

Don't Get Ripped Off By Your Best Pal (Songwriting Credits)

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Songwriting income is frequently far more important than recording royalties, as one can see from the respective wealth of each of the four Beatles. Even though all the Fab Four's non-songwriting income had been split equally, by the time the band broke up in 1969 it was estimated that John Lennon and Paul McCartney were each ten times richer than Ringo Starr!

From a songwriter's point of view, it was educational to hear former Rolling Stones bass guitarist Bill Wyman musing on the relative positions of those in a band who write the songs, and those who don't. Wyman joined the Stones in 1962, and stayed with them until they stopped touring in 1982. You would have thought that after twenty years in the world's top band, each member could look forward to a very comfortable retirement, but it did not quite work out like that. The fact that the band was no longer working did not really affect the lifestyles of Mick Jagger or Keith Richards, the two songwriting members of the band, who kept earning huge amounts of money from the early songs they had written. But as Bill Wyman told Sky's Adam Boulton, he had no songwriting income, and after seven years living off his savings, was more than glad to be able to go back to work in 1989 when the band re-formed.

But of course it is not really the superstars who suffer most (they have record royalties, merchandising, and public appearances to tide them over). Rather, it is those who perhaps get one or two lucky breaks in their career, and then recede into the background, and are dependent on that short run of success to sustain them in future years. Anybody, for example, remember the American group the Fireballs? No? Not surprising, but they did have their fifteen minutes of fame back in 1963, with a song called "Sugar Shack" which actually topped the US charts.

Forty years later, the four members of that band still share royalties of a few hundred dollars per annum from that record. Meanwhile, Keith McCormack, who wrote the song, earns \$10,000 per year to this day from the very same song. However, it could have been \$20,000 per year! Unable to recall the proper name for a type of clothing popular with young girls in the early sixties, he asked a neighbour - and for providing the one word "leotard", he gave her 50% of the royalties for all time! That act of careless generosity probably cost Keith McCormack a million dollars over the years.

This huge long-term potential from just one hit helps to explain why a small but very shrewd mid-west studio owner back in the fifties could offer to record bands and singers free of charge in return for just a small percentage of their songwriting income. Many years later, and with only a tiny amount of his studio's output actually making it onto vinyl, he was worth \$5 million - although no single individual who recorded there ever earned anything close to that sum.

Now I accept that it is hard to get too worked up about income which you may never see, or to get too perturbed about whose name is added to the credits on a song which may never even get recorded. Songwriters can often be a little naive in business matters anyway, sometimes handing over a percentage here and a percentage there, in the hope of furthering their careers, or even out of gratitude, or a misplaced loyalty. Occasionally, they will contribute to other writers' songs without ever bothering to ensure that they will be properly credited - sometimes (believe it or not) from a feeling of embarrassment at the thought of having to broach the subject!

Even today, in spite of all that has been written on this matter, incorrect crediting is still one of the most recurring problems we come across, particularly in the case of bands where the sole

writer in the group is finding himself under pressure to credit everybody with his songs, to "avoid hassle" - and to "prevent jealousy". If you are tempted to do this - just remember.

The notion of "collective" attribution can lead low-earning writers to sign deals they should never have signed, and to credit people they should never have credited. And it is not a "trivial matter", as a manager told one of our readers recently, when the writer objected to the entire band being credited with songs which he had written completely on his own. Songwriting income can be huge.

One world-famous band spread the songwriting credits around - the manager promising that when the royalties finally came in, only the actual writers would be paid their correct dues. Without warning, the band split, and the real writers were now told that the income would have to be divided according to the listed, and in some cases, spurious credits. And it was. One member, who had co-written a multi-million seller, ended up getting quite literally nothing at all for his efforts.

I am not advocating a policy of total selfishness - but it can be a jungle out there. Just don't get eaten - that's all I'm saying.

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