

# Music Supervisors 101

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*A practical primer on music supervisors and sync licensing: who they are, how placements actually happen, what they need from you, how to pitch, and how the money works. US-focused.*

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## What a music supervisor does

A **music supervisor** is the person responsible for the music in a screen project — TV shows, films, ads, trailers, games, and increasingly branded/digital content. They are the bridge between the creative team (director, editor, ad agency, showrunner) and the music world (artists, labels, publishers).

Their job typically includes: - **Choosing the music** — finding songs and score that fit the scene, tone, budget, and brand. - **Clearing the rights** — securing the two licenses every placement needs (see below) within the production's budget and timeline. - **Budget management** — spending a fixed music budget wisely across many cues. - **Negotiation** — agreeing fees and terms with rights holders. - **Spotting & creative direction** — working scene-by-scene (“spotting sessions”) to decide where music goes and what it should do.

They are gatekeepers for sync, but they're also problem-solvers on a clock. The easier you make their job, the more likely you get used — and used again.

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## The two licenses every placement needs

Because a song has two copyrights, every sync requires **two licenses**:

1. **Sync license** — for the **composition** (the song). Granted by the publisher / songwriter.
2. **Master-use license** — for the **specific recording**. Granted by the master owner (label or artist).

If different people control these two halves, the supervisor has to clear **both**. This is why **one-stop rights** (one party controls or can grant both) are so valuable — it removes friction and risk, and supervisors strongly prefer it when budgets and timelines are tight.

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## How placements actually happen

Placements come from a few main channels:

- **Direct relationships** — a supervisor knows and trusts an artist, label, publisher, or sync agent and goes to them.
- **Pitches to a brief** — supervisors send out a “brief” (e.g., “uplifting indie-electronic, 120–128 BPM, no lyrics about heartbreak, female vocal, budget \$X”) and rights holders/agents pitch matching tracks.

- **Sync agencies / libraries** — many artists place music through sync agents or production-music libraries that have standing relationships and pre-cleared catalogs.
- **Music search / catalog platforms** — supervisors search tagged catalogs by mood, genre, BPM, and lyrical theme.
- **Discovery** — DSP playlists, social, and word of mouth.

For instrumental/electronic acts (house, tech-house, etc.), placements often skew toward **ads, games, trailers, sports, fashion, and montage/needle-drop moments** where mood and energy matter more than lyrics — and where clean instrumentals are gold.

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## What music supervisors need from you

Make yourself “sync-ready.” Supervisors reject great songs every week simply because the assets or rights aren’t in order. Have all of this ready:

### 1. Clean, one-stop rights

- Know exactly who controls the **master** and the **publishing**, and have authority to grant (or quickly clear) both.
- **One-stop** = you can license everything from one place. This is your biggest competitive advantage as an independent artist. Avoid uncleared samples — an uncleared sample makes a track unusable for sync.

### 2. High-quality masters

- 24-bit WAV, properly mixed and mastered, correctly titled.
- No surprises: if there’s an uncleared sample or interpolation, disclose it (and ideally don’t pitch it).

### 3. Alternate versions

Supervisors love options because they have to fit picture: - **Instrumental** (essential — many placements can’t use vocals). - **A cappella / vocal stems**. - **Clean / edited** version (no explicit language). - **Shorter edits / loops / 30s & 60s cuts** (especially for ads). - **Stems** for custom edits when allowed.

### 4. Complete, accurate metadata

- Title, artist, writers + splits, publishers, PROs, IPI numbers, ISRC, ISWC, BPM, key, mood/genre tags, lyrics, and rights-holder contacts.
- Embed metadata in the files and include a one-page sheet. Bad metadata = lost placements and lost money.

## 5. Fast, clear contacts

- One responsive point of contact who can say yes and clear quickly. Slow or unreachable rights holders lose placements to whoever answers first.
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## How to pitch a music supervisor

1. **Pitch to the brief, not the wishlist.** Only send tracks that genuinely fit what they asked for. Mismatched pitches train them to ignore you.
  2. **Keep it short.** A line of context + a private streaming link + instant access to instrumental and metadata. Don't attach files or write essays.
  3. **Lead with the fit and the rights.** "Instrumental tech-house, 124 BPM, one-stop, uncleared samples: none, instrumental + stems available." That sentence answers their first three questions.
  4. **Make access effortless.** Private, organized link; clearly labeled versions; downloadable on request. No login walls.
  5. **Be reachable and fast.** When they bite, respond same-day with clear terms. Speed wins syncs.
  6. **Build the relationship, don't spam.** Supervisors reuse trusted sources. One good, well-targeted pitch and a smooth clearance beats a flood of generic emails. Respect their time and they'll come back.
  7. **Consider a sync agent or library** if you don't have direct relationships — they bring briefs and credibility, usually for a percentage of the fees they land.
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## Fees and backend (how the money works)

A sync deal usually has two components:

### 1. Sync fee (upfront)

A one-time license fee, typically split between the **master side** and the **publishing side** (often roughly equal). Ranges vary enormously by use: - **Small/student/indie/digital:** low hundreds to low thousands. - **TV episodic / streaming:** low thousands to tens of thousands depending on usage and prominence. - **National ads / film trailers / major campaigns:** can reach five or six figures. - **Drivers of fee size:** budget of the project, prominence of the placement (background vs. featured vs. main title), media (TV vs. national ad vs. game vs. trailer), territory (one country vs. worldwide), term (limited vs. in perpetuity), and exclusivity.

### 2. Backend (ongoing)

- **Performance royalties** flow when the placement **airs/broadcasts**, collected through your **PRO** (this is why PRO registration and a **cue sheet** — the production's list of music used — matter; the cue sheet is how PROs know to pay you). Streaming-only placements generate less backend than broadcast TV.

- For the master side, broadcast/digital performance may generate **SoundExchange**-type income depending on use.
- Backend on a long-running, widely-aired show can ultimately exceed the upfront fee.

### Common deal terms to watch

- **Exclusivity** — exclusive uses pay more but lock the song up; non-exclusive lets you license elsewhere.
- **Term & territory** — “in perpetuity, worldwide, all media” is the most valuable to the buyer (and should command a higher fee).
- **MFN (“Most Favored Nations”)** — both sides (master and publishing) get equal terms; common in sync.
- **Options** — buyer may pay a smaller fee now with options to expand usage later.

**Manager’s note:** Sync is one of the best income streams for an independent artist because it pays on both copyrights, builds discovery, and rewards being *organized* more than being famous. The artists who win sync are the ones who are easy to license: one-stop rights, clean instrumentals and stems, perfect metadata, and a contact who answers fast. Get the catalog sync-ready first — then pitch.

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### Quick glossary

- **Music supervisor** — chooses and clears music for screen/media projects.
  - **Sync license** — license for the **composition** to pair with picture.
  - **Master-use license** — license for the **recording** to pair with picture.
  - **One-stop** — a single party can grant both licenses; highly preferred.
  - **Brief** — a supervisor’s spec for the music they need.
  - **Cue sheet** — the production’s log of all music used; drives PRO performance payouts.
  - **Backend** — ongoing royalties (mainly performance) after the upfront sync fee.
  - **MFN** — equal terms across rights holders on a placement.
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*This is an overview, not legal advice. Have an entertainment attorney review any sync/master-use license before signing.*