

## **How to find, land, and work a music publishing deal**

A music publishing deal can be an additional revenue generator for a songwriter, and we've got advice on how to prepare your material and get into the mix.

For any indie artist, there are tried and true ways to earn a few bucks: sell albums, downloads, concert tickets, and merchandise. But what about the more elusive streams of income open to songwriters? Many independent artists may have heard the term "publishing deal" thrown around, but the process of understanding, finding, solidifying, and earning money under the right sort of music publishing deal can be mystifying.

To help lift the shroud, read on for some hard-earned wisdom from Natalie Nicole Gilbert, a Los Angeles-based singer and songwriter who has worked in music publishing, broadcasting, and licensing for 20 years.

**What exactly is a music publishing deal?** It's a relationship with a publisher in which they represent one or more of your compositions, usually for a set period of time, and they take a percentage cut of any revenue you earn related to those compositions.

**When should indie artists start to look for publishing deals?** It's never too early to get this search on your radar — much like finding a good entertainment lawyer. On the other hand, it's best to approach publishers when you have a collection, no matter how small, of tunes that are truly marketable.

It also helps to reach out once you have a set of materials that make it easy to demonstrate your marketability and level of skill and professionalism, items like professional-quality demos, headshots, cover letters, and ideally, your own website, including a hidden or password-protected spot where they can download digital copies of your available music. Even videos of your live performances can help.

So with that in mind, if all you have today is a very rough MP3 and your last headshot was taken ten years ago, take the time to update your assets before you start pitching to publishers and catalogs.

**What kind of indie artist can benefit the most from a music publishing deal?** The kind of artist that benefits most from a publishing deal is an artist who performs out very little, if at all. Even as I say this, though, take note that I'm not saying a composer or songwriter should ever stop performing entirely. It's important to stay engaged with fans and listeners to keep a sharpened sense of what resonates most with your audience.

For an artist who is especially shy, exhausted by performing too much, or has other obligations and interests in life that prevent regular touring, a publishing deal is a great way to lengthen the life and reach of his or her music so it can circulate with other artists and mediums like TV, film, or sheet music.

My friend Dean H. Anderson, who's a fellow composer, has also pointed out that artists who are particularly prolific and have a large surplus of material, which they

couldn't possibly perform themselves, can really benefit from a publishing deal. For them, it can be great to utilize a publisher to find other artists who might be able to perform those surplus songs, so the compositions don't just sit around and gather dust.

**What about artists who do tour a lot?** Publishing deals can be a great way for touring artists and bands to expand their revenue portfolios, inviting multiple streams of income from the same songs and works they're performing on the road — or even different works that aren't as viable for concerts, but may be great for beginning piano books or backdrop music beds in a reality show.

**Do all publishing deals look the same?** They're not one-size-fits-all. Shop for the one that makes the most sense for your present compositions in today's market. If a publisher wants to sign your work indefinitely, negotiate to either start with just one to five years, or give them just a few songs, so you're not landlocked if they aren't able to shop your work the way you'd hoped.

Much like your stock portfolio and general revenue streams, diversity is key — especially at the start. Over time, if you find one company that's a good fit and your sense is that it's the right time to put your entire catalog with them, go for it. But make that choice after you've had the time to do your homework and gotten to know the publishing company.

**If it's the right time for an indie artist to seek out a deal, what's the best way to find and approach the right publisher?** Pick up a copy of the latest *Songwriter's Market* and read through the listings. Pay special attention to the ways that different publishers request your materials.

There's also a fine balance to strike between keeping it simple and giving them enough information at the start. Label absolutely everything you send with your name and contact information. Assume that the CD will be separated from the cover letter, the DVD, and anything else you tuck in the package. Also, make sure your digital file metadata is clean, accurate, and plentiful. Make interacting with your materials as simple as possible.

**What info should you include in your pitch?** It can be easier to demonstrate your value to a publishing company if you've already been generating some buzz and movement on your songs. Have you had great online sales via Amazon, iTunes, and Google Play? Include those sales numbers and a list of the continents where your music is downloaded the most; but again, keep it concise. Has your music been picked up in a reputable film or TV show or included on a worthwhile soundtrack? Have you won any recent music awards? Let them know.

Above all, don't wait until you've signed with any kind of music representative before you start pitching your music to filmmakers and fellow artists. Pound the pavement yourself and learn everything about the business side of the music industry that you can. It will cost you far less to know too much than too little.

**What are some of the most widespread misconceptions about publishing deals?** One of the most common misconceptions is how the chain interlinks. On top of my own musical pursuits, I also work with a large stock music library, and we get calls

there frequently from composers looking to land their small collection of 20 tracks in our massive library of over 380,000 tracks. While there are various exceptions in every field, for the most part, it doesn't work that way.

**How does it work, then?** The artist composes and hands off music to a publisher, if the artist doesn't have his or her own publishing company. The publisher then passes the music off to a larger publisher or a small library, or an artist or record label, who then may or may not pass it off to a larger conglomerate library where supervisors and editors can do mass music searches for everything under the sun.

It's absolutely possible that a music supervisor may find an artist directly and be kind enough to negotiate with them for \$3,000, all in, to place a song in a film project — and the more you widen your network with filmmakers and music supervisors, the better your chances of those direct licensing opportunities — but more often, it's a messy third- or fourth-degree separation from the artist that puts your work on someone's searching radar.

**Does that lessen the amount of money an artist earns?** Yes, the larger those degrees of separation, the more cuts those middle men will take and the more likely that the end users' cue sheet reporting will not be fully accurate, meaning that even in this digital age, you may not get paid everything you've earned. That's why companies like TuneSat.com exist, to better track the use of your music. It's also why you should be diversifying your portfolio, nurturing all of your connections, and maximizing the quality of your music and your metadata, so it can travel further and be tracked with more accuracy. Register your work with a performing rights organization like ASCAP or BMI, with SoundExchange, TuneSat, as well as Shazam and Rumblefish, which is easily done via CD Baby, so your music is easy to track and find.

**Can you elaborate on why registrations like that are important?** Your worst luck would be to finally make it to the ear of a great music supervisor who is ready and able to toss \$5,000 your way to place your composition in a great film — but she can't figure out which artist or publishing company owns the rights to the song she discovered online because the song isn't registered with a PRO, the artist doesn't have a website or searchable online contact information, or the metadata for the file she uncovered has no insightful story to tell.

Sit down with one of your MP3s and Google the lyrics or title and see what comes up. Are you findable? If not, start leaving an online footprint by posting your lyrics on lyric sites, creating artist and music profiles on popular sites like SoundCloud and ReverbNation, and make sure your music is in the most frequently-searched e-stores like iTunes, Amazon, and Google Play. Also, be sure that every iteration of your song's title is registered with your PRO.

**Once you sign a publishing deal, what sort of work is expected of you?** This varies greatly based on the deal. If it's a single song or work deal, the publisher will largely only need the assets pertaining to that one song and access to any related stems for the length of your agreement with that publisher.

On the other side of the spectrum, if you have a term writing deal with a publisher, they may want every song you write during the term of your agreement. That means that it's wise to limit that term to just one year, so your options aren't too limited. In the latter deal, they're also more interested in your long-term output, so are more likely to pair you with other writers to strengthen the resulting collaborations during the time period of your agreement.

**Once you're in a publishing relationship, what are some tips for engaging in a sustainable, long-term way?** As with any business relationship, you want to stay in the forefront of your publisher's mind without being a pest. Keep correspondences brief but consistent. Pay extra attention to specs on file type, length of recording, any notes on how to label files, and other such details. Don't get too anxious if you don't hear anything for a while. Set yourself up for success by having a recording set-up at home – even a basic one – so you can create requested files as needed.

Above all, don't assume that because you have a publishing deal, or any other kind of management or recording deal inked, that your work is done. No matter how large or small your team, it's still incumbent upon you to keep your skills sharp, your product top notch, and your network well rounded. When and if things start to feel a bit stagnant or landlocked, start back at the beginning. Find a new source of inspiration or revisit one that always lights a fire under you, update your tools or take classes to sharpen your skill sets, and continually collaborate and expand your network by helping others.

**What if the answer always seems to be “no”?** If a publisher isn't interested in your work today, don't lose heart. I've heard some publishers say that until your music is making \$5,000 a year or more there's not much point to their administrating it. This is because with their typical 50/50 split, they would annually have to pay more than the \$2,500 a year they earn working with you just to maintain all the paperwork and assets on your behalf.

That's not a fixed threshold, so if your music is only making \$3,000 a year, don't let that stop you from submitting demos and EPKs to publishers. It's just a reference point to keep in mind and offer a little perspective on why publishers are able to accept some work — like the bubblegum pop you hear on the radio that only uses three chords but sells like hotcakes — but not accept others, like your masterpiece that uses every ounce of music theory you learned in college.

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