

# Royalties & Registration Guide

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*Greyscale Music Group — Artist Management Toolkit · Money Kit*

**The goal of this document: get the artist registered in every place that owes them money, so nothing is left uncollected.** Most independent artists collect their distributor's streaming payout and *nothing else* — leaving publishing, mechanical, and digital-performance royalties sitting in collection pools for years (and in some cases, eventually forfeited).

Read the companion `Music Revenue Streams Guide.md` first if you need the full map of where money comes from. This guide is the **how-to-register** playbook.

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## The core distinction (read this twice)

A single song you wrote and recorded contains **two separate copyrights**, and each one is paid on a **different system**:

	THE MASTER (the recording)	THE SONG (the composition)
What it is	The actual audio file	The lyrics + melody + chords
Owned by	Artist / label	Songwriter(s) + publisher
Pays via	Distributor, SoundExchange	PRO + MLC + publishing admin

**You can be fully set up on the master side (you have a distributor) and collecting \$0 on the song side.** This guide closes that gap.

There are **four pillars** of royalty collection. You need all four:

1. **PRO** — performance royalties (the song performed publicly)
  2. **The MLC** — US mechanical royalties (the song reproduced/streamed)
  3. **SoundExchange** — digital-performance royalties (the recording on digital radio)
  4. **Publishing admin / sync** — collects the worldwide odds-and-ends and chases sync
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## Pillar 1 — Performance royalties: your PRO

### What a PRO does

A **Performing Rights Organization** collects money whenever your **song** is **publicly performed** — radio, TV, streaming (the songwriter's performance share), live venues, clubs, bars, gyms, restaurants, retail. It pays you in two slices:

- **Writer's share** — paid to you as the songwriter.
- **Publisher's share** — paid to your **publishing entity**. If you never set up a publisher, this ~50% is either unpaid or only partially recovered. **Set up a publisher even if it's just you.**

### Choose ONE PRO (you can only belong to one at a time)

PRO	Songwriter fee	Publisher fee	Notes
ASCAP	~\$50 one-time	~\$50 one-time	Open membership; member-owned; easy online signup
BMI	\$0 (free) for songwriters	~\$150 (sole prop) / ~\$250 (other) for publishers	Free writer signup; widely used
SESAC	—	—	<b>Invite-only.</b> Not an option for most new artists

**Practical default:** For a new self-managed artist, **BMI (free writer signup)** or **ASCAP** are the realistic choices. Pick one and stay consistent across all your songs — splits get messy if co-writers are on different PROs (that's normal and fine, but each writer registers their *own* share with *their own* PRO).

### Step-by-step: register with your PRO

1. **Sign up as a WRITER.** Provide legal name, SSN/EIN, address, bank/ACH info for direct deposit.
2. **Sign up / affiliate a PUBLISHER.** Choose a unique publishing company name (search availability in the PRO's repertory first — it must be unique). This is your publisher's-share entity.
3. **Set your writer/publisher split** (commonly 50/50 writer/publisher for a self-published writer — you receive *both* halves).
4. **Register every song (work)** you've written:
  - Title, alternate titles, ISWC (if any)
  - All songwriters + their PRO affiliations + ownership %
  - Publisher(s) + ownership %
  - Performer / recording artist
  - **Splits must total 100%** on both the writer side and the publisher side.
5. **Keep registering** — every new release, every co-write, every remix you wrote. Unregistered works don't get matched to incoming money.

**Co-writes:** Each writer registers their own percentage with their own PRO. Confirm splits in writing (a one-page split sheet — see template at the end) *before* release to avoid disputes.

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## Pillar 2 — US mechanical royalties: The MLC

### What the MLC does

The **Mechanical Licensing Collective (mlc.co)** collects the **mechanical royalty** owed whenever your song is reproduced — most importantly the **mechanical generated by every interactive stream** in the US (Spotify, Apple, Amazon, etc.). This is **separate from and on top of** the master payout your distributor sends you, and separate from the PRO performance royalty.

**Why this matters:** Streaming mechanicals are pennies per stream, but at scale they're real, and they accumulate in the MLC's pool waiting for the rightful owner to claim them. **If you've released music and never registered with the MLC, this money exists and is unclaimed right now.**

### Important: distributor “publishing” add-ons vs. the MLC

Many distributors offer a **publishing administration add-on** (DistroKid's Publishing, TuneCore Publishing, CD Baby Pro, Songtrust, etc.). These services register with the MLC, your PRO's publisher side, and foreign societies **on your behalf** — and take a commission (often ~10–20% of publishing, or a flat fee).

- If you use a publishing admin, **do NOT also self-register with the MLC for the same works** — you'll create conflicting claims. Let the admin handle it.
- If you do **not** use an admin, **register directly with the MLC yourself (it's free).**

Pick one path per work and be consistent.

### Step-by-step: register directly with the MLC (free)

1. Go to **mlc.co** and create a **Member** account as a **self-administered songwriter/publisher**.
2. Provide your publisher info (the same publishing entity you set up at your PRO), tax info (W-9/EIN), and bank/ACH details.
3. **Register your works:** title, songwriters + splits, your publisher share, ISRCs of the recordings, ISWC if available.
4. **Match your recordings:** use the MLC portal to claim/match unmatched royalties tied to your ISRCs.
5. Check the portal periodically for **unmatched works** and claim anything that's yours.

**Mechanical on physical/downloads:** If you press vinyl/CDs or sell downloads of songs you don't 100% own, you owe the **statutory mechanical rate** per unit (currently ~12¢ for a song 5 minutes or under; longer songs prorate per minute). For your own 100%-owned songs you owe it to yourself, so it's a non-issue — but budget for it on covers or co-writes. Physical/

download mechanicals are licensed via the Harry Fox Agency or directly, not the MLC (the MLC covers streaming/download mechanicals under the blanket license).

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## Pillar 3 — Digital-performance royalties: SoundExchange

### What SoundExchange does

**SoundExchange (soundexchange.com)** collects a **master-side** performance royalty paid when your **sound recording** is played on **non-interactive digital radio** — **SiriusXM, Pandora (radio tier), and internet/webcast radio**. This is **not** covered by your PRO (PRO = the song; SoundExchange = the recording). Two different checks for the same airplay.

### The split SoundExchange pays

- **45%** → the **featured artist**
- **5%** → non-featured musicians/vocalists (via the AFM & SAG-AFTRA Intellectual Property Rights Distribution Fund)
- **50%** → the **rights owner** (the master owner — for an indie, that's usually *you* again)

**Register BOTH hats** (featured artist **and** rights owner) so you collect both the 45% and the 50%.

### Step-by-step: register with SoundExchange

1. Go to **soundexchange.com** and create an account.
2. Register as a **Recording Artist** (featured-artist share) **and** as a **Rights Owner** (master-owner share) — if you own your masters, do both.
3. Provide legal/business info, tax forms (W-9), and bank/ACH details.
4. **Add your catalog** by ISRC (your distributor assigns ISRCs — pull them from your distributor dashboard).
5. Keep your catalog updated with each release.

**Bonus — international neighboring rights:** Outside the US, foreign neighboring-rights societies pay performers and master owners for broadcast/public performance of recordings. SoundExchange does **not** collect these for you. If you get meaningful overseas radio/TV play, consider a **neighboring-rights administrator** to register and collect foreign master royalties (they take a commission).

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## Pillar 4 — Publishing admin & sync

### Publishing administration

A **publishing administrator** (Songtrust, distributor pub add-ons, or a traditional admin deal) registers your songs **worldwide** — every foreign PRO/mechanical society, the MLC, YouTube publishing, etc. —

and collects the long tail of international publishing money you can't easily reach alone. They typically take ~**10–20%** of publishing collected (or a flat annual fee for some services).

**When it's worth it:** As soon as you have meaningful streams in multiple countries, an admin usually nets you more than they cost because foreign collection is genuinely hard to do solo. **When to skip it:** Very early, US-only, low volume — self-register with PRO + MLC + SoundExchange and add an admin later.

**Don't double-register:** If an admin handles your MLC/PRO-publisher registrations, don't also self-register the same works. Choose one system per work.

## Sync licensing

Sync (placements in film/TV/ads/games/social) isn't a registration — it's **business development**. To capture it: - Keep clean, documented ownership (splits, masters) so you can clear a deal fast — supervisors pass on songs with messy or unknown ownership. - Have **instrumental and clean versions** rendered and ready. - Register works at your PRO so **back-end performance royalties** from the placement airing flow to you automatically. - Pitch via sync agents, libraries, your distributor's sync program, or directly — they take **20–50%** of the upfront fee.

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## The “Register Everywhere” master checklist

Work top to bottom. Check each box per artist/project.

### A. Foundation (do these first)

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**Decide ownership structure:** are you self-published, or using a publishing admin? (Determines who registers the MLC/foreign side.)

☐

**Create a publishing entity name** (unique — check your PRO's repertory). Even a sole proprietorship works.

☐

**Get an EIN** (free at [irs.gov](https://irs.gov)) for the publishing entity so you're not putting your SSN everywhere.

☐

**Gather IDs for the catalog:** ISRCs (from distributor) and ISWCs (assigned by PRO when you register works).

### B. Master side

☐

**Distributor** set up and delivering to all DSPs (Spotify, Apple, Amazon, YouTube Music, Beatport, Bandcamp, etc.).

☐

**Content ID** enabled via distributor (collects on YouTube uploads of your music).

☐

**SoundExchange** — registered as **Featured Artist AND Rights Owner**; catalog added by ISRC.

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**(If overseas radio play)** neighboring-rights administrator engaged.

☐

**Bandcamp / D2C store** live for downloads, vinyl, merch.

### C. Song side

☐

**PRO** (ASCAP or BMI or SESAC) — registered as **Writer**.

☐

**PRO Publisher** affiliate set up (so you collect the publisher's share).

☐

**Every song registered** at the PRO with correct writer + publisher splits (= 100% each side).

☐

**The MLC** — registered (directly OR via publishing admin, not both) and works registered/matched.

☐

**Publishing admin** engaged if collecting internationally (Songtrust / distributor pub / etc.).

☐

**Unmatched royalties checked** at the MLC and claimed.

### D. Per-release hygiene (repeat every single release)

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**Split sheet signed** by all collaborators *before* release (template below).

☐

New work registered at **PRO** (all co-writers register their own shares).

☐

New work registered at **MLC** (or confirmed your admin did it).

☐

New recording added to **SoundExchange** by ISRC.

☐

ISRCs and ISWCs logged in your **catalog spreadsheet** (one row per song).

☐

**Sync-ready files** (instrumental + clean) rendered and stored.

### E. Money operations

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**Bank/ACH + tax forms (W-9)** on file at every collector (PRO, MLC, SoundExchange, distributor, admin).

☐

**Calendar the payout schedules** so you can reconcile (most pay **quarterly**; distributors pay monthly).

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**Quarterly reconciliation:** confirm money arrived from each pillar; investigate anything missing.

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## Who pays when (typical cadence)

Collector	What it pays	Typical frequency
Distributor	Master streaming/downloads	Monthly
PRO (ASCAP/BMI/SESAC)	Song performance	Quarterly
The MLC	US streaming mechanicals	Monthly/quarterly
SoundExchange	Digital-radio master performance	Quarterly
Publishing admin	Worldwide publishing	Quarterly (after their collection lag)
Neighboring-rights admin	Foreign master performance	1–2x/year (long lag)

**Expect lag.** Royalties trail usage by **3–9+ months** as they move through collectors. International is slowest. Don't panic if a placement or release takes a couple of quarters to fully show up.

## Common ways artists lose money (avoid these)

1. **Never set up a publisher** → forfeit the publisher's share of performance royalties.
2. **Never registered with the MLC** → streaming mechanicals sit unclaimed.
3. **Never registered with SoundExchange** → SiriusXM/Pandora master royalties unclaimed.
4. **Double-registered** (self + admin on the same works) → conflicting claims freeze payments.
5. **No split sheets** → disputes block registration and stall every downstream payment.
6. **Inconsistent metadata** (name spelled differently, wrong ISRCs) → money can't be matched to you.
7. **Stale banking/tax info** → checks bounce or are withheld for missing W-9.

## APPENDIX — Split Sheet Template

**TEMPLATE ONLY — not legal advice. Have an entertainment attorney review before signing.**

Use this for **every** song with more than one contributor. Fill it out and have everyone sign **before** release.

### SONG SPLIT SHEET

Song Title: [FILL IN]

Alternate Title(s): [FILL IN]

Date Created: [FILL IN]

Studio / Session Location: [FILL IN]

Intended Release / Project: [FILL IN]

ISRC (recording): [FILL IN if known] ISWC (composition): [FILL IN if

known]

WRITER / COMPOSITION SPLITS (must total 100%)

Legal Name	Stage Name	Role (writer/producer/topline)	PRO	IPI/CAE #
[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]
[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]
[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]
[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]
[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]
TOTAL WRITER %:				
100%				

MASTER / RECORDING OWNERSHIP (if applicable – must total 100%)

Owner (artist/label/entity)	Master %	Contact/Email
[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]
[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]	[FILL IN]
TOTAL MASTER %: 100%		

SAMPLES / INTERPOLATIONS USED? ☐ No ☐ Yes – describe and note clearance status:  
[FILL IN]

AGREEMENT

The parties confirm the songwriter splits above are accurate and complete, and agree these percentages govern registration and royalty collection for this work.

Signatures:

_____	Date: _____	_____	Date: _____
[FILL IN – Name]		[FILL IN – Name]	
_____	Date: _____	_____	Date: _____
[FILL IN – Name]		[FILL IN – Name]	

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*All fees, rates, and percentages in this guide are realistic working figures for US independent artists and can change with statutory rate periods and each organization's current terms. Verify current fees*



*on each organization's website ([ascap.com](http://ascap.com), [bmi.com](http://bmi.com), [sesac.com](http://sesac.com), [mlc.co](http://mlc.co), [soundexchange.com](http://soundexchange.com)) before registering, and consult an entertainment attorney or qualified royalty/publishing administrator for anything involving co-writes, label deals, or significant sums.*