



A Guide to Releasing Your Own Product

This document covers registering, distributing and retailing your music, both physically and digitally.

The first step if you wish to make a release is to ensure you own copyright in the recording or have licensed the rights from the owner. You will also need to ensure that you've obtained any necessary performers' consents and any mechanical licences if you are recording cover versions of other peoples' songs.

With self-releases, the main issue is how you want to sell your music — whether the format is vinyl record, CD or digital download. You may simply want to sell it direct, at gigs and through your own website, or wish to retail it through others, whether an online distributor, shops or both.

Selling your own releases at gigs and through your website is simple. But should you want to distribute a release, in order to receive full recompense — in terms of the royalties that can be earned from the sale and broadcast of your compositions, your recordings and your recorded performances — and also be able to have its sales accurately reflected by any charts, there are a number of issues to deal with.

Registering with Collection Societies

PRS for Music

PRS for Music incorporates both the Performing Right Society (PRS) and also the Mechanical Copyright Protection Society (MCPS), both of which licence and collect in respect of rights in songs/compositions. If you are commercially releasing your own music, then as a songwriter you should join both PRS and (provided you don't already have a publisher) MCPS. If you own the recordings that you are going to release, you should also join Phonographic Performance Limited (PPL — see below).

You can join PRS as a writer member as soon as your music is being performed in public — from local gigs to national radio. You don't need to have signed a contract with a music publisher or a record company. PRS is £30 to join as a writer member.



PRS grant licences and collect licence fees for the public performance and broadcast of their members' works, both in the UK and, through their affiliates, around the world.

Provided you don't already have a publisher, you can join MCPS as a writer member when one of your songs has had a commercial release by a record company (not one that you own), or been recorded into a radio or TV programme, or been recorded in an audio-visual or multimedia production, or been used online. MCPS charge a separate £50 joining fee.

MCPS grant licences for permitting copying of their members' works onto vinyl records/CDs, or for downloading, and for issuing copies to the public, and collect licence fees in the UK and, through their affiliates, around the world.

If you are an MCPS member and you wish to release your own songs on your own label, you will not need to pay a licence fee to them but you will need to apply for what they call an AP2 exclusion. This involves filling out a form and providing proof that you own the record label. See their website for further information.

PPL and UKPS

PPL (Phonographic Performance Limited) grants licences, and collects and distributes licence fees due to its members, both performers and record labels, in respect of the broadcast and public performance of sound recordings. It is therefore similar to PRS in that while PRS licences the song for public performance and broadcast, PPL licences the recording of the song for public performance and broadcast.

PPL issues these licences on behalf of its record company members to UK radio and TV stations, shops, pubs, clubs and other music users who play sound recordings in public. So if you own your own recording you may need to be a record company member of PPL.

If you performed on a recording that has been or is to be released to the public, you would also need to join UK Performer Services, PPL's performer arm, as a performer member. Performers have a statutory right to receive 'equitable remuneration' from the broadcast and public performance of their recorded performances. In practice this effectively means the record company receives 50% of what PPL collect, and the performers share the other 50%.

So if your releases get played, PPL's distribution arm, UK Performer Services (UKPS), will be able to pay you your share of licence fees provided you are a member. Consequently if you own the song, and performed on and own the recording, then a radio play should generate income for you from PRS, as rights-owner of the song, from PPL, as rights owner of the recording, and from UKPS, as a performer on the recording.

PPL is currently free to join.

Unique Identifiers

If you plan to retail vinyl/CDs or downloads anywhere apart from at gigs and your own website — eg. through shops/distributors or via online download stores — you should obtain unique identifiers for each one.

If you do not obtain a unique catalogue number, barcode and ISRC Code, it is likely that no physical/online retailers will be willing to accept your release. Without these unique identifiers, there will be no way for you to receive proper remuneration for your work, as it will not be possible to track its sales and broadcast/performance use.

Catalogue numbers

After completing your tracks, first register them with PPL. Whether you plan to release them on vinyl, CD or as a download, a catalogue number will also need to be allocated.

You can make up your own but it is advisable to contact MCPS, which is part of PRS for Music, to check whether the catalogue number you have chosen has already been used.

Barcodes

The next stage is to create a barcode/ UPC (Universal Product Code) for the release. These are only required at release stage and you needn't acquire a barcode for each individual track unless you plan to release them all as singles.

Barcodes are essential for the sale of vinyl records, CDs and digital downloads. They help track sales and ensure that transactions are correctly accounted for.

In addition, you will need a barcode to be eligible for the UK sales charts run by the Official Charts Company (OCC). Your first point of contact is GS1 UK, the association responsible for allocating them. It is important to note that GS1 UK only allocates barcode numbers. To receive the actual barcode itself, you will then need to approach barcode manufacturers direct.

A list of these 'solution providers' can be found on GS1 UK's website, gs1uk.org. You may have to pay £10—20 for a barcode but some providers will offer them for free so do research the options available.

ISRC Codes

When releasing your music in CD or download form, each track will need an International Standard Recording Code (ISRC) encoded. These 12-digit codes are the global identification system for sound recordings. Your distributor or aggregator may issue ISRCs on your behalf and it is worth checking with them if this is part of their service so your tracks don't have duplicate codes. If you do require ISRCs the Member Services team at PPL can help you get started. You don't have to be a member of PPL to do this and there is no charge. You can contact the team at recordcompany@ppluk.com. All requests will be processed within two working days.

Distribution

Many artists decide to distribute both physical and download versions of their releases, using a mixture of traditional and online distributors.

With the distribution of vinyl or CDs, it pays to target your approach to those companies who deal in the genre of music that reflects your work. For instance, a distribution company dealing primarily in folk and roots music is not likely to be all that interested in carrying a reggae or house release.

When it comes to digital distribution, there are a greater number of options available, from those who specialise in one or a range of genres, to "aggregators" (or intermediaries) who provide access to such online retailers as Amazon and iTunes.

The services offered by distributors work on a variety of pricing models, with the combination of percentage fees, product return arrangements, set-up costs and subscription charges. ***Irrespective of what form of distribution you are seeking, before signing any agreement, get it checked by the MU Contract Advisory Service. This service offers MU members an hour's free legal advice on every contract they are offered in their working lives as professional musicians. The MU also has a specimen distribution agreement available for members to look at, which gives an idea of what terms may be offered.***

Physical releases

Distributors who deal with physical releases sell vinyl and CDs to a range of other retailers, whether they are bricks-and-mortar stores or online.

A good starting point is to check which company is performing this function for the independent releases/labels that you like or are operating in the same musical area.

Try to target the people at traditional distributors who deal with the style of music you produce and ensure that you sell them the idea of carrying your release. You should show that you are proactive in promoting your music and building your fanbase — support your approach with any press notices or reviews you have received.

Online distribution of physical releases often goes hand-in-hand with simultaneous download distribution, should you require it. For instance, CD Baby can distribute vinyl and CDs through its own website, get download versions carried by the likes of Amazon, and allow a string of bricks-and-mortar stores to special order your CD releases.

Digital releases

Digital music sales are now outstripping the sales of traditional CDs and records, according to figures published by the BPI. In the first quarter of 2012, digital music accounted for 55.5% of total £155.8m music sales and sales of physical formats such as CDs had fallen by 15% to £69.3m.

Many self-released artists find that they can get their music stocked by iTunes, Amazon and other services without the support of a record label and, therefore, keep a much bigger piece of the pie. As iTunes and Amazon are not interested in dealing with artists directly, a system of online retail “aggregators” has sprung up. Typically, these companies provide a one-stop service that enables artists to upload their music to a single point, then not only have it distributed to the major online music stores but also to more minor players.

When approaching these intermediaries, some will require you to show that you have an established fanbase or have taken steps to start building one. However, most other providers of these one-stop services are open to all comers.

Again, as a member of the MU, you can access free advice on any terms and conditions offered. You can also seek legal advice through the union in the event of any breach of contract.

Technical issues

Although your music will ultimately be sold as downloadable MP3s, one-stop services usually require you to submit it in an aggregators format (44.1 kHz .wav files, 16-bit, stereo), which they will then convert according to the requirements of the different online stores. In some cases, you will be able to send in a CD instead of uploading your music. You will need a barcode/UPC for the release and an ISRC code for every track/single recording. In addition, you will need to provide information — or metadata. This varies from company-to-company and by genre,

but you should think of it as the modern version of the copy on the label of a vinyl record or CD, so would include the artist name, title, writer, label name and copy-right details, plus the details of the conductor and any soloists if applicable.

Consider recording quality too as intermediary services will block poor quality recordings (hissing, distortion, low levels) and require that cover art be supplied in a particular format, at a set image quality.

Promoting your release

The timing of your product release is crucial and the success of your launch will also depend on the level of promotion you can create. Aim to have your product available to journalists and DJs at least two weeks before the physical/digital release date, to allow time for reviews and test plays. You should mail at least 200 copies to this market, so be sure to factor in the costs for this mailing in advance. For more information on how to effectively promote your releases, contact the MU.

You may have sufficient funds to hire a press officer to do promotional work for you, but shop around and consult fellow musicians as to their effectiveness before making any commitment because their fees vary widely.

Useful links

Musicians' Union, the trade union for professional musicians: www.theMU.org

PPL, collection society for performers and record labels: www.ppluk.com

To acquire an IRSC from PPL, see: <http://www.ppluk.com/en/Record-Companies/repertoire2/How-Do-I-Get-Started>.

PRS for Music and MCPS, collection societies for publishers, songwriters and composers: www.prsformusic.com

CD Baby: <http://members.cdbaby.com/moreservices/UPCbarcode.aspx>

THE BENEFITS OF MU MEMBERSHIP

£2K INSTRUMENT/EQUIPMENT INSURANCE: Protect your gear — at home, on the road and around the world — against loss, damage and theft / **£10M PUBLIC LIABILITY INSURANCE:** Protect yourself and others whilst you perform / **LEGAL ASSISTANCE:** Our Legal Team can help with unpaid fees, cancellations, employment disputes and contracts / **CONTRACT ADVISORY SERVICE:** Get your contracts checked by our Music Industry Lawyers before you sign them — don't accidentally sign away your musical rights / **PARTNERSHIP ADVISORY SERVICE:** If your band breaks up, who owns the name, songs, recordings and equipment? We can prepare an agreement for you, tailored to your band's requirements / **RIGHTS PROTECTION:** We help to protect the copyright and property rights of composers, songwriters and producers / **CAREER AND BUSINESS ADVICE:** In relation to all aspects of your musical career including performance, recording and broadcasting, independent releasing, composing and teaching / **MU Music Writers' Section** Section Secretary: Naomi MacDonald, 60–62 Clapham Road, London, SW9 0JJ. +44 (0)20 7840 5517. writers@theMU.org