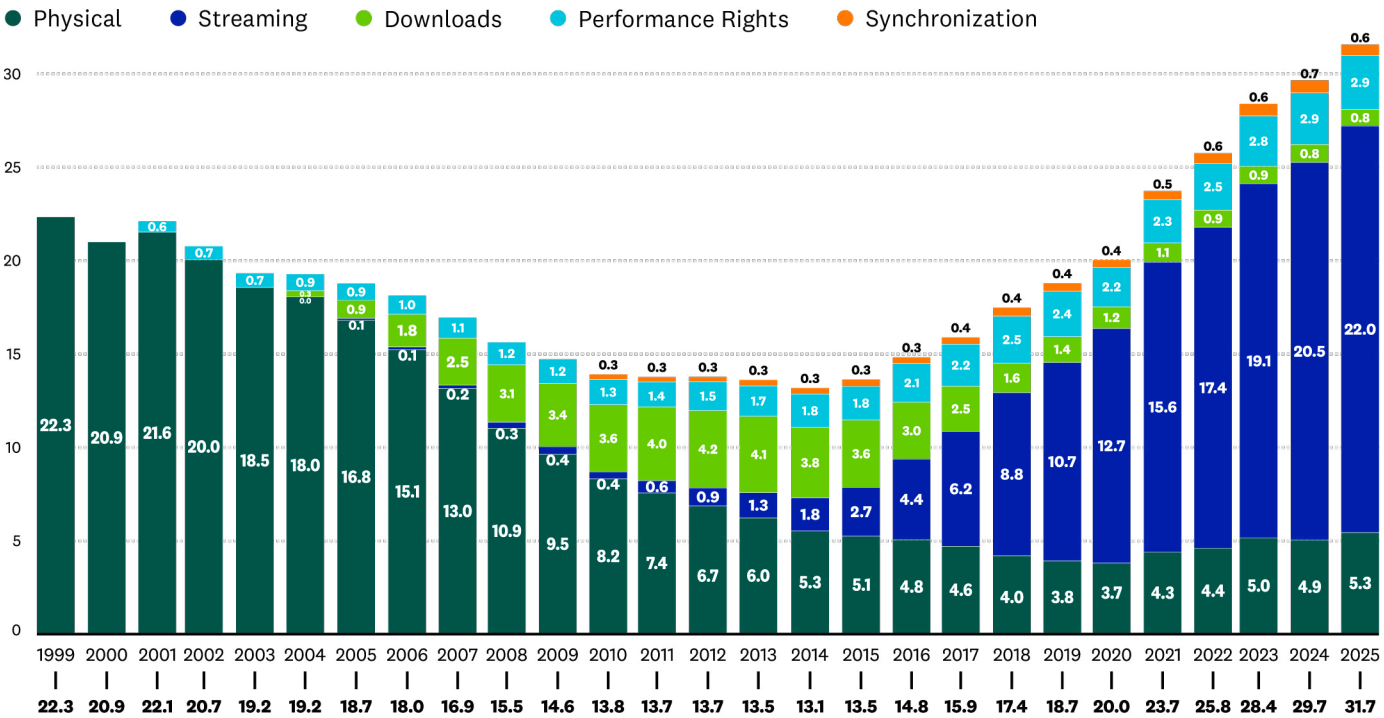
In 2026, the global music industry entered a new era defined by growth, radical accessibility, and creative abundance. Here's a look at some of the latest standout stats and trends shaping the industry. Understanding this broader context is essential for independent artists navigating their careers today.

REVENUE GROWTH

Global recorded music revenues rose for the eleventh consecutive year in 2025, reaching an all-time high of $31.7 billion at an annual growth rate of 6.4 percent. (IFPI). Nearly 70% of that total revenue came from streaming platforms, which drove a record $22 billion in revenue in 2025. Within that figure, paid streaming subscriptions were the primary driver, making up 52.4% of total streaming revenue.

Physical formats and performance rights revenue also saw continued growth. Vinyl sales rose by 13.7% — marking their 19th consecutive year of growth — while performance rights revenue increased for a fifth straight year, up 0.3%.

Source: IFPI Global Music Report 2026

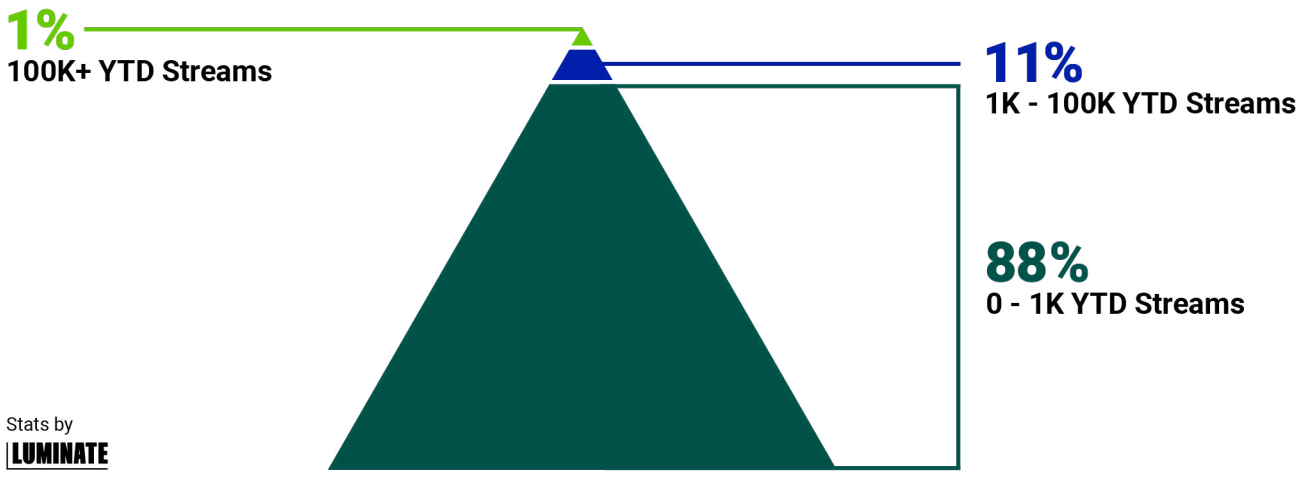


What does this mean for independent artists? Continued growth in streaming means platforms like Spotify and Apple Music are still the best ways artists can get their music heard. Meanwhile, growth in physical and performance rights means there are increasing opportunities for artists to monetize their music through creative partnerships and merchandise.

But beneath top-line revenue growth metrics, artists are experiencing an oversaturated market constantly shifting from new forms of competition and evolving technologies that shape how music is created, discovered, and monetized. In this next section, we'll take a closer look at some of the challenges facing today's independent artists.

CREATIVE ABUNDANCE

Artists can share their music with the world in minutes thanks to independent distributors and digital service providers. But that radical accessibility is driving an exponential increase in music uploads. In 2025, digital service providers (DSPs) received over 106,000 tracks every day (Luminate). And just 12% of those tracks saw 1,000 streams or more.



That means the challenge for today's artists isn't releasing music — it's getting heard.

At CD Baby, that reality puts artist education and empowerment front and center. With distribution and promotion tools more accessible than ever, the artists who succeed in 2026 will be the ones who think strategically, understand the ecosystem, and are equipped to master it.

THE RISE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

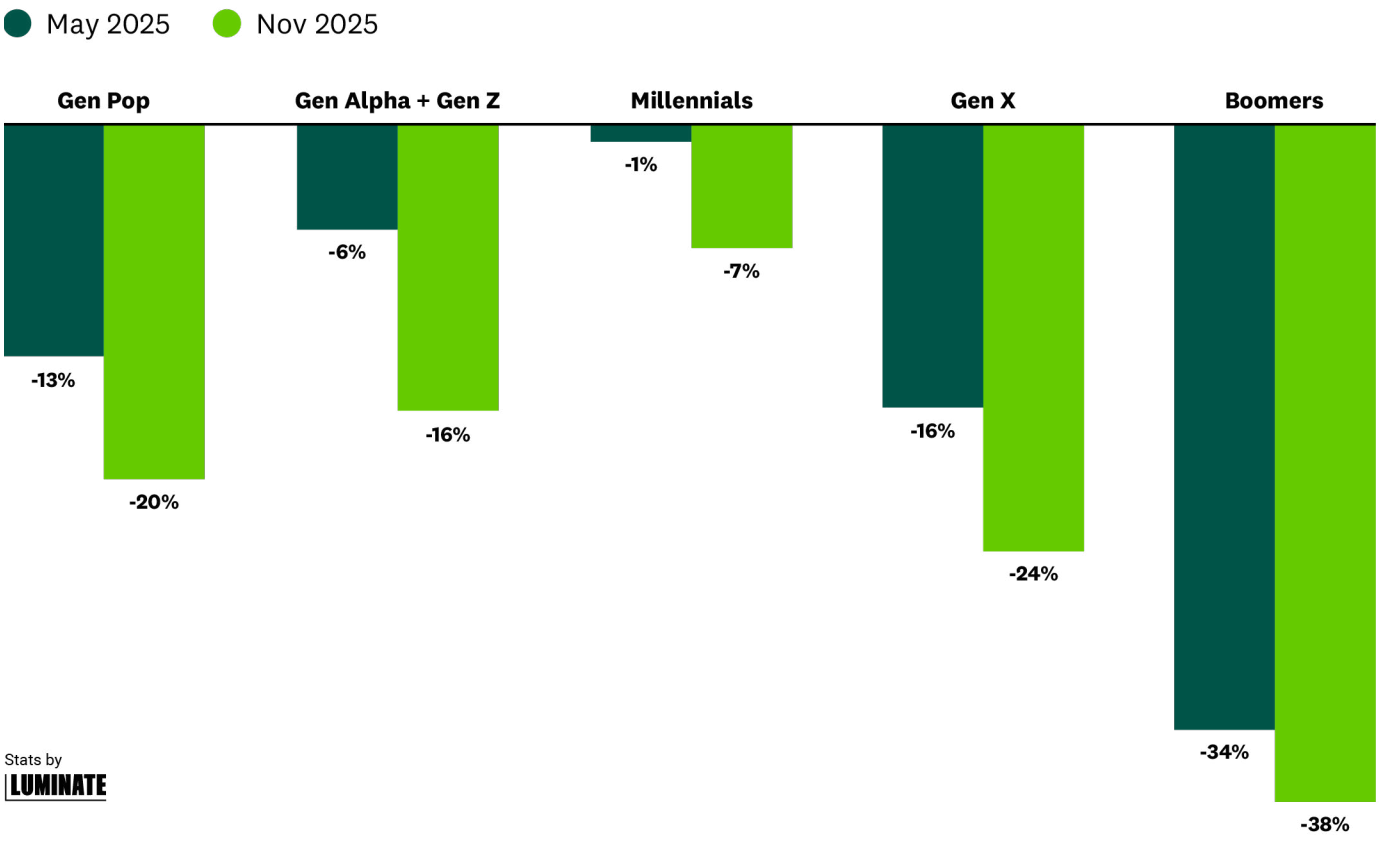
At their best, AI tools offer faster workflows and new creative possibilities for hardworking artists. But bad actors are finding ways to exploit these tools to impersonate artists or siphon away royalties through mass uploads of low-quality, AI-generated music.

Latest data shows consumers are growing increasingly aware of these downsides of AI. Overall consumer interest in listening to AI-generated music has declined in recent months from net -13% negative in May 2025 to -20% in November 2025 (Luminate). The trend applies across generations, but interest in AI-generated music among Gen Alpha and Gen Z deteriorated most, dropping 10 points from net -6% to -16%.

CD Baby continues to work with partners like Spotify to increase transparency around AI and develop best practices. It's part of our commitment to standing for human creativity and putting real artists first. That starts with our pay-per-release model, which supports artists making intentional releases – not bad actors trying to game the system. And once an artist releases music through CD Baby, our rights infrastructure and verification tools safeguard their work and earnings.

CONSUMER INTEREST IN LISTENING TO AI MUSIC

Net share of U.S. consumers who would be interested in listening to music if they knew it was produced using generative AI



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Radical accessibility and creative abundance: Digital platforms allow anyone to release music globally within minutes, creating unprecedented opportunity. With more than 106,000 tracks uploaded daily, the challenge for independent artists is no longer access — it's visibility.

The rise of AI: Innovations in AI have created new creative possibilities, but present serious harms to artists when bad actors misuse these tools. Staying informed on the latest AI policies from partner platforms and reporting fraudulent playlists and uploads will help keep your music safe.

Strategy and knowledge drive success: In a crowded and ever changing ecosystem, artists must understand how distribution, promotion, and monetization work together to succeed. Getting your music onto platforms is only the beginning.



THE BASICS AND BENEFITS OF MUSIC DISTRIBUTION

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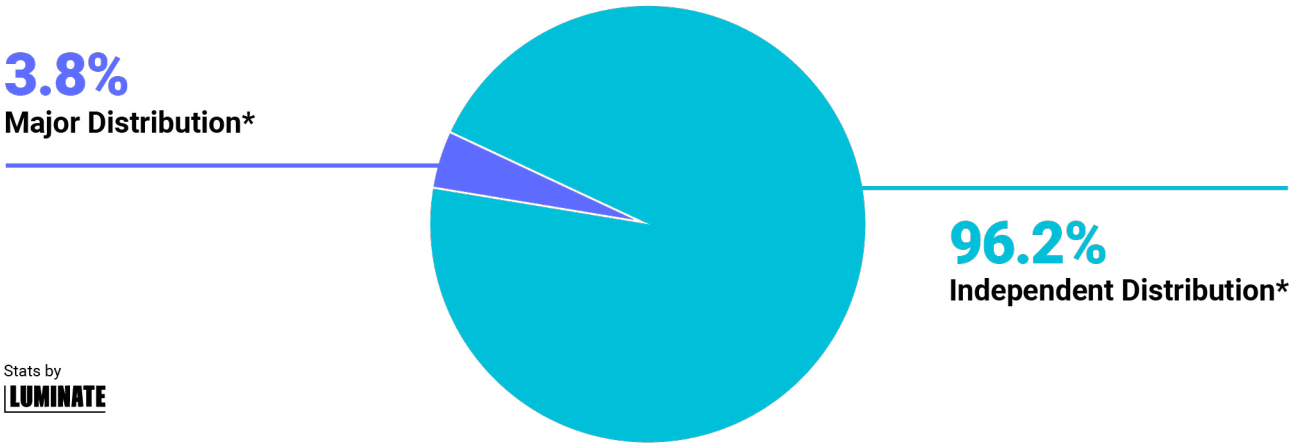
In this chapter, you'll learn the basics of music distribution: what it is, how it works, and the key considerations for choosing a distributor to release your music.

THREE TYPES OF DISTRIBUTORS

There are three main types of music distributors.

- **Major distributors:** These companies (like Universal Music Group) typically handle releases from established artists and major labels.
- **Independent distributors:** These companies cater to indie artists and smaller labels, but are often selective.
- **DIY distributors:** These companies (like CD Baby) serve the majority of independent artists and specialize in distribution to digital service providers

While these distributors serve different segments of the industry, they all operate within the same modern distribution ecosystem — of which independent and DIY distributors take up an overwhelming majority share.



Today's music distribution predominantly deals with digital streaming platforms.

Most streaming platforms don't let independent artists upload music directly. Therefore, artists turn to distributors to handle the formatting, protection, and delivery of tracks to these platforms.

DIY distributors like CD Baby are the most common entry-point for artists to release their music on digital streaming platforms.

THE BASICS OF MUSIC DISTRIBUTION

So how does your music get from a distributor to major platforms like Spotify and Apple Music?

If you work with a DIY or independent distributor, you'll follow a submission process modeled around the specifications, guidelines, and best practices of the streaming platforms your music is delivered to.

Generally, distributors will need high-quality audio files, your metadata (descriptive and creative information about your music), your cover art, and your release date. Distributors review your submission for accuracy and quality before delivering it to your preferred digital service providers.

WHAT DISTRIBUTORS NEED FROM YOU	WHAT DISTRIBUTORS WILL PROVIDE
• Metadata • High-quality audio files • Cover art • Release date	• ISRC codes • UPC codes • License agreement • Payment process

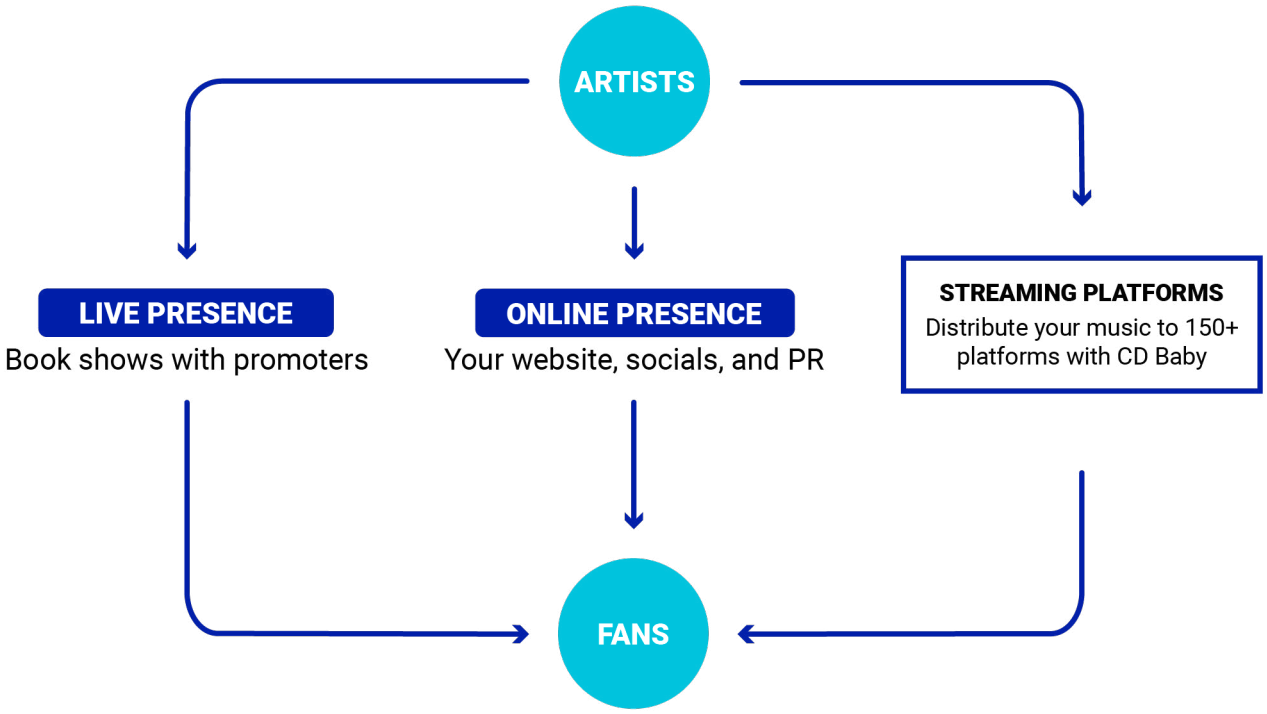
For new songs, distributors generate International Standard Recording Codes (ISRCs) — unique identifiers that act like a digital fingerprint for each track. That code stays with the recording for life, even if it's later released as part of an album or compilation. You may also receive a Universal Product Code (UPC) to identify the total music release (album, EP, single) as a whole product. More on release formats later.

No matter what distributor you partner with, take care to prepare your assets and metadata carefully to ensure a smooth submission and timely release.

A quick copyright note: Independent or DIY distributors should allow you to retain full ownership of your music. That's a major difference from traditional record labels that typically require a share of ownership of your music rights to distribute it. If you distribute with CD Baby, you retain full ownership of your music — you're only licensing us to distribute it and ensure you get paid.

THE ROLE OF DISTRIBUTION IN REACHING FANS

Put simply, every artist has three primary ways to reach their audience today: live performance, online presence, and streaming platforms. Music distribution is what makes the streaming pathway possible, connecting the music you create to the platforms where fans already spend their time.



Once your music is on streaming platforms, it's primarily your responsibility to market it to fans. It's just like playing a show or building a website — you need to share the news and build the hype to engage your audience.

CD Baby provides you with the tools, insights, and best practices you need to mobilize your fan engagement strategy. But as an independent artist, you lead the way — deciding how and when to harness those tools to build your audience and reach your goals.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. Distribution is required to reach most streaming platforms: Major DSPs like Spotify and Apple Music don't allow direct uploads from independent artists — distributors handle the formatting, delivery, and compliance required for release.

2. Distributors assign critical identifiers and handle payment infrastructure: ISRCs, UPCs, license agreements, and royalty payouts are core components of the distribution process.

3. Distribution enables access — marketing drives growth: Distributors deliver your music and collect revenue, but building an audience requires strategic promotion that you lead. Many distributors provide tools and resources to support that effort, but it's primarily your responsibility.

THE BENEFITS OF MUSIC DISTRIBUTION

Getting your music onto streaming platforms is just the beginning. The real benefits of distribution begin once you're starting to market your music, build your fanbase, tweak your strategy with actionable analytics, and earn revenue from your music.

Here's how music distribution can benefit you:

Discoverability

Distributors get your music on leading discovery platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube, and TikTok.

Audience growth and insights

You'll gain actionable analytics from your distributor and digital streaming platforms your music is on. You'll learn where your fans are, how songs are resonating, how listener trends change over time, and more. These analytics can help you make smarter marketing decisions moving forward.

Proper attribution and payment

Distributors ensure your music is correctly credited, assign ISRCs to track recordings, and collect royalties from streaming services so you're paid accurately for your streams.

Marketing support

You can take advantage of additional services beyond distribution to support promotion and audience growth. CD Baby, for example, provides a suite of marketing tools for release campaigns, fan engagement, and streaming profile optimization.



KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHOOSING A MUSIC DISTROBUTOR

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHOOSING A MUSIC DISTRIBUTOR

Now that you understand the basics and benefits of music distribution, the next step is choosing the right distributor for your needs. Different distributors offer various services, pricing models, and levels of support, so it's important to evaluate what matters most to you.

Here are a few key considerations to guide your decision:



Global reach

Your distributor should offer worldwide delivery to a combination of major and emerging platforms to maximize your reach. CD Baby distributes music to over 150 platforms globally, at no additional cost for new platform uploads.



Payment model

Distributors may charge any combination of subscriptions, per-release fees, royalty percentages, or other models for their services — so choose a model that best fits your release cadence and finances. CD Baby offers a pay-per-release model with a 9% royalty share, aligning our success with yours.



Ownership

True DIY distributors should not require you to transfer ownership of your music for distribution. CD Baby distributes music through our license agreement, ensuring you retain full ownership of your work.



Marketing help

While marketing remains the artist's responsibility, a distributor should have your back with resources and tools to support growth. CD Baby backs you with industry-grade marketing services and education.

Social media and video monetization

If your music appears on social platforms, your distributor should help you collect royalties generated by qualifying uses. When you opt into Social Video Monetization, CD Baby delivers your music to social platforms and collects revenue whenever your tracks are used in monetized content.

Support and guidance

Distribution can be complex, especially if it's your first time releasing music on a self-service platform. Your distributor should have reliable support and resources to help you succeed. CD Baby offers fast and comprehensive support along with a resource center of educational articles and guides.

Trust and credibility

Your distributor should be a preferred partner of major streaming platforms and be a dependable source of information and services relevant to music distribution. CD Baby has empowered independent artists since 1998, pioneering digital distribution and innovating to meet artists at every stage of their careers.



PREPARING YOUR MUSIC RELEASE

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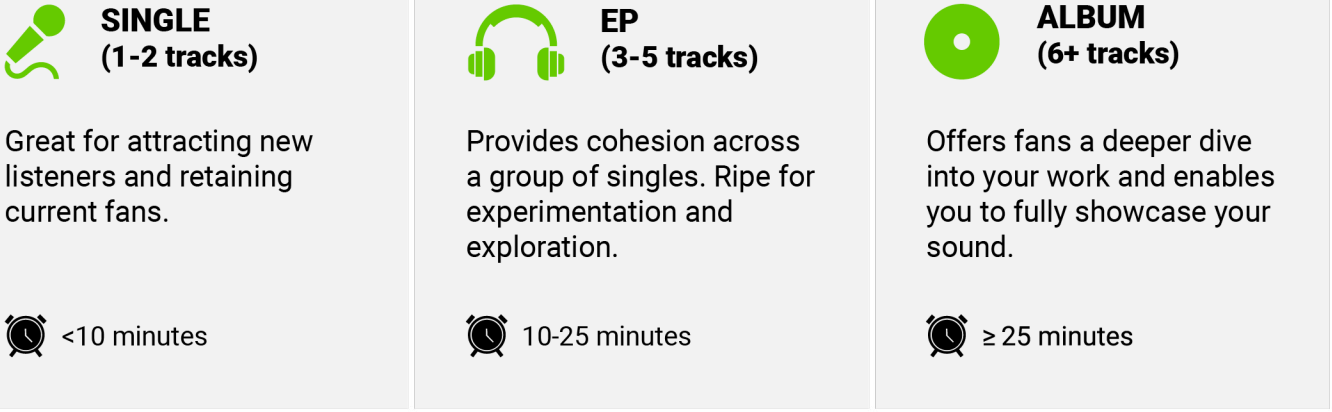
Once you've chosen a distributor, the next step is preparing your music for release. This stage is critical to ensuring your music is delivered to platforms accurately and on time.

In this section, you'll learn the key components of the distribution process — from selecting a release format to organizing your audio files, artwork, and metadata for submission.

CHOOSING A RELEASE FORMAT

A release format describes the structure of your music as it's distributed.

By industry specifications, there are three formats: singles, extended plays (EPs), and albums (long plays or LPs). CD Baby simplifies this down to a single (1 song) or an album (2+ songs).



Understanding the differences between each format and how they support your goals can help you release your music more effectively. Even if you have a full album of material, we recommend emerging artists start by releasing several singles off the album to build anticipation. Employed strategically, that's called a "waterfall release." Learn how to plan a waterfall release here.

PREPARING YOUR METADATA

Once you've chosen a release format, it's time to prepare your music metadata – that's the essential information behind your music such as your artist name, track titles, genre, and songwriter splits. Metadata ensures your music is properly tracked on platforms, accurately attributed for royalties, and easily discoverable by fans. For all these reasons, this is a crucial section of your submission – take it slowly and review for accuracy.



Covers

If you're releasing a cover song, you can secure a license through services like the Harry Fox Agency's Songfile, Easy Song, or directly from the copyright holder. If your release is limited to streaming platforms, however, you don't need to obtain a license yourself. Platforms like Spotify and Apple Music handle licensing and pay mechanical royalties to publishers through The Mechanical Licensing Collective (MLC).

Samples

If you use a sample from another song, you must get permission for both the master recording (usually from the record label) and the underlying composition (from the songwriter or publisher). These licenses are not compulsory, which means the copyright owners are not required to approve your request. It is illegal to use a sample without permission from its creator.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. Your release format is a strategic decision: Singles build momentum. EPs test cohesion. Albums deepen connection. Choose formats that support your goals.

2. Plan your release timeline early: Set your release date at least four weeks in advance to allow time for promotion.

3. Metadata determines how you get discovered and paid: Accurate, consistent metadata helps platforms categorize your music correctly and ensures royalties are routed properly.

4. Ownership and licensing must be clear before submission: You must control the rights to your recordings — including clearing any covers or samples — before distributing your music.

5. Technical details matter: Details like artwork specs, audio quality, genre tags, and contributor splits can determine whether your release is approved, delayed, or rejected. Be extra careful to avoid errors in art work and explicit content tags – two of the most common reasons we see legitimate releases get rejected.

6. Preparation prevents release-day problems: Submitting complete, accurate assets upfront reduces errors and ensures a smoother rollout.



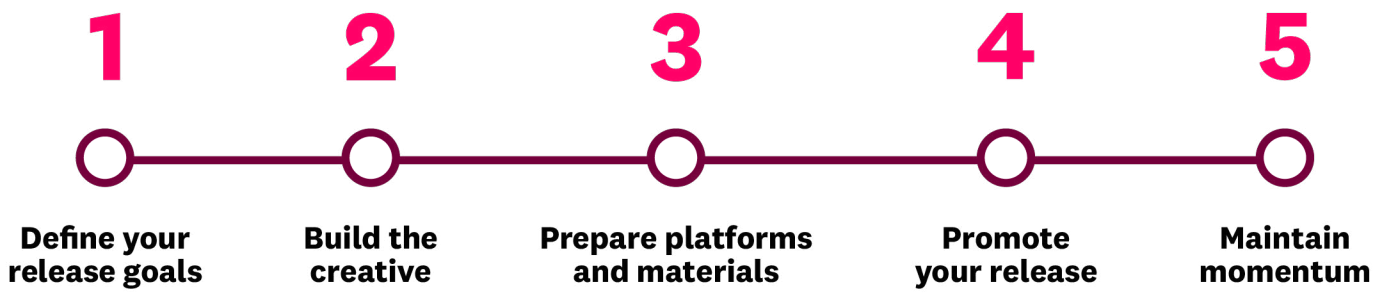
MUSIC RELEASE STRATEGY

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Once you've successfully submitted your music, it's time to plan how you'll promote it. Having a release strategy is crucial for finding and engaging your fans once your music hits streaming platforms. Remember, distribution can get your music everywhere, but it takes marketing to engage your fans and drive streams.

In this chapter, you'll learn how to plan a release from start to finish: defining your goals, preparing your assets, promoting your music effectively, and maintaining momentum long after release day.

Rather than trying to do everything at once, it helps to think of your release strategy in five key steps.



1 DEFINE YOUR RELEASE GOALS

Before you promote anything, decide what you want this release to accomplish. Creating clear goals gives you direction and an outcome to measure your progress against.

Your goals might include:

- **Introducing** your music to new listeners
- **Re-engaging** your existing fanbase
- **Building momentum** toward a larger project
- **Creating opportunities** for press, playlists, or live shows

CREATE METRICS TO TRACK YOUR PROGRESS

Once you've set your goals, choose a few metrics to track progress. A mix of quantitative and qualitative metrics will give you the most complete picture. Streams, saves, and new followers show objective reach, while social media interactions, press quotes, and playlist-adds help gauge sentiment and engagement.

Clear goals and metrics help you prioritize your efforts and evaluate what worked when the release cycle ends.

Pro tip: Instead of comparing your metrics to other artists', compare them against yourself! Measure your second release against your first and focus on learning — not competition. That's ultimately how you'll grow.

2 BUILD THE CREATIVE VISION

The most effective music releases feel cohesive and immersive. Before creating promotional content, take time to define the creative world around your music that your visuals and written content will help create. Create a mood board or a list of notes to capture the look and feel of your release.

Ask yourself:

- What **themes or emotions** does this release express?
- What **story** does the music tell?
- **Who do you want** this release to resonate with?
- What **visual styles** best support the sound?

This foundation will guide everything that follows.

Pro tip: This is a rather systematic approach for an artistic process. If elements like your cover art, photoshoot, and press release come together more organically, the important step is to review them for consistency and be sure you're telling a coherent story or exploring a consistent theme across formats.

3 PREPARE PLATFORMS AND MATERIALS

Once you've built your creative vision for your release, it's time to prepare streaming platforms and develop promotional materials that help capture that vision. From creating an electronic press kit to optimizing your streaming profiles, here's what you need to succeed.

SET UP YOUR DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Claim your artist profiles on major streaming platforms and customize every available section — including imagery, bios, playlists, and interactive features. CD Baby makes it easy to claim your profile with top platforms.

Upload Spotify Canvases or Apple Music Album Motion Art to add visual interest to your release with CDB video creator.

Update your website with your cover art, release date, and pre-save, add, or order links.

Consider drafting a playlist that complements your release — featuring songs that inspired you or share sonic overlap. This can become another entry point for fans discovering your music.

GENERATE WRITTEN MATERIALS

Written content plays a key role in promotion, especially across press, email, and text-first platforms.

Prepare the following in advance:

- ☐ An electronic press kit **(EPK)** with your bio, photos, music, and achievements
- ☐ A press release with key details, artist quotes, visuals, and an early listening link
- ☐ Two emails for fans — one ahead of release and one on release day
- ☐ A release-day social media caption with credits, links, and calls to action

Having these materials ready makes promotion smoother and reduces last-minute stress.

GENERATE VISUAL MATERIALS

Visual content can help you reach new listeners and provide current fans with a way to engage further with your release.

Prepare the following in advance:

- ☐ **A music video**

  You don't need a large budget. Just create a long-form visualizer to accompany your track. Upload it to YouTube and set it to premiere on release day!

- ☐ **Artist photos**

  Schedule a photoshoot with a professional photographer to get high quality promotional photos. Get a mix of portrait and landscape shots for different purposes.

- ☐ **Short-form video**

  Create a few short-form videos you can use around your release. Lean into what feels authentic, but some options include recording your live shows, getting studio b-roll, or creating an intro clip welcoming new followers.

4 PROMOTE YOUR RELEASE

Once you have your promotional assets, it's time to launch your campaign! Here, it's all about taking it in chunks.

- ☐ **Pre-save/Pre-add**

  Launch a pre-save or pre-add campaign and include clear calls to action in your posts. Share your pre-save/pre-add links across channels. On social media, use teaser clips that offer a preview of your music — whether through live footage, studio clips, short-form videos, or photo carousels — with a link to pre-save/add your release.

- ☐ **Playlists and press**

  - Pitch editorial playlists on streaming platforms at least one week before release.
  - Pitch the press for coverage. Contact local media two weeks in advance and national outlets closer to four weeks out. Be on the lookout for day-of premieres.
  - College radio stations are also a fun, effective channel for discovery. Pitch stations on interviews, airplay, or on-air appearances.

☐ **Live performance**

Book a release show or organize a listening party and promote either event in the lead-up to your release.

☐ **Social media**

- Announce your release date at least four weeks in advance using a multichannel approach — email, social media, texts, and in-person conversations all count.
- Schedule a few strong short-form videos to amplify your release. Focus on different concepts to test what works – live performances, a recorded introduction, a music video clip, and more.
- As release day approaches, start a short daily countdown to build excitement — focusing on channels where content is temporary, such as Instagram Stories, to avoid tiring out your followers.

5 MAINTAIN MOMENTUM

Release day is about visibility and connection. Be active, responsive, and present as fans engage with your new music. From there, it's about maintaining momentum by doubling down on your best methods for fan engagement.

ON RELEASE DAY

Release day marks the culmination of your campaign — when anticipation shifts into active listening and audience engagement. If you're reading this just before your release and didn't get the chance to follow the previous steps, don't worry. The checklist below covers the bare essentials for making the most of day one.

10 THINGS TO DO ON RELEASE DAY

1. Claim and optimize your streaming platform profiles

Work with your distributor to claim every profile your music appears on, then update it with new photos, bio, playlists, and any other customizations platforms offer.

2. Send an email blast

Reach your fanbase directly with a short email letting them know your release is live with links to stream it.

3. Host a release show or listening party:

Creating a tentpole event on the day of your release locks in the celebration. This works for artists of all sizes – just starting out? Invite some friends over to listen to the album.

4. Post short-form content

Create at least 3 videos to promote your new release. These can be intro videos where you're telling a story behind your music, behind-the-scenes clips from the studio, a snippet of a live performance, a visualizer with the hook of your song, and more. Stick to what feels authentic.

5. Announce your song is out across social media channels

Email is excellent for reaching your current fanbase, but announcing your release on social media can help you reach new audiences. Make sure to thank and tag collaborators.

6. Arrange for press coverage

Even if you didn't pitch your release ahead of time, local publications especially, are always looking for new music. You can increase your chances of getting coverage by reaching out to journalists ahead of time and asking for a good contact to pitch.

7. Announce your merch

Give your fans a way to support you. You can even add some excitement by launching a merch giveaway in the days after your release.

8. Create a playlist around your release

You can build affinity with other artists and give your fans more reasons to stream your music by creating a playlist of songs that complement your latest release.

9. Reach out to friends and fans directly

On release day, send some texts to friends and family with links to your music, letting them know you've released new music. Your inner circle is often the start for building a strong community around your music.

10. Go live on Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube

If you've developed a following on any of these platforms, doing a live listening party of the release can drive engagement and give you a meaningful way to engage with fans in real time.

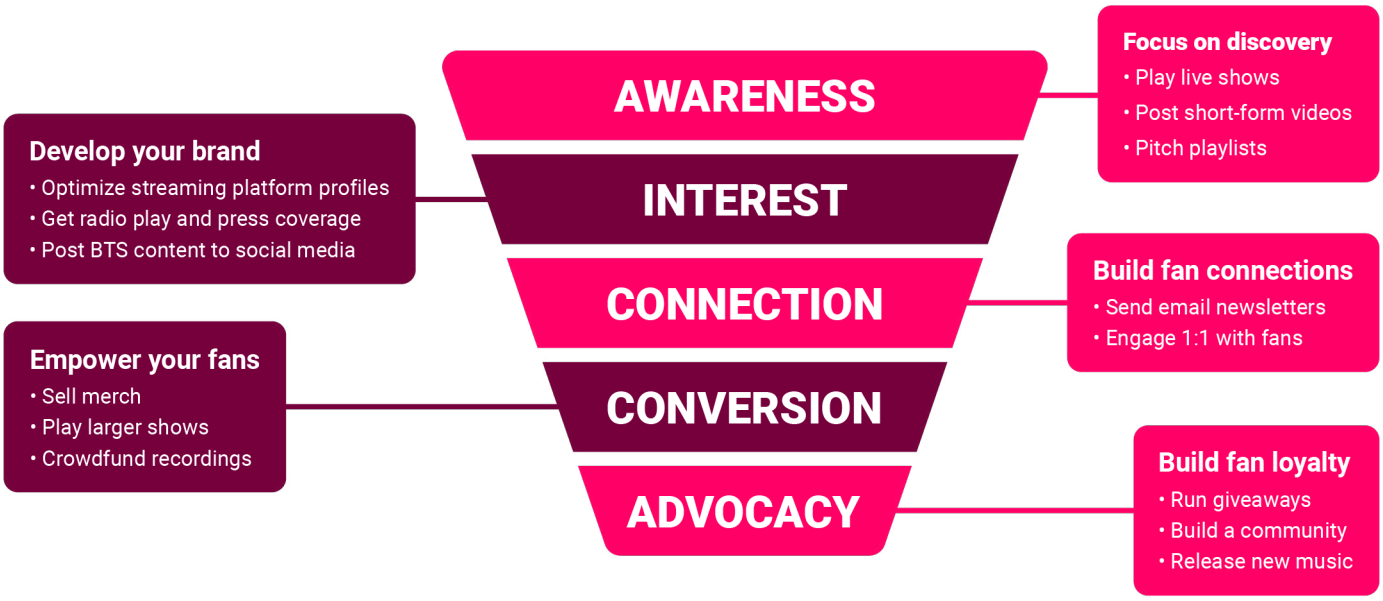
AFTER RELEASE

The time after your release is all about maintaining momentum. There's no singular way to keep your fans engaged, but choose an approach that aligns with your creative process and strongest fan engagement channels, then get organized.

A marketing funnel will allow you to map your tactics and activities across levels of engagement,

acquisition, and retention to understand how you're building your fan base.

The infographic below uses the typical activities of an artist as an example, but as an exercise, map your own activity onto this funnel. Identify gaps in your strategy and make plans to plug them. This is how you build a fan base that lasts.



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. Start with goals, not tactics: Define what success looks like for your release before you start promoting it.

2. Build a cohesive creative foundation: Strong releases feel intentional. Align your visuals, messaging, and storytelling across every platform.

3. Preparation reduces stress and increases impact: Claim streaming platform profiles, draft press materials, and organize assets before promotion begins.

4. Plan your promotion in phases: Build anticipation in advance, drive concentrated visibility on release day, and scale the strategies that prove effective.

5. Distribution gets your music live — marketing gets it heard: Uploading your music is the starting point. Consistent promotion and fan engagement drive growth.

6. Every release is a learning cycle: Track metrics, evaluate results, and refine your approach with each campaign.



RIGHTS, ROYALTIES, AND REVENUE

RIGHTS, ROYALTIES, AND REVENUE

Now you understand how distribution works, what's required during the typical submission process, and how you should approach a release strategy. If you've navigated all of these steps successfully, you'll start to see your music accumulate streams. At this point, you might be wondering, how do I get paid?

As fans stream your music, your distributor collects streaming royalties that they pay out to you through your earnings dashboard. Though it seems simple, there's a good deal of mechanics making that process possible.

In this section, you'll learn the ins and outs of music revenue through the music rights and royalties system.

MUSIC COPYRIGHT

We'll start with music copyright – the legal foundation for protecting and monetizing your music. Music copyrights allow rights holders to control how their music is used and entitles them to compensation when it is reproduced, distributed, performed, or otherwise exploited.

As a musician, you automatically own the copyright to your own songs and recordings the moment they're in a fixed format (recorded, written on sheet music, etc.). That's sufficient for distributing your music, controlling its uses, and claiming royalties.

> **A quick note on copyright enforcement:** While it's not necessary to formally copyright your music to legally distribute it, you won't receive enhanced, critical benefits — like the ability to file a federal copyright infringement lawsuit or make a claim with the Copyright Claims Board — unless you've registered your music with the U.S. Copyright Office beforehand. Learn how to register your music here.

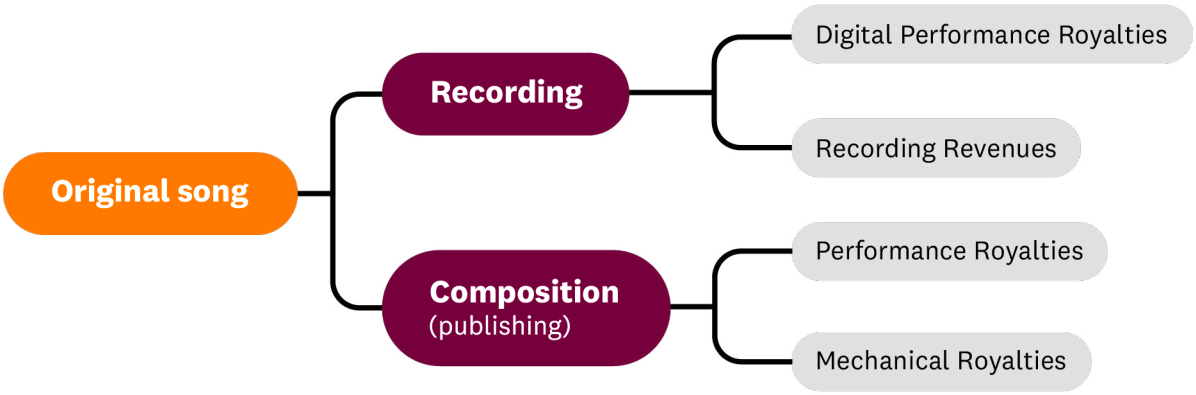
If you created a song by yourself, you're the only one that owns the composition. But if you collaborated on a track, each contributor owns a portion of that song and is entitled to compensation in proportion. How much does each person own, though? That's up to all of you to determine as a group.

The best way to avoid tricky situations is to meet with your collaborators and write up a document determining the splits (the percentage of the song each person owns), and then register your copyright according to that agreement. That's called a split-sheet and it's integral to the distribution process. Typically, splitsheets include the names of contributors, what they contributed, and the entailed percentage ownership.

MUSIC ROYALTIES

Stemming from music copyright are music royalties — payments owed to you for the use and/or reproduction of your music.

Specifically, music royalties stem from two forms of copyright inherent to a recorded song: the music composition (underlying melody, lyrics, and beat) and the recording (a specific recording of the song).



There are four main types of royalties that different uses of your music composition and recording can produce.

Recording revenues (streaming royalties):

Recording revenues are generated any time your music is streamed on digital streaming platforms like Spotify or Apple Music or otherwise downloaded and sold. Your distributor collects these royalties and pays them out to the recording artist and/or your label.

Digital performance royalties:

Digital performance royalties are generated when your recording is played on a non-interactive streaming radio like Pandora or iHeartRadio in the U.S. and paid out to the recording artist and/or label as well as session musicians – through SoundExchange.

Neighboring rights royalties:

Outside of the United States, countries allow artists to earn from terrestrial AM/FM radio play, digital performance royalties are considered just another source of "neighboring rights" royalties.

Mechanical royalties:

Mechanical royalties are generated when your musical compositions are physically or digitally reproduced (including streaming) and collected in the U.S. by The Mechanical Licensing Collective. These royalties are paid out to the songwriter, composer, lyricist, and/or publisher.

Performance royalties:

Performance royalties are generated when your music is played or performed in a public setting. All performance royalties are collected and distributed by collection societies such as performing rights organizations (PROs) to the relevant rightsholders. These royalties are paid out to the songwriter, composer, lyricist, and/or publisher.

Sync and micro-sync royalties:

Sync royalties stem from licensing your music for use in visual media — from video games and television to movies and advertisements. These kinds of licenses are negotiated on a per deal basis. Micro-sync royalties, on the other hand, operate on blanket licenses with social video platforms like Instagram or TikTok. Micro-sync royalties are generated as your fans use your music in their social video content.

Sync royalties are split between songwriter, composer, lyricists and/or publisher (for the composition share) and the recording artist and/or label (for the sound recording share).

HOW TO COLLECT MUSIC ROYALTIES

With an understanding of royalty types across uses of your music, let's zoom in on streaming-based royalties — the first revenue you'll earn after you distribute your music.

Royalties from streaming

Whenever a track is streamed in the U.S., it generates three kinds of royalties: streaming, mechanical, and performance.

CD Baby automatically pays you the first one – streaming royalties (recording revenue). You can add CDB Boost to collect your mechanical royalties generated from streaming and digital performance royalties generated from non-interactive streaming.

When you add CDB Boost to your release with CD Baby, we'll register your music with The Mechanical Licensing Collective and SoundExchange to help you collect royalties you're already generating. We'll also pitch your music for new sync licensing opportunities, to help you maximize your revenue. We've helped thousands of artists earn more from their music.

LEARN MORE

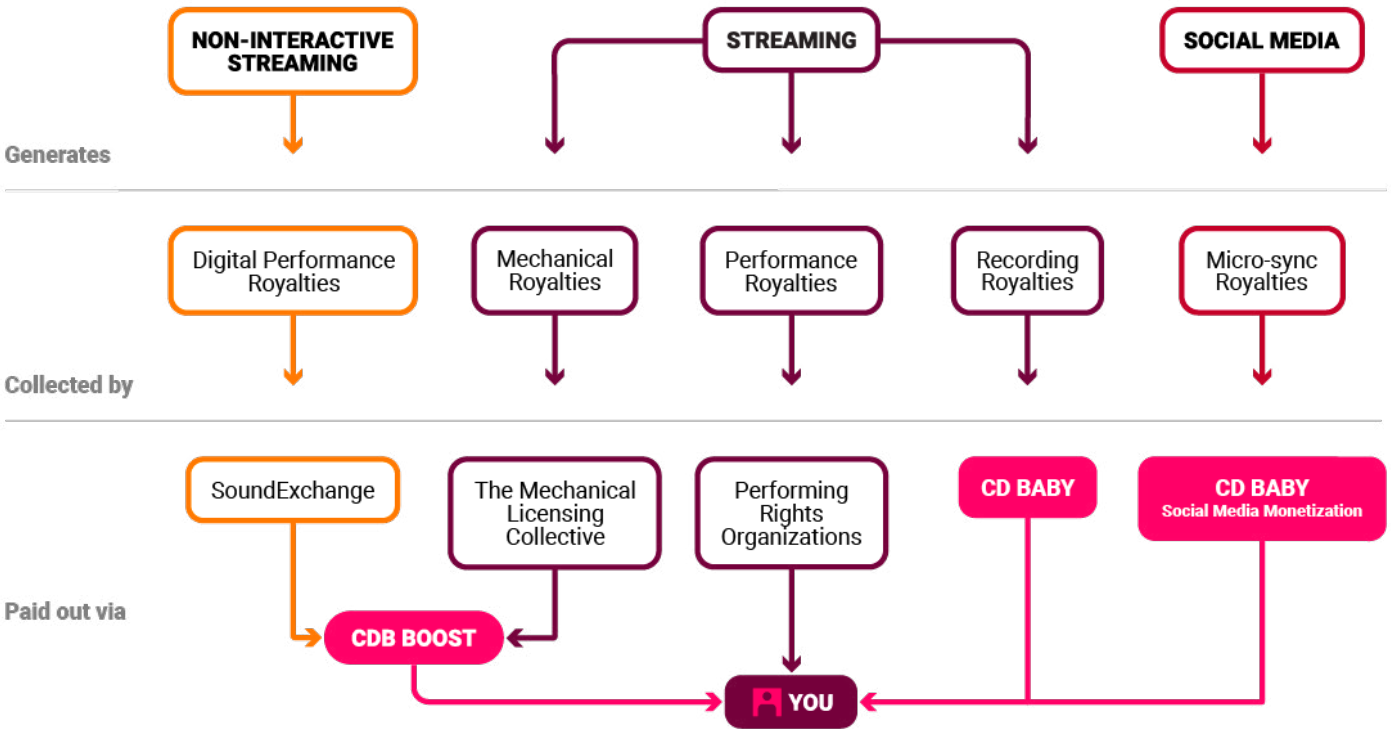
Royalties from Sync licensing

If you're interested in licensing your music to visual media or printing sheet music, you'll want a publishing administrator for that, too. CDB Boost makes your music eligible for sync licensing.

Royalties from Social Video (Micro-sync)

If you distribute your music to social media platforms like TikTok or YouTube, CD Baby offers a monetization tool to collect royalties every time your music is used. You can collect these royalties by opting into CD Baby's Social Video Monetization service.

Feeling a bit dizzy? Royalties are complex, but here's a simplified version of royalty generation and methods of collection stemming from the most common uses of your music online: social media, non-interactive streaming, and regular streaming.



MUSIC PUBLISHING

Music publishing is the business of managing your music's composition rights (lyrics and melody) — protecting your music and collecting revenue as your composition is used. Here's what you need to know if you're just beginning to explore publishing for your music after distribution.

Within music publishing, there are publishers and administrators. Publishers can take partial ownership of your music copyrights in exchange for services like pitching your music for placements and more actively managing your copyrights to create revenue.

A publishing administrator, on the other hand, doesn't typically take ownership and instead helps you collect royalties from disparate payout points and collects a commission on your royalty revenue.

CDB Boost is an excellent publishing administration tool for emerging artists looking to add incremental revenue and take their first steps into publishing and sync licensing.

But if your music is starting to generate thousands of streams, it might be time to consider a full-on, comprehensive publishing administrator solution from our partner, Songtrust. Registering and collecting all these royalties yourself is incredibly time-consuming and challenging – Songtrust makes that process easy and transparent.

LEVELING UP YOUR PUBLISHING WITH SONGTRUST

A fellow Downtown Music Company, Songtrust provides musicians and other rightsholders with song monitoring, music publishing administration services, and worldwide royalty collection from 65 collection societies and pay sources spanning over 215 countries and territories.

Most importantly, you retain 100% ownership of your songs and stay in full control of your music catalog.

YOU CAN LEARN MORE ABOUT SONGTRUST HERE



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. Every song contains two copyrights: The composition (lyrics and melody) and the recording (the specific performance) generate different types of royalties.

2.Copyright creates revenue: Owning and properly documenting your rights is the foundation for getting paid when your music is streamed, performed, reproduced, or licensed.

3. Different uses generate different royalties: Streaming, radio play, public performance, sync placements, and physical reproduction each produce distinct royalty types.

4. Distributors collect recording royalties — not all royalties: Your distributor pays you streaming revenue from the recording, but additional royalties (mechanical, performance, sync) may require registration with collection societies or a publishing administrator.

5. Split sheets and proper registration prevent disputes: Clear ownership agreements with collaborators via split sheets protect relationships and ensure accurate royalty distribution.

6. Publishing administration maximizes income: Registering your compositions globally and collecting from multiple societies helps capture royalties you might otherwise miss.



WHY CD BABY

WHY CD BABY

Since 1998, millions of artists have trusted CD Baby for music distribution and career-spanning support. We empower artists at every stage with affordable, seamless distribution to major platforms, along with tools and services to take their music further. Whether you're releasing your debut single or looking for a long-term partner to support your growth, here are 10 reasons to choose CD Baby for your music distribution needs and beyond.



1. Distribute your music to a truly global network

Share your music on over 150 streaming platforms worldwide, including Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube Music, Amazon Music, TikTok, Instagram, and more. We automatically distribute your music to new partners at no extra cost — helping you reach fans everywhere.



2. Pay per release starting at $9.99 without subscription fees

CD Baby's simple one-time fee model means no subscriptions, no annual charges, and no hidden costs. You keep 91% of your streaming royalties, making it one of the most affordable ways to release music without long-term contracts or lock-ins. See our rates here.



3. Keep 100% ownership of your copyright

CD Baby ensures you retain full copyright ownership and complete creative control of your music. As an independent artist with CD Baby, you choose how your music is released, monetized, and managed. Read our Artist Agreement.



4. Receive transparent accounting and royalty reports

Understand your audience and earnings with intuitive dashboards that show where your streaming activity and royalties are coming from, then make informed decisions about marketing and future releases. Learn more about CD Baby analytics.



5. Collect additional royalties with CDB Boost

Go beyond streaming royalties from your masters. Collect mechanical royalties and digital performance royalties you're otherwise missing with CDB Boost. You'll also unlock opportunities for sync licensing in TV, film, games, and ads (placements not guaranteed). Learn more about CDB Boost.

6. Find your fans with CD Baby marketing tools

Promote your releases with CD Baby's suite of marketing tools, services, and guides. From music landing pages to paid ads, you'll find everything you need to run a multi-channel campaign across platforms.

7. Monetize beyond streaming on social and UGC platforms

Earn money whenever your music is used on YouTube (Content ID), TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and other creator-driven platforms. This is one of the fastest growing revenue streams for independent artists and CD Baby makes it easy. Learn more about CD Baby's monetization services.

8. Grow with over 25 years of proven leadership

CD Baby has been a pioneer in digital music distribution for over two decades, helping millions of artists release their music worldwide. Our longevity means stability and expertise you can trust.

9. Support your ambitions with educational resources

Learn how to grow your audience, strategize around your music, and navigate the modern music industry through our blog, help center, YouTube channel, and downloadable guides.

10. Build to your next career milestone

CD Baby grows with you. As your career evolves, you can tap into the broader Downtown Music network for publishing, distribution, rights management, and more.

At CD Baby, we believe artists at every stage should have access to professional-grade tools, services, and support to take their music further. Since our inception as a pioneer in DIY distribution, we've remained committed to advancing artists while ensuring they maintain complete control over their music.

CONCLUSION

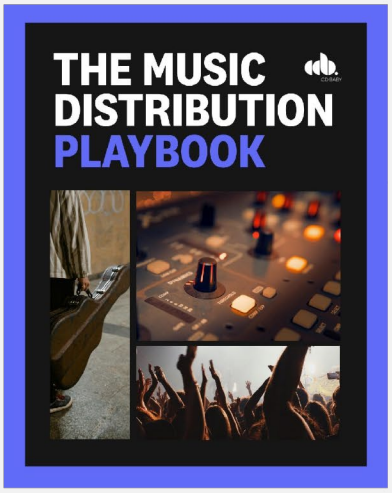
You now have a clear understanding of how distribution works, the role it plays in your career, and how to approach your music releases strategically – from preparation and copyright protection to promotion and revenue.

As the introduction to this guide demonstrated, the technologies and strategies around music distribution continue to evolve. Independent artists of every era face a mix of new challenges and possibilities shaped by technology and fan behavior. But a strong foundation in how to prepare, protect, and promote your music will help you adapt and succeed.

When you're ready to put this knowledge into action, CD Baby is here to support you. Explore our blog and resource center for deeper guidance on the topics covered here, then create a free account to begin preparing your next release.

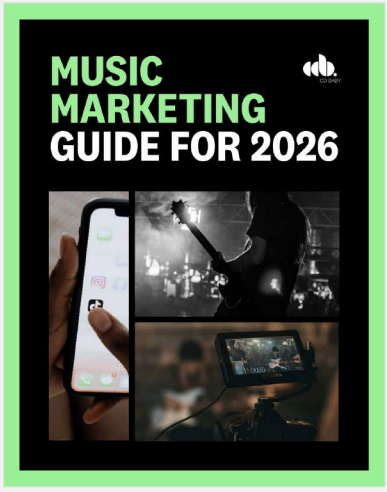
START MY RELEASE

THE MUSIC DISTRIBUTION PLAYBOOK
Get step-by-step guidance on your release



DOWNLOAD

THE GUIDE TO MUSIC MARKETING
Promote your music and find your fans



DOWNLOAD

GLOSSARY

Album *(LP – Long Play)* - A release format containing 7 or more songs or 25 minutes or more of music. Albums provide a longer, cohesive listening experience.

Analytics - Data and insights provided by distributors and streaming platforms showing how your music is performing — including streams, listener demographics, geographic locations, saves, and engagement metrics.

Apple Music Album Motion Art - Short animated artwork displayed on Apple Music to enhance the visual presentation of an album.

Artist Profile - Your official page on a streaming platform *(e.g., Spotify, Apple Music)* where listeners can view your music, bio, images, and updates.

Audio Specifications - Technical requirements for distribution. Standard digital delivery requires stereo WAV or FLAC files at 44.1 kHz and 16-bit resolution.

Composition - The elements that make a specific song *(not a specific recording)* unique, such as melody, lyrics, and beat. A composition can have many recordings.

Cover Art - The visual artwork representing your release. Must meet platform specifications *(typically 3000×3000 pixels, square format, JPG or PNG, RGB color mode)*.

Cover Song - A new recording of a song written by another songwriter. Requires a mechanical license for physical or download distribution.

Copyright - The legal ownership of creative work. In music, copyright exists in both the composition *(lyrics and melody)* and the sound recording *(the recorded performance)*.

Digital Audio Workstation *(DAW)* - Software used to record, edit, mix, and produce audio *(e.g., Pro Tools, Logic, Ableton)*.

Digital Distribution - The process of delivering music to online platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, TikTok, and YouTube Music.

Digital Service Provider *(DSP)* - Online services where listeners stream music, such as Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon Music, and YouTube Music.

DIY Distributor - A distribution company that allows independent artists to release music directly to streaming platforms while retaining ownership *(e.g., CD Baby)*.

Electronic Press Kit *(EPK)* - A digital promotional package including an artist bio, music, photos, press quotes, and contact information used for media outreach.

EP *(Extended Play)* - A release format containing 3–6 songs or less than 25 minutes of music. Longer than a single but shorter than an album.

Explicit Content Tag - A content designation indicating strong language or adult themes. Incorrect tagging can cause release delays or rejections.

Interactive/Non-Interactive Streaming - Interactive or "on-demand" streaming services *(like Spotify, Tidal, or Apple Music)* allow listeners to choose what recordings they listen to, and they generate both performance and mechanical royalties. Non-interactive streaming services *(nota-*

bly Pandora) - sometimes loosely referred to as streaming radio - in which the listener does not choose the specific songs, pay only performance royalties.

ISRC *(International Standard Recording Code)* - A unique identifier assigned to a specific sound recording. It stays with that recording for its lifetime and is used to track usage and royalties.

License Agreement - A legal agreement granting someone permission to use a work for certain purposes or under certain conditions, generally for a limited period of time. A license does not change the ownership of the copyright.

Master Recording - The original recorded version of a song. Ownership of the master determines who earns recording royalties.

Mechanical Royalties - Royalties earned through the reproduction of copyrighted works in digital and physical formats. Songwriters are paid mechanical royalties per song sold, downloaded, and streamed via "on-demand" streaming services.

Metadata - The descriptive information attached to your release — including artist name, track titles, genre, songwriter credits, splits, ISRCs, and release date — used for identification, discovery, and royalty payments.

Micro-Sync Royalties - Royalties generated when music is used in user-generated content *(UGC)* videos on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube.

Monetization - The process of generating revenue from your music through streaming, licensing, social media usage, or other income sources.

Music Publishing - The business of acquiring, protecting, and promoting song *(composition)* copyrights and collecting the royalties that these copyrights generate. Music publishing ensures that songwriters get paid fairly when their intellectual property—their musical works—are used by companies such as record labels *(which pay mechanical royalties)*; radio stations, bars, and restaurants *(which pay performance royalties)*; or film studios and advertising agencies *(which pay sync license fees)*, among others. Music publishing pays royalties only to the writer of a song, not to performing artists or recording owners.

Performing Rights Organization *(PRO)* - An organization *(e.g., ASCAP, BMI, SESAC)* that collects and distributes performance royalties on behalf of songwriters and publishers.

Performance Royalties - Royalties generated when a composition is publicly performed, including live shows, radio broadcasts, or background music in businesses.

Playlist Pitching - Submitting your song to editorial or independent playlist curators for potential inclusion.

Pre-Save / Pre-Add - A promotional tool that allows fans to save or add your music to their library before the official release date.

Publishing Administrator - A company that helps songwriters register compositions and collect publishing royalties globally without taking ownership of the copyright.

Recording Royalties *(Streaming Royalties)* - Revenue generated from streams and downloads of the master recording. Collected and paid out by your distributor.

Release Date - The official date your music becomes publicly available on streaming platforms.

Release Format - The structural classification of your music release — single, EP, or album.

Royalty - A payment made to rights holders for the use of their music.

Sample - A portion of an existing recording used in a new song. Requires permission from both the master owner and the composition owner.

Social Video Monetization - A distribution feature that collects royalties when your music is used in monetized social media content.

Sound Recording - The fixed recorded performance of a song, distinct from the underlying composition.

Split Sheet - A written agreement documenting each contributor's ownership percentage of a song's composition. A split agreement should be finalized between collaborators before it is exploited commercially in any way, including commercial release to streaming services.

Streaming - On-demand digital playback of music via platforms such as Spotify or Apple Music.

Sync *(Synchronization)* License - Permission to use music in visual media such as TV shows, films, advertisements, video games, or online videos.

Sync Royalties - Revenue generated when music is licensed for use in visual media.

Title Track - A song on an album that shares the same name as the album.

UPC *(Universal Product Code)* - A unique identifier assigned to a music release *(album, EP, or single)* as a whole product.

User-Generated Content - User-generated content, or "UGC," in the context of song rights, refers to content created by a platform's users *(e.g. YouTube or TikTok)* that contains copyrighted music. This is often unlicensed or subject to a blanket use license between the platform and the rights holder.

Waterfall Release - A release strategy where multiple singles are released sequentially and later compiled into an EP or album to build momentum.