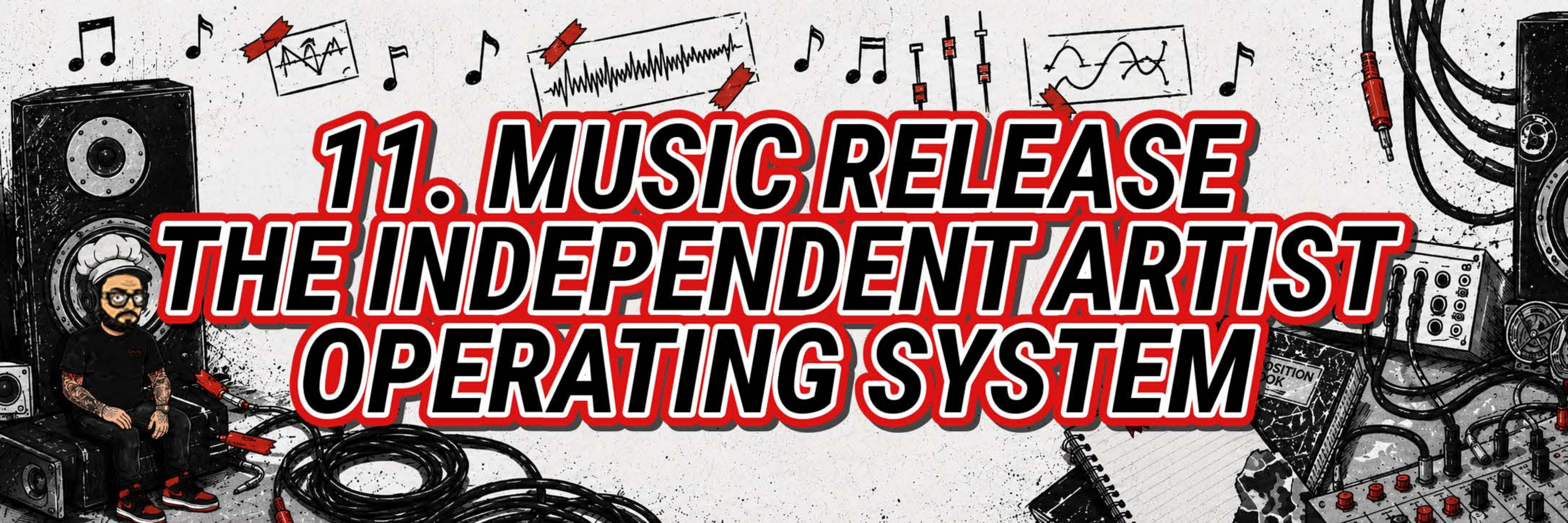
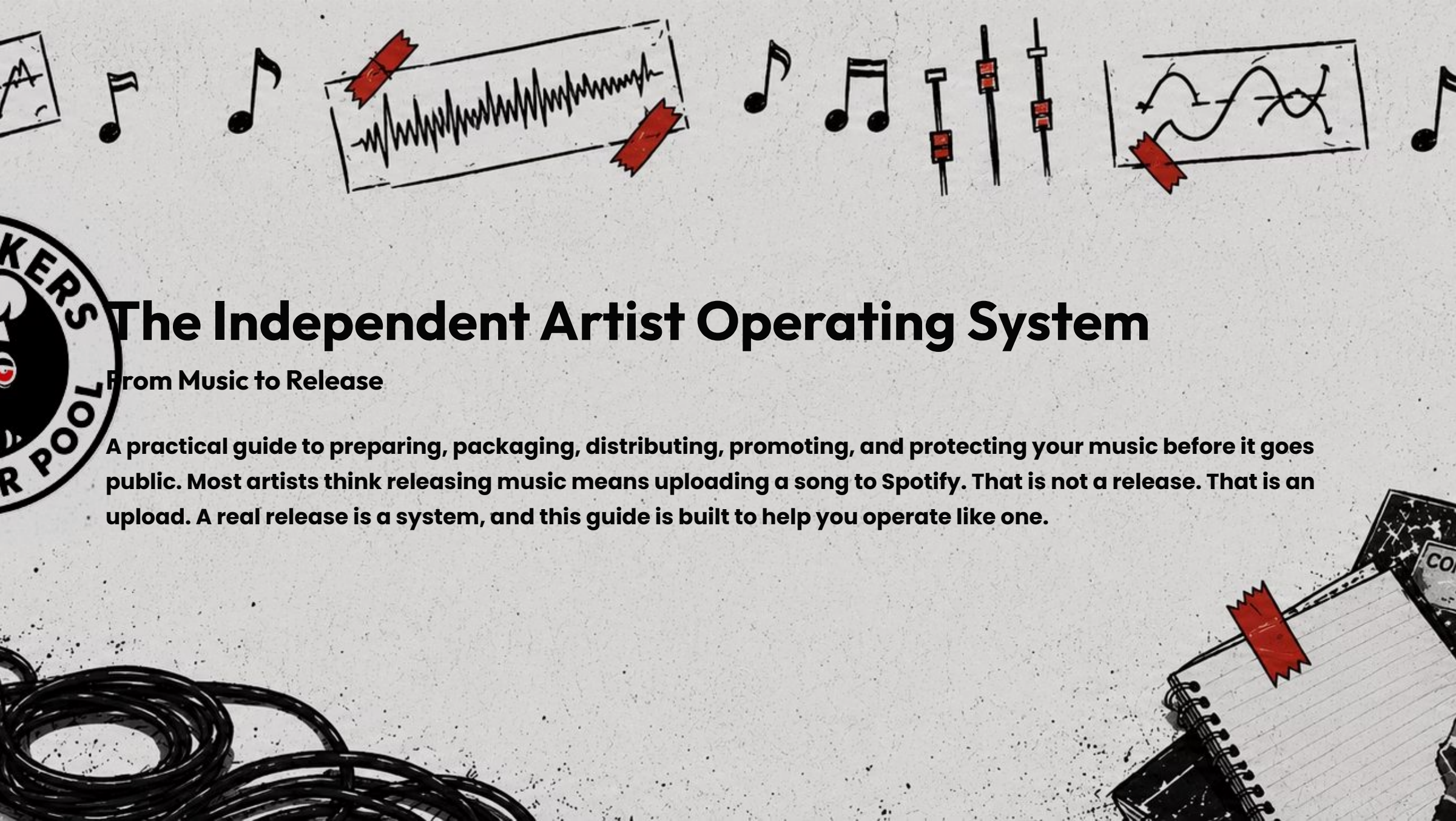




# 11. MUSIC RELEASE THE INDEPENDENT ARTIST OPERATING SYSTEM



# The Independent Artist Operating System

From Music to Release

**A practical guide to preparing, packaging, distributing, promoting, and protecting your music before it goes public. Most artists think releasing music means uploading a song to Spotify. That is not a release. That is an upload. A real release is a system, and this guide is built to help you operate like one.**

# Why Most Independent Releases Fail

## The Typical Pattern

Artist finishes a song. Artist uploads it. Artist posts once. Artist waits. Nothing happens. Then comes the blame: the algorithm, the distributor, the playlist editors, the scene, the audience.

But the real problem is not the audience. The real problem is the absence of a system.

## What a Real Release Actually Is

A real release includes the music, the mix, the master, the artwork, the metadata, the credits, the rights, the distributor, the release date, the visuals, the story, the rollout, the content, the fan communication, the follow-up, and the next move.

Every element depends on every other. Miss one and the whole release feels incomplete. Build them all and the release works like a machine.

- ❑ You do not need permission to release music. But if you want people to take it seriously, you need to prepare it properly.

## The Main Rule

Do not release music just because it is done. Release music when it is ready to represent the artist.

## The Goal

A release should not feel like panic. It should feel like execution.

## The Mindset

You are the artist. You are the label. You are the system. Act like it.

# Is Your Release Actually Ready?

A release is ready when the music, files, rights, branding, and rollout all line up. Most artists only check the music. That is not enough. Before you move toward distribution, run through this readiness framework honestly.

|                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                                                                                                                                             | 2                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Audio</b><br>Finished arrangement. Clean mix. Final master. No clipping. Checked on multiple systems outside the DAW.                      | <b>Identity</b><br>Correct title. Correct artist name. Correct credits. Final artwork. Cover that works as a thumbnail. |
| 3                                                                                                                                             | 4                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Rights</b><br>No uncleared samples. No uncleared vocals. No stolen images. No fake feature credits. No AI vocals presented as real humans. | <b>Logistics</b><br>Distributor selected. Release date set. Promo plan exists. Links and profiles are prepared.         |

 The goal is not perfection. The goal is professionalism. A release can be raw, underground, experimental, or weird, but it should not be careless.

## The Release Readiness Test

Pick one song you are considering releasing. Answer these questions honestly: Is the song fully arranged? Is the mix good enough to play beside similar releases? Is the master clean? Can you explain the song in one sentence? Does it fit your artist identity? Is cover art finished? Do you know every person who needs credit? Do you own or have permission for every sound, vocal, sample, and image? Do you have at least two weeks of content ideas? Do you know what you want listeners to do after hearing it? If you cannot answer most of these clearly, the release is not ready. That does not mean the song is bad. It means the release system is incomplete.

# Audio, Artwork, and Metadata

These three elements form the technical backbone of every release. Get any one of them wrong and the entire release can stall, get delayed, or quietly fail to reach the right people.

## Final Audio Checklist

Your distributor will ask for a high-quality audio file. Use WAV whenever possible.

- WAV 16-bit or 24-bit, 44.1 kHz or higher
- Stereo, no clipping
- Clean start and end
- Final mastered version
- Checked on speakers, headphones, and earbuds

## Audio Versions to Prepare

- **Main Master** — the final public version
- **Premaster** — with headroom, for labels or engineers
- **Clean Version** — for radio, brand use, family-friendly
- **Instrumental** — for sync, live performance, remixing
- **Acapella** — if the vocal is a priority for remixes
- **Radio Edit** — shorter if the track runs long or explicit
- **Extended Mix** — for DJs, clubs, and electronic culture

## Artwork Requirements

People often see the cover before they hear the song. A bad cover makes good music feel amateur.

- 3000 x 3000 pixels, JPG or PNG
- RGB color, high quality
- No URLs or social handles
- No platform logos
- No unlicensed brand logos or images
- Readable as a small thumbnail

## Metadata Fields That Matter

- **Artist Name** — exact same spelling every time
- **Release Title** — final, checked for spelling and caps
- **Featured Artists** — only real, agreed-upon contributors
- **Songwriters and Producers** — legal names for publishing
- **Explicit Tag** — never hide explicit content
- **Genre and Language** — affects discovery and pitching
- **ISRC and UPC** — provided by distributor if you do not have them



Bad metadata can cause missing royalties, wrong artist profiles, and delayed releases. It is boring until it costs you money.

# Credits, Splits, Samples, and Rights

A release can become legally and financially messy if rights conversations are skipped. These conversations are uncomfortable but essential. Have them before the song is public, not after it starts doing well.



## Master Recording

The actual sound recording. The exported track. The audio file people stream. The master owner collects master royalties through the distributor.



## The Composition

The underlying song, melody, lyrics, chords. Songwriters and publishers collect publishing royalties from the composition separately from the master.



## Split Agreements

Even with friends, write it down. A text agreement is better than nothing. A proper split sheet is better than a text. Decide before release, not after it blows up.



## Sample Clearance

Do not assume something is safe because it is online. Chopping, filtering, reversing, or burying a sample does not make it yours. If people can recognize the source, there is risk.

## High-Risk Material to Avoid

- Movie dialogue, TV clips, news broadcasts
- Famous speeches and celebrity interviews
- Major-label vocals or recognizable melodies
- Unlicensed samples, even if heavily edited
- AI-generated vocals based on real artists
- Artwork with copyrighted characters or logos

## Safer Options

- Record your own vocals or hire a vocalist
- Use properly licensed or royalty-free samples
- Use public domain material after verifying it
- Use Creative Commons only if the license allows your use
- Create your own fake radio or dialogue lines

⊗ Cover songs require mechanical licensing. Remixes usually require permission from the rights holder. Check your distributor's rules before uploading either.

# Choosing a Distributor

A distributor gets your music onto Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube Music, TikTok, Amazon Music, Deezer, Tidal, and others. But distribution is not promotion. A distributor does not automatically make people care. Getting onto Spotify is easy. Getting people to listen is the work.

## DIY Distributors

**Best for:** New artists, independent releases, frequent uploads, budget control, artists who want ownership and flexibility.

**Examples:** DistroKid, TuneCore, CD Baby, LANDR, Amuse, RouteNote, Ditto, EmuBands, iMusician

**Watch out for:** Annual renewal fees, takedown rules if subscription lapses, whether they support your target platforms, quality of customer support.

## Premium Distribution

**Best for:** Artists with real traction, labels, artists needing marketing support, regional growth strategies, playlist pitching, advanced analytics.

**Examples:** AWAL, Believe, The Orchard, ONErpm, Virgin Music Group, ADA, Stem, Symphonic

**Watch out for:** Revenue share, selective acceptance, contract terms, rights and ownership language, whether they actually add value.

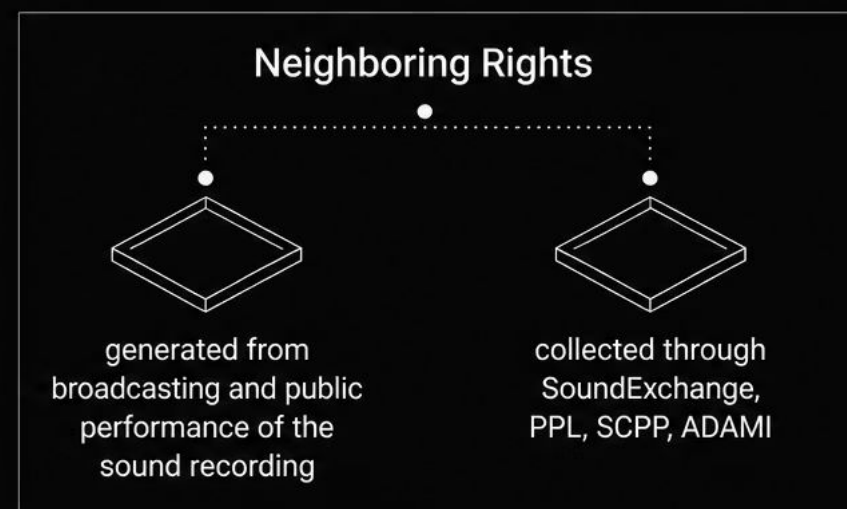
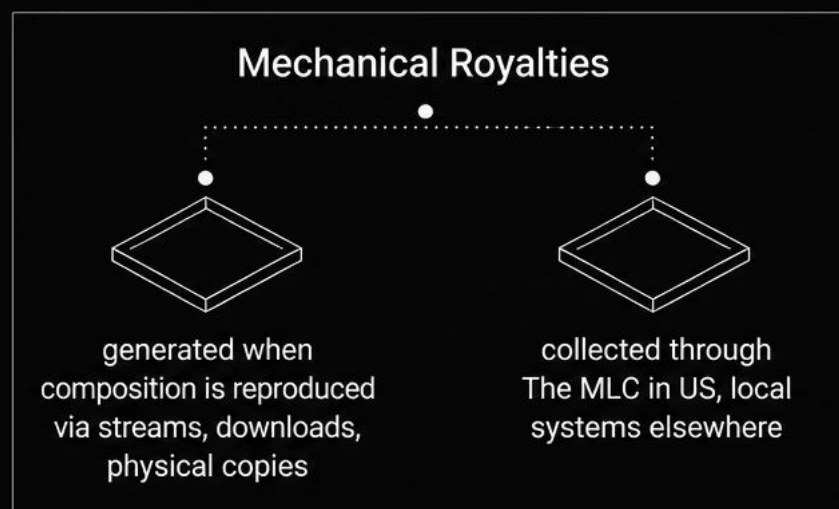
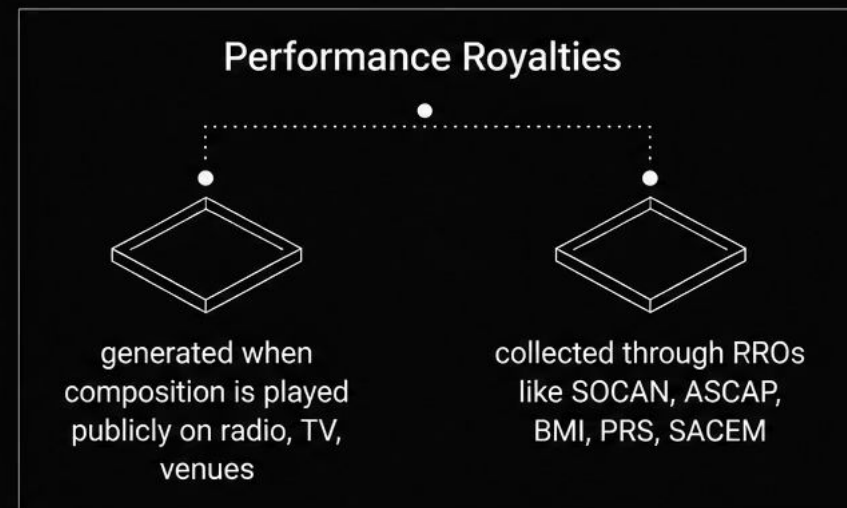
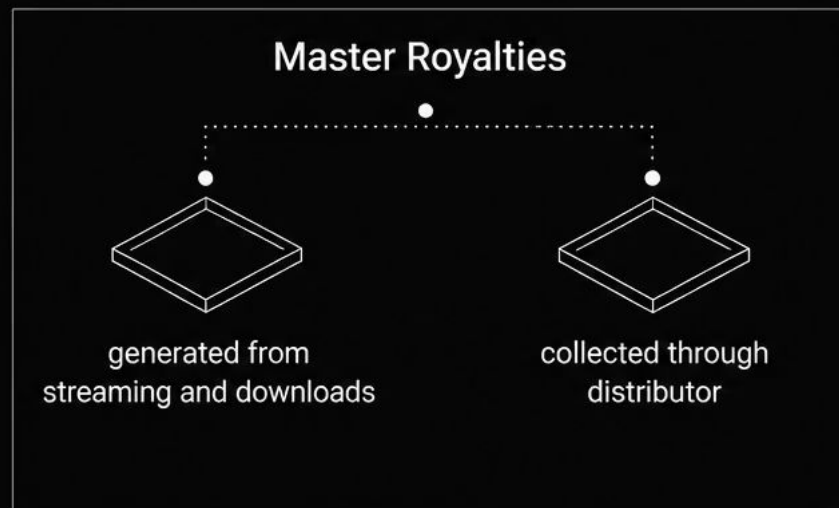
## Distributor Fit Test, Answer These Before Choosing

- How often do I release?
- Do I need unlimited uploads?
- Do I want one-time fees instead of subscriptions?
- Do I need split payments for collaborators?
- Do I release cover songs?
- Do I need YouTube Content ID?
- Do I care if music is removed when I stop paying?
- Do I need regional platforms like KKBOX or Deezer?
- Do I need physical distribution?
- Do I need fast customer support?
- Do I plan to operate as a label with multiple artists?
- Do I need publishing administration?

❏ The cheapest distributor is not always the best. The best distributor is the one that fits your release system. Do not give up a percentage unless the service provides value you cannot get alone.

# Rights Registration and Royalty Systems

Your distributor does not collect every royalty. This is one of the biggest mistakes independent artists make. They upload music and think they are done. They are not. Different royalties flow through completely different systems, and if you are not registered in each one, money may still be generated, it just may not reach you.



## Basic Registration Checklist

- Join your local PRO and register every composition
- Register splits accurately from the start
- Register sound recordings where applicable
- Register with SoundExchange if eligible (US)
- Register with The MLC for US digital mechanical royalties
- Register with neighboring rights societies when relevant
- Keep ISRC and UPC codes organized by release
- Track royalties by source, not just by total

⚠ If you perform on your own recordings and own your masters, you may need to register in more than one place. Do not assume your distributor handles all of it.

# Profiles, Release Dates, and the Rollout

Once your distributor delivers your music, claim your artist profiles, before release whenever possible. A release sends people to your profiles. If those profiles look abandoned, the release loses trust immediately. Then, once profiles are solid, build the rollout plan that gives the release a real chance to land.

## Profiles to Claim and Optimize

- Spotify for Artists
- Apple Music for Artists
- Amazon Music for Artists
- YouTube Official Artist Channel
- Deezer for Creators
- TikTok Artist Account
- Bandsintown and Songkick
- Genius and Musixmatch for lyrics

On each profile: updated photo, clear bio, social links, artist pick or pinned release, consistent branding.

## Release Date Planning

- **Emergency Release (1 week):** Only for urgent or surprise drops. Less pitching time, more stress.
- **Basic Release (2–4 weeks):** Enough for distributor processing, basic promo, pre-save, and Spotify pitch.
- **Strong Release (4–8 weeks):** Better for singles, music videos, press outreach, and content rollout.
- **Album or EP (8–12+ weeks):** Needed for multiple singles, press kits, visual campaigns, merch, and shows.

✔ Set the release date far enough ahead that you can promote calmly. A rushed release usually feels rushed.

## The Three-Stage Rollout



Do not stop promoting after release day. Release day is the start of public life, not the end of the campaign. The artists who build real momentum are the ones who treat the post-release period with the same energy as the announcement.

# Press, Playlists, and Social Media Strategy

Getting your release heard requires intentional outreach across three fronts: press and EPK materials, playlist pitching, and a consistent social media presence that builds context before, during, and after release. None of these channels work in isolation, they reinforce each other.



## EPK and Press Materials

Your Electronic Press Kit gives blogs, curators, promoters, and media people everything they need in one place. Include: artist bio in three lengths (one-liner, short, full), press photos in square/horizontal/vertical formats, private listening link, public links, release artwork, credits, genre tags, and a contact email. Make it easy for people to cover you, they should not have to chase you for materials.



## Playlist Pitching

Pitch Spotify editorial through Spotify for Artists before your release is live. Add genre, mood, instruments, story, and marketing plan, not hype. For independent playlist outreach: research carefully, target fit over quantity, and avoid paid playlist scams and bot activity. A good pitch names the specific playlist, references a similar track, and gives a clear reason why your song fits.



## Social Media Strategy

Social media is not just where you say "out now." It is where you build context. Use repeatable content buckets: music previews, process content, story posts, education, personality, community moments, visual world, and calls to action. Every post does not need to sell. Some posts build trust, some build story, some drive action. A release campaign needs all of them across the full three-stage rollout window.

- ❗ Build direct fan channels, email list, Discord, SMS, Bandcamp followers, website, alongside social media. Social platforms are rented land. Your account can lose reach. Algorithms change. Direct connection is an asset you own.

# The Full Release System in Action

Every element of this guide feeds into one operating system. The 30-Day Release System and the Full Release Checklist are how you execute it with discipline. Use them for every release, not just the big ones.



## Post-Release Momentum, Do Not Abandon the Song

### Weeks 1–4

- Saves, shares, first reactions, release content
- Story content and visualizer or music video
- Behind-the-scenes and track breakdown
- Press follow-up and fan engagement

### Month 2 and Beyond

- Remix, alternate version, live version
- DJ edit, collaboration content
- Regional pitching and sync opportunities
- Analytics review, merch, next release setup

Independent does not mean amateur. Independent means responsible. Build the song. Package it properly. Register it correctly. Release it intentionally. Promote it repeatedly. Study the results. Then build the next one.