THE BUSINESS OF LYRICS

Knowledge Toolkit

THE IVORS ACADEMY

THE BUSINESS OF LYRICS

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Lyrics have emerged from the margins of music publishing to become a distinct and valuable part of the creative economy. What was once simply the words printed in album sleeves or CD booklets has transformed into a multi-hundred-million-pound global business, driven by digital platforms, social media, and new ways of experiencing music.

For songwriters and composers, understanding the business of lyrics means recognising them as a separate asset with their own licensing requirements, revenue streams, and creative opportunities. Unlike performance rights and mechanical rights, which flow through established collecting societies, lyrics operate more like sync rights - licensed work by work, territory by territory.

This section explores how lyrics generate income, who manages these rights, and how you can ensure your words reach audiences accurately while maximising their commercial potential. We'll examine the partnerships, platforms, and processes that turn your lyrics from creative expression into sustainable revenue.

THE LYRICS LANDSCAPE

In today's digital ecosystem, lyrics serve multiple commercial and creative functions:

Discovery and search

Modern listeners find music through lyrics more than ever before. Whether typing a remembered line into a streaming service, asking a voice assistant to "play the song that goes...", or discovering tracks through social media captions, lyrics have become primary entry points to your music. This discovery function directly impacts your streaming numbers and broader audience reach.

Platform engagement

Streaming services invest heavily in lyrics because they demonstrably increase user engagement. When listeners can see lyrics while listening, they spend more

time on platforms, skip fewer songs, and return more frequently. For platforms operating in an attention economy, lyrics transform passive listening into active engagement - turning your songs from background music into foreground experience. Some services have adapted a full karaoke experience with the use of synched lyrics.

Social media and user-generated content

Perhaps the most dramatic shift has been lyrics' role in social media. With billions of views monthly, platforms like TikTok, Snap, and Instagram have made lyrics central to how people experience and share music. Critically, much of this consumption happens with sound off - meaning lyrics can become a primary way for audiences to connect with your songs. When users add your lyrics to their posts, they're not just sharing music; they're using your words for self-expression, dramatically expanding your reach.

Global access and learning

Lyrics transcend language barriers through translation and romanisation. Many global music fans credit song lyrics as their primary method of learning English. This creates opportunities for UK songwriters to reach international audiences, while translated lyrics can open entirely new markets for your work.

The commercial reality

Unlike the blanket licences that CMOs provide for performance and mechanical rights, lyrics operate in a more complex commercial environment:

- No single collecting society manages lyrics rights globally.
- Licensing happens work by work, similar to sync licensing.
- Multiple rights holders often control different shares of the same lyrics.
- Platforms need accurate lyrics for millions of songs simultaneously.
- Revenue flows through aggregators who manage both rights and distribution.

This complexity has created a new category of music industry partners: lyrics aggregators and administrators who bridge the gap between rights holders and platforms.

KEY PLAYERS IN THE LYRICS ECOSYSTEM

Lyrics aggregators and administrators

Companies like Musixmatch have emerged to solve the massive logistical challenge of lyrics licensing. These organisations:

- Aggregate rights from hundreds of thousands of rights holders globally.
- Manage the licensing, distribution, and quality control of lyrics.
- Handle the complex data matching between songs, recordings, and rights holders.
- Provide indemnification to platforms - crucial given the legal risks of displaying incorrect or unlicensed lyrics.
- Process and distribute royalties back through the rights chain.

Currently, Musixmatch alone administers approximately £150 million annually in lyrics revenue, demonstrating the material value of this previously overlooked right.

Publishers and rights management

Music publishers control lyrics rights as part of their broader publishing agreements, but paradoxically often don't possess the actual lyrics text. This creates a unique dynamic where:

Publishers have the legal rights but may rely on external sources for accurate lyrics.

- Artists and writers may need to provide lyrics to their publishers retroactively.
- Quality control becomes a shared responsibility between creators, publishers, and aggregators.

- Digital Service Providers (DSPs).

Streaming platforms and social media services have become the primary monetisers of lyrics. They require:

- Accurate lyrics for millions of songs.
- Proper licensing for each territory they operate in.
- Real-time synchronisation with audio.
- Multiple language versions for global audiences.

Amazon Music pioneered lyrics integration in streaming services, recognising early that lyrics enhanced user experience and retention. Today, every major platform considers lyrics essential to their service.

DATA CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The accuracy problem

One of the most persistent challenges in the lyrics business is ensuring accuracy. Many established songwriters and artists have discovered their lyrics displayed incorrectly across platforms, often because:

- Original lyrics were never formally documented.
- Crowdsourced lyrics websites created unofficial versions that propagated.
- Publishers received rights but not the actual text.
- Multiple versions exist with no authoritative source.

This matters commercially because inaccurate lyrics can:

- Lead to lost revenue through improper licensing.
- Damage artist relationships with fans.
- Create legal liability for platforms.
- Reduce the value of lyrics for sync and other opportunities.
- Taking control of your lyrics.

Modern tools now allow songwriters to manage their lyrics directly:

- **Documentation:** Start documenting lyrics formally from the creation stage.

- **Verification:** Use official tools to verify and correct lyrics across platforms.
- **Distribution:** Ensure authorised versions reach all major platforms.
- **Translation:** Consider official translations for key markets.
- **Synchronisation:** Create word-by-word sync for enhanced user experience

Platforms like Musixmatch Pro provide tools for independent artists to:

- Transcribe and synchronise lyrics.
- Edit existing lyrics across platforms.
- Distribute to all major DSPs.
- Track usage and ensure proper attribution.

For songwriters with publishers, coordination is key - ensure your publisher has accurate lyrics and understands your preferences for their use.

You can find out more in The Ivors Academy career guides - Introduction to data and music.

REVENUE STREAMS AND MONETISATION

How lyrics generate income

Lyrics revenue typically flows through several channels:

- **Streaming platform display:** Payment based on lyrics impressions/views.
- **Social media usage:** Licensed use in user-generated content.
- **Voice search and discovery:** Enabling lyrics-based search functionality.
- **Translation and adaptation:** Additional fees for translated versions.
- **Synchronisation data:** Enhanced payments for time-synced lyrics.
- Revenue flow.

The typical path for lyrics revenue:

- Platform pays aggregator based on usage.
- Aggregator identifies rights holders and shares.
- Payment flows to publishers (or directly to independent writers).
- Publishers distribute to writers based on publishing agreements.

For independent songwriters, direct registration with aggregators can eliminate intermediaries, though this requires active management of your lyrics catalogue.

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

Beyond display: Lyrics as data

Forward-thinking companies are developing new applications for lyrics data:

- **Cultural analysis:** Using lyrics to track societal trends, from political movements to consumer behaviour. For example, tracking how often luxury brands appear in lyrics, or how themes like love or social justice evolve over decades.
- **Sync discovery:** AI-powered tools can now scan millions of lyrics to find perfect matches for sync briefs. A publisher might discover forgotten catalogue gems simply because the lyrics match a brand's campaign needs.
- **Educational applications:** Lyrics as teaching tools for language learning, poetry analysis, and cultural studies.
- Interactive experiences: Combining physical products (vinyl, merchandise) with digital lyrics experiences.

The AI factor

Artificial intelligence is transforming lyrics management through:

- Automated transcription (with human verification).
- Multi-language translation
- Semantic analysis for sync opportunities.
- Error detection and correction

However, AI remains a tool requiring human oversight - especially for creative content where nuance and accuracy are paramount.

PROTECTING YOUR RIGHTS

Key considerations for songwriters

- **Co-writer agreements:** Ensure all collaborators agree on lyrics distribution and management. [Split ownership](#) can complicate licensing if not properly documented.
- **Publisher coordination:** If you have [a publishing deal](#), understand how your [publisher manages lyrics rights](#). Many songwriters discover their publishers aren't actively exploiting lyrics opportunities.
- **Platform direct upload:** While some DSPs allow direct lyrics upload, this can create legal issues if you have co-writers or publishers. Always verify your right to upload before using these tools.
- **Quality control:** Regularly check how your lyrics appear across platforms. Incorrect lyrics can persist for years if not actively managed.
- **Future-proofing:** Consider how emerging technologies might use your lyrics. Ensure agreements don't inadvertently give away rights to future applications.

PRACTICAL STEPS

For independent songwriters

- Document lyrics formally from day one.
- Register with a lyrics administrator or use pro tools.
- Verify lyrics across all major platforms.
- Consider translations for key markets.
- Monitor usage and revenue.

For published songwriters

- Ensure your publisher has accurate lyrics.
- Understand your publisher's lyrics strategy.
- Coordinate on any direct platform uploads.
- Review how lyrics revenue appears in statements.

- Discuss emerging opportunities with your publisher.

For all songwriters

- Treat lyrics as valuable assets requiring active management.
- Stay informed about new platforms and opportunities.
- Network with other writers about their lyrics strategies.
- Consider lyrics when negotiating any music deals.
- Remember: accurate data at source prevents problems downstream.

The business of lyrics continues to evolve rapidly. What began as simple text display has become a complex ecosystem generating substantial revenue while creating new ways for audiences to discover and connect with songs. By understanding this landscape and actively managing your lyrics rights, you ensure your words reach audiences accurately while maximising their commercial potential.

LYRICS FAQS

Can I upload my lyrics directly to streaming services like Apple Music?

While some platforms technically allow you to upload lyrics directly, this can be legally problematic if you're not the sole owner of the composition. If you have co-writers or a publishing deal, you likely don't have the unilateral right to distribute lyrics.

Most publishing agreements grant lyrics rights to the publisher, meaning they should handle distribution through proper channels. Even with co-writers who aren't published, you'd need their agreement before uploading shared lyrics. The safest approach is to work through your publisher or a lyrics aggregator who can ensure proper rights clearance and attribution.

For independent songwriters who own 100% of their compositions, direct upload may be possible, but consider whether you want to manage lyrics across multiple platforms individually or use an aggregator for broader distribution.

How do I ensure my lyrics are accurate across all platforms?

Start by maintaining your own definitive lyrics file for every song you write. Don't rely on memory or assume your publisher has accurate texts - many don't. When you finish a song, save the complete, formatted lyrics exactly as you intend them to appear.

If you have a publisher, provide them with accurate lyrics and insist they update their records. For independent artists, use tools like Musixmatch Pro to submit and verify your lyrics across platforms. These services distribute to all major DSPs from a single source, ensuring consistency.

Regularly monitor how your lyrics appear on major platforms. If you spot errors, you can usually request corrections through your publisher, distributor, or directly through aggregator tools. Remember that corrections can take time to propagate across all platforms, so accuracy from the start is crucial.

Do I need a publisher to monetise my lyrics?

No, you don't need a publisher to monetise lyrics, but the process differs for published and independent songwriters. Publishers typically handle lyrics licensing as part of their broader rights management, meaning lyrics revenue flows through them according to your publishing deal terms.

Independent songwriters can work directly with lyrics aggregators or use platform tools to distribute their lyrics. However, you'll need to handle all administration yourself - from ensuring accuracy to managing any disputes. Some aggregators offer different service levels, from basic distribution to full administration.

The trade-off is between control and convenience. Publishers provide infrastructure and expertise but take a share of revenue. Going independent means keeping more revenue but handling more complexity yourself.

How much money can I make from lyrics?

Lyrics revenue varies dramatically based on your songs' streaming performance. For most songwriters, lyrics represent a modest additional revenue stream rather

than a primary income source. The global lyrics business generates hundreds of millions annually, but this is distributed across millions of songs.

Revenue is typically calculated per impression - each time lyrics are displayed on a platform. A song with millions of streams might generate hundreds or thousands in annual lyrics revenue, while songs with modest streaming numbers produce proportionally less.

Think of lyrics income as one of many cumulative revenue streams. While unlikely to transform your finances alone, when combined with performance royalties, mechanical royalties, and other income sources, it contributes to overall earnings. The key is ensuring you're collecting all available revenue, no matter the size.

What happens if my co-writer and I disagree about lyrics distribution?

Disagreements over lyrics distribution should ideally be addressed in your collaboration agreements. Without clear agreements, you generally need unanimous consent from all writers to distribute lyrics, as each co-writer has an ownership interest.

If disagreement arises, first attempt direct communication to understand concerns. Common issues include accuracy disputes, crediting preferences, or revenue sharing. If you have publishers, they may help mediate, though their primary obligation is to their individual writer.

For future collaborations, address lyrics distribution in your initial agreements. Specify who maintains the official lyrics, how disputes will be resolved, and whether individual writers can veto distribution. Prevention through clear communication beats resolving disputes after the fact.

Why are my lyrics wrong on Spotify/Apple Music?

Inaccurate lyrics usually result from breaks in the data chain between creation and platform display. Common causes include:

- Publishers lacking accurate lyrics despite controlling rights.

- Platforms using crowdsourced versions when official versions aren't available.
- Transcription errors during digitisation.
- Multiple versions existing without clear authority.

To correct errors, first identify the source. Check with your publisher if you have one - they should be providing accurate lyrics to aggregators. If independent, you may need to submit corrections through aggregator tools or your digital distributor.

Remember that platforms receive lyrics from aggregators, not directly from artists. Correcting the source ensures fixes propagate across all platforms, though this can take several weeks.

Should I be worried about AI transcribing my lyrics incorrectly?

AI transcription has improved dramatically but isn't perfect, especially for complex wordplay, unusual pronunciations, or non-standard English. Quality aggregators use AI as a starting point but employ human review for accuracy, particularly for significant releases.

The bigger concern is unauthorised AI transcription creating "official" versions without your input. This reinforces the importance of providing accurate lyrics proactively rather than letting platforms guess or rely on user submissions.

If you're using AI tools to transcribe your own lyrics, always review and edit the output. AI can accelerate the process but shouldn't replace your authority over your own words. Think of it as a helpful first draft, not a final version.

How do translated lyrics work commercially?

Translated lyrics open additional revenue opportunities as they're licensed separately from original language versions. When platforms display translations, they typically pay for both the original and translated versions, creating multiple revenue streams from a single song.

Some aggregators maintain vast networks of translators who create official translations, while others accept artist-provided translations. Quality matters - poor translations can misrepresent your work and reduce engagement in international markets.

Consider key markets for your music when prioritising translations. For example, if you have significant streams in Japan or Brazil, official translations for those markets could enhance engagement and revenue. Remember that translations remain derivative works of your original lyrics, so you maintain underlying control.

What's the difference between lyrics rights and sync rights?

While both involve licensing specific uses of your work, lyrics and sync rights operate differently:

- Lyrics rights cover the display of your words as text - on streaming platforms, in apps, or on websites. These are typically licensed through aggregators who manage bulk rights for platforms. Revenue is usually based on impressions or displays.
- Sync rights involve using your composition (music and lyrics) synchronised with visual media - films, adverts, games. These are negotiated individually for each use, often commanding higher fees but requiring separate approval for each placement.

The similarity is that both require work-by-work licensing rather than blanket licences. The difference is scale and use case - lyrics rights enable mass distribution of text, while sync rights cover specific audio-visual combinations.

How do I protect my lyrics from unauthorised use on social media?

Complete prevention of unauthorised lyrics use on social media is virtually impossible, but you can take protective steps.

First, ensure your lyrics are properly registered with your PRO and publisher (if applicable). This establishes your ownership claim. Work with authorised

aggregators who have agreements with major platforms - they provide indemnification and handle infringement issues.

For persistent infringement, document the unauthorised use and report it through platform tools. Most social media platforms have copyright reporting mechanisms. Your publisher or aggregator may also assist with enforcement.

Focus energy on ensuring authorised uses generate revenue rather than chasing every minor infringement. The effort to stop a fan posting favourite lyrics often exceeds any potential harm, while ensuring platforms properly license lyrics provides actual income.

THE IVORS ACADEMY RESOURCES

[On demand content - The Business of Lyrics](#)

[Career guide - Music publishing - pitfalls and how to avoid them](#)

[Career guide - Introduction to music publishing](#)

[Career guide - Songwriter split sheet template](#)

[Industry template contract - Sync license](#)

[Career guide - Introduction to data and music](#)

[Career guide - Introduction to music publishing](#)

[Career guide - What are "performance rights"?](#)

[Career guide - Introduction to collective licensing](#)