

# MUSIC PUBLISHING

Knowledge Toolkit



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## INTRODUCTION

Music publishers have been part of the songwriting landscape for a very long time, but their role has transformed dramatically in the digital age. Today's publishers range from one-person operations to global corporations, from pure administrators to full creative partners. Understanding what [publishers](#) actually do - and what level of support you need - directly impacts your ability to build and sustain your career.

At their core, publishers help you manage and monetise your copyrights. But as you'll discover in this section, their role can extend far beyond simple administration. From ensuring your songs are registered in over 100 territories [worldwide](#) to actively creating opportunities through sync placements and co-writing sessions, publishers can be the difference between songs sitting in a drawer and songs earning income globally.

The UK publishing landscape offers multiple entry points. You might start by self-publishing while you learn the business, engage an administrator when the paperwork becomes overwhelming, or partner with a full-service publisher from day one. There's no single path - successful writers have taken every approach. What matters is understanding your options and making informed decisions based on your specific needs and career stage.

This section of the toolkit will help you navigate the world of music publishing. We'll explore the hierarchy of publishing services, from DIY approaches through to full creative partnerships. You'll learn what publishers actually do day-to-day, how they complement the work of collecting societies, and why even basic administration now involves processing millions of data lines.

Drawing on insights shared at the Ivors Summit by leading publishers, we'll examine the core functions that publishers perform - from the nuts and bolts of rights management to the creative catalyst of A&R support. We'll address the questions songwriters ask most frequently, clarify common misconceptions, and provide practical guidance for choosing and working with publishers.



Whether you're wondering if you need a publisher at all, trying to understand the difference between administration and full service, or looking to maximise an existing publishing relationship, this section provides the knowledge you need. Remember, the right publishing solution is the one that serves your music and your career at this moment in time.

Throughout this section, we're discussing [music publishing](#) - the business of managing and monetising your songs and compositions. This is separate from the recording side of the music business. Publishers work with your underlying musical works, not your recordings. They help collect income from the many ways your songs are used, but have no involvement in your recording contracts or master royalties.

For those who are both songwriters and recording artists, understanding this distinction helps you build the right team for each aspect of your career. [Your publisher](#) and your record label (if you have one) perform different but complementary roles in your music business.

## THE PUBLISHING HIERARCHY: FROM DIY TO FULL SERVICE

Publishers work with songwriters and composers at different levels, from basic administration through to comprehensive creative partnerships. Understanding these distinctions helps you choose the right approach for your career stage and goals.

### Self-publishing

When you self-publish, you maintain direct ownership and control of your publishing copyrights. You'll join [PRS](#) for performing rights and potentially [MCPS](#) for mechanical rights, handling all aspects of your publishing catalogue yourself.



This means managing your own registrations with collecting societies worldwide. When your music is used in Germany, Japan, or Brazil, you'll need to ensure you're registered with GEMA, JASRAC, or UBC respectively. Without these registrations, publishing royalties remain uncollected. The consequences can be severe - at the Ivors Summit, Chris Meehan of Sentric Music shared a cautionary tale of songs with nearly a billion streams that had gone unregistered for two years, resulting in permanently lost income.

Self-publishing also requires accurate data management. Songs need correct registration details, co-writer splits must be documented, and recordings need to be matched to compositions through ISWC and ISRC codes. The complexity multiplies with digital platforms - at the Summit, Chris Meehan revealed that "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year" had generated 2,083 different versions across streaming services. Even if the main version generates 90% of income, the remaining 10% spread across thousands of versions represents significant money that needs individual tracking.

Beyond collective licensing through societies, many revenue streams require direct action. Sync licensing, digital mechanical deals, and print music sales all need individual negotiation and administration.

Self-publishing suits writers who have limited commercial activity, primarily write for their own projects, or want to understand the business before committing to a publisher. It becomes challenging when international usage increases or when administration time cuts into creative work. The question isn't just about keeping 100% of your publishing income - it's whether you're actually collecting 100% of what you're owed

### **Publishing administration (pub admin)**

Publishing administrators handle the business side of your catalogue while you retain creative control and ownership. They register songs globally, collect publishing royalties, manage data, and ensure you receive all income due.



A publishing administrator will typically:

- Register your works with 100+ collecting societies worldwide
- Manage complex international tax treaties and currency conversions
- Match recordings to compositions for mechanical royalty collection
- Pursue black box recoveries from societies and digital services
- Audit royalty statements from licensees
- Handle direct licensing where collective licensing doesn't apply

The scale of modern administration has transformed the skillset required. During the Ivors Summit, Chris Meehan from Sentic said that Sentic processed more data in the last six months than in the previous three years. Copyright professionals now need SQL skills and machine learning tools to process billions of data lines - a far cry from the traditional copyright expertise of previous decades.

Publishing administration doesn't include creative services. Administrators won't arrange co-writing sessions, pitch songs for covers, or actively pursue sync placements. They collect publishing royalties from exploitation that's already happening rather than creating new opportunities.

Most administrators charge a commission on collected royalties (typically 10-20%) rather than taking ownership or offering advances. This model works well for writers who want professional administration while maintaining independence and control over their creative direction.

### **Advanced pub admin or 'Admin+'**

Some companies offer services beyond basic administration without providing full publisher support. These might include sync representation, playlist pitching, or basic promotional services. It's the middle ground between pure administration and full creative partnership.



The specific services vary significantly between companies. Some provide access to sync briefs and submission platforms - ensuring your songs are at least in the conversation when opportunities arise. Others focus on digital marketing or streaming strategy. Some offer periodic creative feedback or limited co-writing connections.

Understanding exactly what additional services are included - and how actively they're delivered - is essential when evaluating these deals. Ask specific questions: How many sync briefs will you receive? What playlist relationships exist? Is there any A&R feedback? The 'plus' in admin+ can range from genuinely valuable additions to merely better reporting dashboards.

Admin+ can suit writers who need more than basic administration but aren't seeking full creative partnership or don't want to share ownership of their publishing copyrights. Commission rates typically fall between pure admin and full service deals, reflecting the additional services provided.

### **'Full service' music publishing**

Full service publishers provide complete support across creative development, administration, and commercial exploitation. They actively work to develop your career and create new opportunities for your music. The best publishers focus on long-term value - as Golnar Khosrowshahi, CEO of Reservoir, explained at the Summit, they're "focused on the music and the staying power of that music" rather than treating catalogues as financial assets to flip.

Creative services include A&R support providing objective feedback and development, carefully curated co-writing sessions, connections with producers and artists, and writing camps that might take you from London to Lagos. The approach is tailored to each writer - as Amber Davis from Warner Chappell explained at the Summit, touring artists need different support than emerging writers seeking daily sessions.



Commercial teams actively exploit your catalogue through dedicated sync departments. Modern sync includes both traditional placements and growing bespoke opportunities - creating specific music for games, advertisements, or brand campaigns. Publishers also promote songs for cover opportunities, handle sample clearances, and develop strategic marketing campaigns. The goal, as Pixie Pickering from Sony Music Publishing put it at the Summit, is becoming "the first port of call when somebody wants music."

Full service publishers typically offer advances against future publishing earnings, allowing writers to focus on creative work. They share in ownership of your publishing rights (though your PRS writer's share always flows directly to you). The publisher typically takes 20-50% of publishing income in exchange for their services, expertise, and investment.

The relationship works best when publisher and writer share creative vision and commercial goals. Success often depends on the specific people you'll work with - as Amber Davis emphasised at the Summit, "it's about who you sign to as much as it is about the company." Look for publishers focused on long-term career development rather than quick exits.

### Choosing the right deal

Each model serves different needs at different career stages. Consider:

- Your available time for administration versus creative work
- Whether you need upfront financial support
- The importance of creative development and co-writing opportunities
- Your music's suitability for sync and cover opportunities
- Your existing industry connections and ability to exploit copyrights
- Your short and long-term career objectives

Writers often move between models as their careers develop. Some begin self-published while learning the business, transition to administration as catalogue



income grows, then partner with full service publishers when ready for career expansion. Others find their ideal model early and maintain it throughout their career.

The right choice depends on your specific circumstances, creative goals, and business needs at this point in your career.

## CORE PUBLISHER FUNCTIONS

Publishers perform four main functions that go beyond what [collecting societies](#) provide. Understanding these helps clarify why writers might need publisher support and what value publishers add to the royalty collection process.

### Rights management

Effective rights management forms the foundation of music publishing. While PRS and MCPS handle collective licensing in the UK (with your writer's share of PRS flowing directly to you), global rights management requires significantly more complexity. As Chris Meehan demonstrated at the Ivors Summit, a single song can have over 2,000 versions in the digital age, each requiring tracking and registration.

Publishers register your songs with collecting societies worldwide - not just reciprocal arrangements through PRS/MCPS, but often direct memberships in key territories. This ensures faster payment and fewer deductions. They understand local requirements, from tax forms in the US to cultural documentation in Japan. Independent publishers often lack this global infrastructure - at the Ivors Summit, Sarah Williams explained how IMPEL emerged to solve this problem by bringing together 60 publishers from 17 countries to match the reach of majors.

Copyright protection extends beyond registration. Publishers monitor for unauthorised uses, pursue infringements, and protect your songs' integrity. When



a brand uses your music without permission or a sample appears without clearance, publishers have the legal resources and expertise to act.

Data accuracy determines whether you get paid. Publishers maintain detailed records of every version, every co-writer split, every territorial variation. They ensure ISWCs match ISRCs across all platforms and territories - critical when processing millions of data lines. The modern rights manager needs both copyright knowledge and technical skills - as Chris Meehan observed at the Summit, "A copyright person today is really good at data and SQL. 20 years ago, they were really good at understanding copyright."

International tax treaties affect your income significantly. Publishers navigate withholding taxes, secure reduced rates through treaty claims, and ensure you're not taxed twice on the same publishing income. This expertise can mean the difference between receiving 70% or 95% of overseas earnings.

## **Revenue collection**

Collecting societies capture much of your publishing income, but significant revenue exists outside collective licensing. Publishers access income streams individual writers rarely reach. The scale of uncollected money is staggering - during the Summit, Chris Meehan from Sentic revealed they'd found nearly a billion streams that hadn't been registered for two years.

Digital services increasingly license directly for mechanical rights, especially in major markets. Publishers negotiate rates, audit statements, and pursue underpayments. They have the scale to demand proper accounting from platforms that might ignore individual writers. These negotiations require deep expertise - Sarah Williams noted at the Summit that licensing deals can take two years to complete, with complex decisions about whether to push for higher headline rates or better minima affecting writers' bottom lines.



Black box income - unallocated royalties sitting with societies and services - represents millions in unclaimed money. Publishers have dedicated teams tracking down these royalties using advanced matching systems and industry relationships. They know which societies hold significant unallocated funds and how to claim them. The data processing requirements have exploded - Chris Meehan revealed at the Summit that Sentric now handles more information in six months than they previously managed in three years.

Publishers conduct audits that individual writers cannot. When streaming services or broadcasters underpay, publishers can demand inspection of records, challenge calculations, and recover missing royalties going back years. These audits often uncover systematic underpayments affecting entire catalogues.

Currency management and cash flow matter for international income. Publishers handle currency conversions strategically, manage payment schedules from different territories, and can advance money against confirmed but unpaid earnings. Understanding payment timelines - from three months for UK broadcasts to two years for some international mechanicals - allows publishers to smooth writer income through strategic advances.

### **Creative services**

Creative support distinguishes publishers from pure administrators. This encompasses both song development and career building, with each writer receiving bespoke service based on their specific needs and goals.

A&R teams provide objective feedback on songs, identifying strengths and suggesting improvements. They understand current market demands while respecting artistic vision. The role goes beyond simple critique - as Amber Davis from Warner Chappell explained at the Summit, it means "super serving the songwriter and catering to what they need," whether that's daily sessions for an emerging writer or strategic support for a touring artist. The best publishers think



long-term, with Golnar Khosrowshahi of Reservoir asking not just "what does tomorrow look like, but what does five years from now look like?"

Co-writing facilitation creates opportunities for growth and commercial success. Publishers connect writers with complementary skills, arrange sessions with successful collaborators, and sometimes fund travel to key music centres. Success requires understanding personalities as much as skills - Amber Davis stressed the importance of "knowing your writers, knowing who they'll get on with, knowing who they've already worked with and hasn't worked out." The setting matters too - she described how Warner Chappell's Lagos camp drew writers from LA eager to experience Africa, with the location itself influencing the creative output.

Career development includes strategic planning around releases, building industry profile, and identifying new creative directions. Publishers might support showcase performances, facilitate introductions to key industry players, or help writers transition between different areas of composition. During difficult periods, as Amber Davis observed, having a team that's "all in the same boat" with shared goals becomes crucial.

Production connections can transform songs. Publishers maintain relationships with producers who can elevate material, fund demo recordings when necessary, and advise on production approaches for different markets. Despite technological advances, these human connections remain irreplaceable - as Golnar Khosrowshahi emphasised at the Summit, relationships with songwriters are "precisely the part of our business that will not be replaced by technology."

### **Commercial exploitation**

Active exploitation creates income beyond collective licensing. Publishers work to place songs in situations that generate both revenue and profile. Sync has become particularly valuable - as Pixie Pickering from Sony Music Publishing



observed at the Summit, it's "one of the things where songwriters really can make money" in today's challenging income environment.

[Sync licensing](#) requires dedicated expertise and relationships. Publishers pitch to music supervisors for film, television, advertising, and gaming opportunities. Success comes from being "the first port of call when somebody wants music" - achieved through constant relationship building, taking supervisors to gigs, understanding their needs, and responding rapidly to briefs. Major publishers maintain offices in Los Angeles, London, and other production centres specifically for sync work.

Modern sync extends beyond traditional placements. Bespoke opportunities - creating specific music for games, end credits, or brand campaigns - offer new revenue streams. Publishers bring briefs from companies like Playstation or Netflix directly to writers, removing what Pixie Pickering called the "pressure of writing a number one" and allowing focused creative work. These opportunities suit writers who "sound syncy" but also bring the right energy and professionalism to commercial projects.

Cover opportunities multiply publishing earnings. Publishers pitch material to artists, suggest songs for specific projects, and maintain relationships with A&R teams globally. When another artist records your song, the mechanical and performance royalties can significantly boost your income. A successful cover can transform a song's earning potential.

Sample licensing has become increasingly important. Publishers negotiate terms when others want to sample your music, ensuring fair compensation and appropriate credit. They also clear samples you might use, navigating complex negotiations that involve both publishing and master rights.

Strategic playlist placement and digital marketing require dedicated teams who understand platform algorithms and editorial processes. Publishers pitch to



playlist curators, create promotional campaigns around releases, and ensure songs reach appropriate audiences. With user-generated content creating thousands of versions, tracking and monetising viral moments requires sophisticated systems.

Brand partnerships and commercial sponsorships represent growing income streams. Publishers identify alignment between songs and brands, negotiate usage terms, and protect artistic integrity while maximising commercial opportunity.

Print music and sheet music sales remain relevant, particularly for classical composers and educational markets. Publishers manage arrangements, oversee quality, handle distribution, and ensure proper payment for all print uses.

### **How these functions work together**

These four areas interconnect constantly. Sync placement requires accurate rights management. Creative development leads to commercial opportunities. Revenue collection funds further creative work. The scale of modern music usage demands this integration - Chris Meehan's example of "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year" generating 2,083 versions shows how rights management, revenue collection, and commercial teams must work together to capture value from every use.

Publishers coordinate these functions through integrated teams and systems. The sync department needs instant access to rights information. A&R teams must understand commercial potential. Royalty departments inform creative decisions through earnings data. The viral success of Joe Keery's "End of Beginning" - which Chris Meehan revealed generated six million TikTok versions and 100 billion views - demonstrates how every department must collaborate to handle such explosive growth.



This integration becomes crucial as the industry evolves. Publishers focused on music rather than financial engineering understand these connections. Golnar Khosrowshahi distinguished between publishers who are "at our core musicians" versus those who view catalogues as "an uncorrelated asset class." Her company Reservoir builds for "staying power" rather than quick exits, creating infrastructure that enhances music value across every functional area. Whether handling viral moments or developing long-term career strategies, successful publishers align all functions toward supporting the songwriter.

Understanding these core functions helps writers evaluate publisher offerings. Not all publishers excel equally in all areas. Some have exceptional creative teams but weaker international collection. Others offer strong administration but limited creative support. Matching publisher strengths to your specific needs drives successful partnerships.

## MUSIC PUBLISHERS FAQS

### **What's the difference between a publisher and a collecting society?**

Collecting societies like PRS and MCPS operate collectively, issuing blanket licenses to users and distributing royalties to all members according to usage data. They handle specific rights in specific territories - PRS for UK performing rights, MCPS for UK mechanical rights. Publishers work individually for their writers, providing a much broader service. They ensure registration with societies worldwide (not just UK), chase royalties from sources societies don't cover, provide creative services, and actively create new exploitation opportunities for your music. While societies are essential infrastructure for collective licensing, publishers are your personal representatives in the global music business. Most professional writers need both - society membership for collective licensing, publisher support for everything else.

### **Do I need a publisher if I'm already with PRS/MCPS?**

PRS and MCPS only collect from their direct licenses in the UK and through reciprocal agreements internationally. However, these agreements don't cover



everything. Publishers fill crucial gaps: they register directly with societies worldwide for faster payment and better tracking, negotiate direct deals with digital services for mechanical royalties, pursue sync licenses that societies don't handle, recover "black box" money through detailed data matching, and provide creative support beyond pure collection.

Even with a publisher, your writer's share of PRS income (at least 50%) continues to flow directly to you - publishers work with the publisher's share and other income streams. Even successful writers often discover significant uncollected income when they first engage a publisher. The question isn't whether you need a publisher instead of PRS/MCPS - it's whether you need a publisher in addition to them.

### **What is 'administration' vs 'exploitation'?**

Administration encompasses all the business processes that ensure you get paid publishing royalties for uses already happening - registering songs with global societies, tracking recordings and versions, processing royalty statements, matching ISRCs to ISWCs, managing copyright data, and pursuing unpaid publishing royalties. It's essentially the "back office" of music publishing.

Exploitation means actively creating new opportunities for your music - pitching songs for synchronisation in films and adverts, promoting songs for cover recordings, arranging co-writing sessions, developing creative strategies, securing brand partnerships, and finding new ways to generate publishing income from your catalogue. Full service publishers handle both administration and exploitation, while publishing administrators focus solely on the collection side.

### **What exactly is a 'sub-publisher'?**

A sub-publisher acts as your publisher's local representative for publishing rights in foreign territories. When your UK publisher doesn't have offices in Japan, Brazil, or Germany, they partner with established local publishers who understand those markets. Sub-publishers handle territorial registration of publishing rights, collect publishing royalties from local sources, may promote your music locally,



understand local licensing requirements, and navigate language and business culture differences. Major publishers typically have their own global networks, while independent publishers rely on carefully chosen sub-publisher partnerships. The quality of sub-publisher relationships significantly impacts international publishing income - good ones actively work your catalogue, while poor ones simply process paperwork. Your publisher should be able to explain their sub-publisher network and how they monitor performance.

## CHOOSING A PUBLISHER FAQs

### Should I self-publish or get a publisher?

Self-publishing means handling all registration, collection, and exploitation yourself. It works when you have limited commercial activity, write mainly for your own artist project, have time and inclination for administration, want to learn the business before committing, or value complete control over limited income.

The breaking point usually comes when administration time interferes with creative work, international usage increases complexity, sync opportunities require industry relationships, or you discover money you've been missing. Most professional writers eventually need at least administration support. The question becomes not whether to work with a publisher, but what level of support you need. Starting self-published can be educational, but don't let pride or misunderstanding of publisher value leave money uncollected.

### What's the difference between pub admin, admin+ and full service publishing?

Publishing administration handles pure business functions - global registration, royalty collection, data management, and copyright administration. Publishers typically charge 10-20% of collected income without taking ownership or offering advances. You retain creative control but receive no active support.

Admin+ adds light creative services like basic sync representation, playlist pitching, or catalogue marketing. Services vary significantly between companies - some offer substantial extras while others simply have better technology. Always clarify exactly what "plus" means.



Full service publishing provides complete partnership including creative development, A&R support, co-writing facilitation, active sync departments, marketing campaigns, advance funding, and long-term career strategy. Publishers typically share ownership of your publishing rights and take a percentage of publishing income (though at least 50% of PRS performance income flows directly to you as the writer's share). They have no claim on your recording income - only publishing royalties. Choose based on your career needs, not just commission rates.

### **How do I know what level of publishing support I need?**

Start by honestly assessing your current situation. How much time do you spend on administration versus writing? Are you confident all your global royalties are being collected? Do you need upfront financial support? Are you seeking co-writing opportunities or creative development? Is your music suitable for sync? Do you have industry connections to exploit opportunities?

If time and missing money are your main concerns, publishing administration might suffice. If you need creative development, industry access, or financial investment, consider full service. Many writers progress through different levels as careers develop - starting with admin, adding services as catalogue grows, potentially moving to full service when ready for major development. There's no shame in starting simple and building up.

### **What questions should I ask a potential publisher?**

Key areas to explore include their team structure (who specifically will work on your songs daily?), track record (what recent successes have they had with similar writers?), global reach (how do they handle international collection?), creative services (what opportunities can they create?), and reporting (how transparent and timely is their accounting?).

Also ask about their sync department's relationships and recent placements, their approach to catalogue development versus new signings, typical response times for writer queries, how they handle co-writer splits and disputes, their sub-



publisher network quality, and whether you can speak with current writers about their experiences. The answers reveal whether they're truly equipped to advance your career.

### **What percentage of income do publishers typically take?**

Publishing deals aren't just about percentages - they're about value exchange. Administration deals typically charge 10-20% commission on collected publishing income without taking ownership. Full service deals usually involve ownership sharing, with writers retaining 50-80% of publishing copyright income. Note that your writer's share of PRS income (at least 50%) always flows directly to you, and publishers have no claim on recording/master revenues - only publishing income.

Consider total income, not just percentages. A publisher taking 25% of publishing income but collecting worldwide, securing syncs, and creating opportunities likely generates more total writer income than keeping 100% of UK-only, self-administered royalties. Also factor in advances, creative support value, and time saved. The best deal balances fair sharing with effective service.

### **Should I prioritise a big company name or the actual person who'll work with me?**

The individual who champions your music matters more than corporate size. Your day-to-day contact determines whether you're prioritised or forgotten, understood or misrepresented, developed or neglected. A passionate advocate at a smaller company often achieves more than being catalogue number 10,000 at a major.

However, company resources do matter. Larger publishers may offer better advances, global infrastructure, and established relationships. Ideally, find both - a committed individual within a well-resourced company. If forced to choose, prioritise personal fit for creative development, company resources for pure administration. Always meet your actual team, not just senior executives who won't handle your catalogue daily.



## PUBLISHING DEALS FAQs

### How do publishing advances work?

Publishing advances are prepayments of future publishing earnings, not additional money. Publishers estimate your future publishing royalties and advance a portion, typically 60-80% of projected earnings over the deal term. You receive this upfront, then publishers recoup from your share of publishing royalties until repaid. After recoupment, you receive royalties according to your deal split. Remember, this only affects publishing income - your recording revenues and writer's share of PRS income remain unaffected.

Advances enable focusing on creativity without financial pressure. Amount depends on track record, catalogue value, and publisher confidence. Unrecouped advances typically aren't repayable (unless fraudulently obtained), but may affect future negotiations. Some publishers offer rolling advances or minimum guarantees. Consider advance size against long-term earnings potential - sometimes smaller advances with better terms yield higher lifetime income.

### How long should a publishing deal last?

Publishing deals have multiple timeframes. The "retention period" (when publishers can sign new songs) typically runs 3-5 years. Publishing rights in signed songs usually extend 10-15 years post-term, sometimes life of copyright. Shorter retention periods offer flexibility but may reduce publisher investment. Longer terms should bring larger advances or commitments.

Consider your career stage - emerging writers might accept longer terms for development support, established writers often prefer shorter commitments. Watch for automatic extensions tied to commercial targets. Reversion clauses can return publishing rights after specified time or earnings. Balance security and flexibility based on your specific needs and the publisher's proven ability to deliver results. Remember, these terms only affect publishing rights - your recording agreements are separate.



## What happens to my songs when a publishing deal ends?

Contract terms determine post-deal scenarios. Publishers typically retain administration rights for your songs' publishing income for an extended "collection period" - often 10-20 years after the retention period ends. This allows recouping investments and ongoing collection from long-tail usage. Some deals include reversion clauses where publishing rights return after achieving specified earnings or timeframes.

New songs written after term expiry are yours to place elsewhere, unless covered by option clauses. Catalogue songs' publishing rights remain with the original publisher per contract terms. Your recordings and master rights are unaffected - we're only talking about publishing administration. Creative materials, relationships, and industry connections typically stay with you. Understanding retention and reversion terms before signing prevents future surprises. Negotiate reversion possibilities during initial discussions, not after problems arise.

## Can I change publishers mid-contract?

Publishing contracts are legally binding - you cannot simply switch publishers mid-term. However, some situations enable change: key person clauses (if your champion leaves), minimum earnings thresholds not met, material breach by publisher, or mutual agreement to exit.

Negotiated departures sometimes occur but expect compromise - perhaps reduced retention periods in exchange for some catalogue retention. Courts rarely break valid publishing contracts without clear breach. Prevention beats cure - include performance obligations, earning thresholds, and key person protections when negotiating. If relationships sour, document issues carefully and seek legal advice before acting. Rushing to "better" publishers mid-contract often creates legal complications exceeding any benefits. Note this applies to publishing agreements only - recording contracts are separate matters.



## **What are the red flags to watch for in a publishing contract?**

Beware of life of copyright retention without reversion possibilities - this permanently assigns your publishing rights. Watch for unclear royalty calculations, excessive administration fees, or deductions that significantly reduce your publishing income. Ensure audit rights exist to verify accounting.

Check creative commitment specifics - vague promises mean nothing without contractual obligations. Territory restrictions limiting global exploitation reduce income potential. Cross-collateralisation with other deals allows publishers to recoup unrelated costs from your publishing earnings. Matching options giving publishers rights to future deals at undefined terms create uncertainties. No performance guarantees mean publishers can warehouse your catalogue without consequence. Always seek legal advice - publisher-recommended lawyers have inherent conflicts.

## **MONEY AND ADMINISTRATION FAQs**

### **I've had millions of streams but haven't been paid - what's happened?**

Multiple issues could prevent payment of publishing royalties for successful streams. Most commonly, songs aren't properly registered with collecting societies worldwide, metadata is incorrect or incomplete, ISWC and ISRC codes aren't properly matched, or your publisher/administrator hasn't claimed the recordings. Publishing royalties then accumulate in various "black boxes" - unpaid money held by societies and services.

Payment timelines also vary dramatically. UK streaming royalties might take 3-6 months, but international mechanical royalties can take 18-24 months to flow through the system. Without proper global registration and active claiming, publishing money accumulates unclaimed. Publishers use sophisticated systems to track, match, and claim these royalties. Individual writers rarely have resources to pursue this effectively, which explains why engaging a publisher often unlocks significant historical publishing income. Note this is separate from any recording royalties you might receive as an artist.



## How long does it take to get paid for streams/broadcasts?

Publishing payment timelines vary significantly by source and territory. UK broadcasts via PRS typically pay within 3-6 months of usage. International performance royalties take longer - 6-24 months depending on territory and local society efficiency. Streaming mechanical royalties are particularly complex, often taking 12-18 months for international payments. Sync fees are fastest, usually within 30-90 days of usage.

Publishers can smooth cash flow by advancing against confirmed incoming publishing royalties, though this depends on deal terms. Understanding these timelines helps manage expectations and cash flow. The complexity increases with international usage - Japanese radio plays might take two years to reach UK writers. Publishers track expected payments and chase delays, knowledge individual writers rarely possess. These timelines apply to publishing income only - recording/master royalties follow different payment schedules.

## What is the 'black box' and how do publishers help?

The black box contains unallocated publishing royalties - money collected but not successfully distributed to rights holders. This occurs when songs aren't registered, metadata is incorrect, recordings aren't matched to compositions, or claims aren't made within required timeframes. Billions in publishing royalties sit unclaimed globally.

Publishers combat this through comprehensive registration ensuring all territories are covered, sophisticated matching systems linking recordings to songs, dedicated teams pursuing unmatched income, relationships with societies to access unallocated money, and historical claiming for catalogue acquisitions. Individual writers lack resources to tackle black box recovery effectively. Publishers invest in technology and expertise specifically to capture this otherwise lost publishing income, often finding significant sums for writers who thought they were being paid correctly.



## **Why do I need global registration if I'm only releasing in the UK?**

Music consumption ignores borders. Your UK release immediately becomes available on global streaming platforms, gets used in social media content worldwide, appears on international playlists, and might be broadcast anywhere. Each territory requires local registration to collect publishing royalties - missing registration means missing publishing money.

Publishers handle this complexity through direct society memberships reducing deductions and speeding payment, understanding local requirements like tax forms and cultural documentation, tracking which societies pay efficiently versus those needing chasing, and managing currency conversions and international tax treaties. Attempting global registration individually means managing relationships with over 100 societies in dozens of languages with varying requirements. Publishers have infrastructure making this routine rather than overwhelming. This ensures you collect publishing income globally - separate from any recording royalties you might receive.

## **How important is it to register songs before release?**

Pre-release registration is absolutely critical in today's instant global music environment. Once released, songs can go viral within hours, generate millions of streams before you notice, spread across platforms and territories instantly, and create derivative versions beyond your control. Without prior registration, you cannot retroactively claim many publishing royalties, black box accumulation begins immediately, and matching becomes progressively harder over time.

The explosion of user-generated content means your song might appear in thousands of videos before you know it's popular. Modern publishers register songs during creation, ensuring publishing rights protection from day one. Delaying registration gambling against viral success risks significant publishing income. With digital timelines, "we'll sort registration later" is an expensive mistake that affects your publishing royalties, though not your recording income.



## CREATIVE SERVICES FAQs

### What is A&R in publishing and do I need it?

Publishing A&R focuses on creative development rather than artist development. This includes providing objective song feedback, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, connecting you with complementary co-writers, arranging sessions with successful creators, understanding market trends while respecting artistry, and building long-term creative strategies.

Whether you need A&R depends on your situation. Established writers with strong industry networks might primarily value administration. Emerging writers often benefit from creative guidance and connections. Even successful writers can become isolated - publishers provide fresh perspectives and opportunities. Consider whether you're achieving creative goals independently. If you're writing alone, struggling for objective feedback, missing co-writing opportunities, or feeling creatively stagnant, A&R support could transform your output.

### How do publisher writing camps work?

Publisher writing camps are intensive creative sessions bringing selected writers together. Modern camps often have specific purposes - writing for particular artists, creating sync-friendly music, exploring new genres, or building catalogue in growth markets. Publishers carefully curate participants, balancing personalities and skills for productive collaboration.

Camps typically run 3-5 days with multiple rooms operating simultaneously. Writers might rotate partners daily, exploring different creative combinations. Publishers provide studio facilities, accommodation, and sometimes brief writers on commercial objectives. The concentrated environment, free from normal distractions, often produces remarkable results. Success depends on thoughtful curation - matching writers who'll connect personally and creatively. Publishers increasingly organise camps internationally, recognising that environment influences creativity.



## **What's the difference between traditional sync and bespoke sync?**

Traditional sync involves licensing existing songs for use in films, TV shows, advertisements, or games. The content already exists - supervisors select appropriate tracks from publisher catalogues. Success requires having the right song available when opportunities arise.

Bespoke sync commissions create new music for specific purposes - end credits songs, advertising campaigns, game soundtracks, or brand anthems. Writers compose to brief, often with detailed requirements about mood, length, and lyrical content. This growing area offers new creative challenges and income streams. Bespoke work suits writers comfortable with commercial constraints and deadlines. Publishers facilitate by maintaining supervisor relationships, understanding brief requirements, and managing project logistics. Both traditional and bespoke sync provide valuable income beyond streaming and radio.

## **How can publishers help with sync opportunities?**

Publishers develop sync success through dedicated teams building relationships with music supervisors, advertising agencies, production companies, and game developers. They understand brief requirements, can respond quickly with appropriate suggestions, create custom edits and versions, handle complex clearance negotiations, and pitch proactively for upcoming projects.

Individual writers rarely access these opportunities independently - supervisors work with trusted publishers who understand their needs, deliver quickly, and handle administration smoothly. Publishers might create searchable databases of your music, produce sync-friendly instrumental versions, identify catalogue songs suiting current market needs, or commission bespoke compositions for specific opportunities. Sync remains one area where publisher relationships directly translate to opportunities writers couldn't access alone.

## **Will a publisher help me get covers of my songs?**

Full service publishers actively promote songs for cover recordings through global A&R relationships, understanding artist repertoire needs, timing pitches for album



projects, creating compelling demonstrations, and negotiating favourable terms. Success requires matching right songs to right artists at right moments - publishers increase these odds through industry intelligence and persistence.

Publishers might commission new demos showcasing different interpretations, translate lyrics for international opportunities, suggest arrangement changes suiting specific artists, or package songs with successful precedents. Cover versions can significantly boost your publishing income - when another artist records your song, you earn publishing royalties from their version. Publishers' networks and market knowledge make them far more effective than writers approaching artists directly. Even one successful cover can transform a song's publishing earnings potential.

## SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES FAQs

### **Can I have different publishers in different territories?**

Yes, you can have different publishers for your publishing rights in different territories through direct deals, though this creates complexity. Writers might sign directly with a US publisher while using a UK publisher for rest-of-world. Benefits include reduced commission in key markets, faster payment avoiding sub-publisher delays, direct relationships with major territory publishers, and better local promotion in important markets.

However, complications include managing multiple publisher relationships, coordinating global strategies, handling conflicting commercial priorities, and increased administrative burden. Most writers only consider this for one or two crucial territories where they have significant activity. Publishers often resist split-territory deals, preferring worldwide rights for simplified administration. Consider whether potential benefits outweigh definite complications. Remember, this only affects publishing administration - your recording deals remain separate.

### **I'm a classical composer - do I need a publisher?**

Classical composers face unique publishing considerations. If primarily writing commissioned works, basic administration might suffice for broadcast and



performance royalties. However, publishers provide valuable services including hire library management for orchestral materials, sheet music publication and distribution, sync opportunities for classical music in media, grand rights administration for dramatic works, and ensuring proper concert performance tracking.

Classical specialist publishers understand unique aspects like performance material rental, orchestral parts preparation, edition variations, and classical performance royalty chains. They maintain relationships with orchestras, venues, and classical labels. Even successful composers often miss significant publishing income without proper global registration. Consider whether you're maximising all publishing revenue streams or just collecting commissions. Your recording rights as a performer remain separate.

### **Should I self-publish my sheet music?**

Sheet music publishing requires balancing control against reach. Self-publishing through digital platforms offers higher margin retention (typically 50-70% versus 10-20%), direct customer relationships, flexible pricing and updating, and complete creative control. However, you handle all promotion, quality control, and customer service.

Traditional publishers provide established distribution networks, editorial expertise ensuring accuracy, inclusion in educational catalogues, marketing to teachers and institutions, and print distribution channels. Many writers combine approaches - self-publishing some works while using publishers for others. Consider your audience, promotion capabilities, and time availability. Educational markets particularly benefit from publisher relationships. Digital sheet music is growing rapidly, creating new opportunities for both models.

### **What if I write with people who have different publishers?**

Co-writing with writers signed to different publishers is standard practice. Publishers routinely coordinate to ensure proper registration and efficient



exploitation. Key steps include informing all publishers immediately about co-writes, providing accurate split percentages and writer information, clarifying who handles administration in which territories, and agreeing on exploitation strategies.

Most publishers have established relationships simplifying coordination. Problems arise only when publishers aren't informed promptly or splits are disputed. Some publishers have reciprocal agreements streamlining co-writer administration. Occasionally publishers might restrict certain co-writes if they conflict with exclusive artist commitments, but generally they encourage broad collaboration. The music industry functions on co-writing - publishers facilitate rather than complicate this process.

### **I've gone viral on TikTok - is it too late to get a publisher?**

It's not too late, but urgent action is needed. Publishers can still capture future publishing income and sometimes claim recent historical publishing royalties, identify all versions and derivative uses across platforms, ensure proper credit and metadata correction for publishing rights, capitalise on momentum for additional opportunities, and prevent future publishing income loss through comprehensive registration.

Viral moments create complexity - one song might generate thousands of user videos, remixes, and international uses. Publishers have systems tracking this proliferation for publishing royalties. They can also leverage viral success for sync opportunities, cover versions, and brand partnerships. While some early publishing income might be lost, publishers prevent ongoing losses and maximise the viral moment. Act quickly - every day without proper administration means more unclaimed publishing royalties and missed opportunities. Note that this relates to publishing income only - your recording revenues remain separate.



## THE IVORS ACADEMY RESOURCES

[On demand content – Publisher perspectives – creative and commercial opportunities](#)

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

[Career guide – What are BMI/ASCAP/HMA?](#)

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

[Industry template contract – Sync license](#)

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

[Career guide – What is PRS?](#)

[Career guide – What is MCPS?](#)

[Career guide – Music publishing - key terms in agreements](#)

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