Every song you drop has 2 copyrights.

Most artists and producers only collect on one. Here's who owns each one, how each one gets paid, the four things to do before the drop, and exactly how to do them.

1 The SONG

The words + the melody.

WHO OWNS IT

Everyone who wrote it, plus their publisher if they have one.

HOW IT GETS PAID

A PRO (ASCAP, BMI, SESAC or GMR) + The MLC.

EARNS WHEN

It's streamed, played on radio, performed live, or used in TV and film.

2 The RECORDING

The actual audio. The master.

WHO OWNS IT

You, if you're independent and paid for it. Your label, if you're signed.

HOW IT GETS PAID

Your distributor + SoundExchange.

PLOT TWIST

US AM/FM radio pays the song's owners. The recording gets nothing.

IN THE STUDIO

Everyone who wrote it owns a piece.

Lyrics, melody, the beat: in hip-hop and R&B, the artist and the producer are often both writers. Sampled something? That owner gets a share too.

Split sheet = one page with every writer's name, their %, their PRO, and everyone's signature.

Agree on splits in the room, before the drop. It protects everybody.

BEFORE YOU DROP

Check these off.

FOR THE SONG _____

☐ Split sheet signed by every writer

The shares add up to 100%. Every writer signs and keeps a copy. Grab the free split sheet at **thelyricalparlor.com/musicbiz**.

☐ Song registered with your PRO

ASCAP, BMI, SESAC or GMR. Each writer makes sure the song is registered at their own PRO, with the same shares as the split sheet. How: page 3.

☐ Song registered with The MLC

The MLC pays the song's share when it's streamed or downloaded in the US. No publisher? You can join and register your songs yourself at themlc.com. How: page 4.

☐ Signed up with SoundExchange

SoundExchange pays the recording's share when it plays on US satellite, internet and cable radio. Featured artists get paid directly. How: page 4.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR VIDEO

AUDIO

Covering a released song? The law lets anyone record it, at a set rate.

VIDEO

Putting a song on video? No automatic license. Every song owner has to say yes.

That's why we get the song owners' OK before any cover goes up on TLP.

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How to do each one.

The post tells you what to do. This is the how: where to go, what to have ready, what it costs, and the mistake that loses people money.

1 Sign a split sheet

DO THIS

1. Before anyone leaves the session, list every writer. Lyrics, melody and the beat all count.
2. Agree each writer's share. The shares have to add up to 100%.
3. Write down each writer's legal name, PRO and IPI number.
4. Everyone signs. Everyone keeps a copy. A phone photo works.

HAVE READY

The free split sheet from **thelyricalparlor.com/musicbiz**, and each writer's legal name.

COST

Free.

WATCH OUT

"We'll sort it out later." If writers register different shares, the money for the part they disagree on can be held until it's settled. And a split sheet covers the song only: who owns the recording needs its own agreement.

2 Register the song with your PRO

DO THIS

1. Join one PRO as a writer. ASCAP and BMI are open to everyone. SESAC and GMR are by invitation.
2. Log in and register the song (they call it a "work"): the title, every writer, and each writer's share.
3. Use the same shares as the split sheet. Add each co-writer's IPI number so the song links to them.
4. Ask your co-writers to check that the song shows up in their accounts too.

HAVE READY

Your PRO login, the signed split sheet, and your co-writers' IPI numbers.

COST

Joining as a writer is free at ASCAP and BMI.

WATCH OUT

Performance money comes in two halves: the writer's share and the publisher's share. No publisher? Ask your PRO how to collect the publisher's half too, or it can sit unclaimed. You can only be with one PRO at a time.

Checked against ASCAP, BMI, The MLC and SoundExchange in November 2026. Fees and rules change, so check their sites before you pay anything. Education only, not legal advice: see the small print on page 2.

The two most people skip.

3 Register the song with The MLC

The MLC collects the song's "mechanical" money from US streaming and download services and pays writers and publishers. The services pay for it, so it takes nothing out of your money.

DO THIS

1. Have a publisher or a publishing administrator? They register for you. Confirm with them and skip to step 4.
2. No publisher? Join at themlc.com as a self-administered songwriter.
3. Register each song with your share. Every co-writer who handles their own publishing registers their own share.
4. Add the recording's ISRC if you have it. It helps match the song to its streams.

HAVE READY

Your IPI number, the song's writers and shares, the ISRC from your distributor, and your tax and bank details.

COST

Free to join. Free to register.

WATCH OUT

The MLC is not your PRO. Your PRO pays performance money. The MLC pays mechanical money. Registering with one does not register you with the other, and The MLC covers the US only.

4 Sign up with SoundExchange

SoundExchange collects the recording's money from US digital radio: satellite radio, internet radio stations and cable music channels. The split is set by law: 50% to the recording's owner, 45% to the featured artist, 5% to backing players and singers.

DO THIS

1. Sign up at soundexchange.com.
2. Independent and own your masters? Register as both the featured artist and the rights owner, so you collect both parts.
3. List your recordings with their ISRCs.
4. Producers: ask the artist for a "letter of direction." It tells SoundExchange to pay your part of the artist's share straight to you.

HAVE READY

Your list of recordings with their ISRCs, and your tax and payment details.

COST

Free.

WATCH OUT

Streams where the listener picks the song are not SoundExchange money. Those are paid through your distributor. And the artist's 45% is paid straight to the artist, even if you're signed: a label can't hold it back to cover what you owe.

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YOUR SONG FILE

One page per song.

Every place that pays you asks for the same few numbers. Fill this in once for each song and keep it with the split sheet.

The basics

SONG TITLE

RELEASE DATE

ARTISTS

PRODUCERS

DISTRIBUTOR

WHO OWNS THE RECORDING

The numbers

YOUR IPI NUMBER

Your writer ID. Your PRO gives it to you when you join.

ISRC

The recording's ID. Your distributor gives one to each track.

UPC

The release's barcode. From your distributor.

ISWC

The song's ID. It shows up in your PRO account after the song is registered.

PRO WORK NUMBER

The number your PRO gives the song.

MLC SONG CODE

The code The MLC gives the song.

Done on

SPLIT SHEET SIGNED

PRO

THE MLC

SOUNDEXCHANGE

SAMPLES AND WHO CLEARED THEM

NOTES

Song ready for the screen?

Cinematic performance sessions at The Lyrical Parlor in Atlanta, and on the road.

Book a session

From our notes on Donald Passman's book, "All You Need to Know About the Music Business." Education only, not legal advice: see the small print on page 2.