

# ISRC & UPC Code Guide

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Every release you put out gets two kinds of codes attached. They're easy to mix up. This guide explains what each one is, how they're issued, and how to keep them organized so you never lose track of which code belongs to which recording.

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## The One-Sentence Difference

- An **ISRC** identifies a single **recording** (one specific master of one track).
- A **UPC/EAN** identifies a **product/release** you sell or distribute (a single, EP, or album as a package).

Think of it like a book: the ISRC is the chapter, the UPC is the whole book on the shelf.

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## ISRC — International Standard Recording Code

**What it is:** A globally unique 12-character code that identifies one specific sound recording (or music video). It travels with that recording everywhere — every DSP, every store, every chart, every royalty system — so streams and sales can be tracked and royalties attributed back to the right master.

**One ISRC = one recording.** That means: - The Original Mix, the Extended Mix, the Radio Edit, and a Remix each get **their own ISRC** — they're different recordings. - A re-master or re-recording of the same song gets a **new ISRC**. - If you release the exact same master on a single and later on an album, it keeps the **same ISRC** (same recording).

**Format (12 characters):** CC-XXX-YY-NNNNN - CC — Country code of the registrant (e.g., US ) - XXX — Registrant code (3 alphanumeric chars identifying who assigned it) - YY — Year of reference (last two digits of the year the ISRC was assigned) - NNNNN — Designation code (5 digits, unique per recording within that registrant/year)

Example: US-ABC-26-00001 . The code is usually written/stored without hyphens ( USABC2600001 ) in metadata fields.

**Who issues ISRCs:** - The system is administered globally by **IFPI**. - In the **United States**, the **US ISRC Manager is the RIAA** (recordingacademy/RIAA-designated agency). They issue **registrant codes** to rights owners who want to assign their own ISRCs. - In practice, you get ISRCs one of two ways (below).

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## UPC / EAN — The Product Barcode

**What it is:** The barcode number that identifies your **release as a product**. The same standard used on retail goods. On streaming it's invisible to fans, but DSPs and stores use it to identify the “package” — a single, EP, or album — and to roll up the tracks inside it.

- **UPC** = 12 digits (the North American format).
- **EAN** = 13 digits (the international format). Functionally the same system; you'll see both terms. Distributors typically assign a 13-digit EAN that works everywhere.

**One UPC = one release.** A single has one UPC. An EP with five tracks has **one UPC** for the EP and **five ISRCs** (one per track). If you re-release the same tracks as a different product (e.g., a deluxe edition or a remix package), that new product gets a **new UPC**.

**Who issues UPCs:** - The global authority is **GS1** (formerly the Uniform Code Council). GS1 licenses **company prefixes** to businesses, who then create barcodes under that prefix. - For music, you almost never buy GS1 codes directly — your **distributor assigns a free UPC** for each release out of their own GS1 prefix.

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## How Distributors Auto-Assign These Codes

This is the normal path for an independent artist:

- When you upload a release, your distributor (DistroKid, TuneCore, CD Baby, Symphonic, etc.) **automatically assigns a free UPC** to the release and a **free ISRC to each track**.
- You don't have to do anything — and for most artists this is completely fine. The codes are valid, globally recognized, and tracked correctly.
- The catch: those ISRCs are issued under the **distributor's** registrant code, not yours. The codes still belong to your recordings and follow them around, but they signal that the distributor assigned them.

**You can almost always bring your own** — every major distributor has a field to paste in your own ISRC and UPC instead of auto-generating. Use it when you've assigned your own codes (below).

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## When You Should Own Your Own Registrant Code

For a hobby artist, auto-assigned codes are fine forever. But once you're operating like a label, owning your **own ISRC registrant code** (from the RIAA/US ISRC Manager) is worth it. Get your own when:

- **You run a label** (Greyscale releasing multiple artists) and want consistent, self-controlled codes across the whole catalog.
- **You switch distributors** and want your codes to stay stable and clearly yours, rather than tied to a former distributor's prefix.

- **You assign codes before delivery** — e.g., you service promos to DJs or send to a sync library before the official release and want the ISRC locked in early.
- **You want clean catalog ownership** — your registrant code in every ISRC makes it unambiguous that these are your masters.

How to get one: apply through the **US ISRC Manager (RIAA)** for a registrant code (a small one-time/low-cost setup). Once you have it, you assign your own ISRCs by following the format above (your registrant code + year + sequential 5-digit number) and paste them into the distributor.

For UPCs: you usually **don't** need your own GS1 prefix — let the distributor assign UPCs unless you're doing serious physical/retail distribution where a GS1 company prefix makes sense.

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## Best Practices for Tracking Codes

Lost or duplicated codes cause split royalties and reporting headaches. Keep a single master log.

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**Keep one ISRC/UPC registry** — a spreadsheet (or ClickUp list) that is the single source of truth for the whole catalog.

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**Log every code at the moment of assignment**, before the release goes live.

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**One row per recording** for ISRCs, with the UPC noted on the release it belongs to.

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**Never reuse an ISRC** for a different recording, and **never assign two ISRCs** to the same master.

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**Assign a new ISRC** whenever you create a new version (extended mix, radio edit, remaster, remix).

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**Store codes without ambiguity** — keep both the hyphenated and plain forms so they paste cleanly into any system.

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**Cross-reference codes** when you register with your PRO, publishing admin, SoundExchange, and Content ID — they tie everything back to the recording.

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**Back up the registry** (cloud + local) like you back up your masters.

## Suggested registry columns

Field	Example
Release title	Nightshift EP
Track title	Nightshift (Extended Mix)
Artist	Snooko

Field	Example
ISRC	US-ABC-26-00001
UPC/EAN	0123456789012
Version	Extended Mix
Release date	2026-08-14
Distributor	Symphonic
Assigned by	Own registrant / Distributor
Date assigned	2026-07-10
Notes	Promo serviced 7/01

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## Bottom line

**ISRC = the recording. UPC = the product.** Each track gets its own ISRC; each release gets one UPC. Distributors hand both out free, which is fine to start — but once you’re running a label, get your **own RIAA registrant code** for ISRCs so your catalog’s codes are consistent and clearly yours. Track every code in one registry from the moment it’s assigned.