How to Release Music as a DIY Musician
A beginner's guide to publishing your own music in professional ways

by Sophia Dove

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Since releasing '[Summer Lover](#)' to streaming platforms in May 2019, I've learned a lot about the process that I wish I knew back then. Being a DIY musician, it's important to become familiar with at least the basics of composition, publication, and promotional techniques. Here, I've compiled all the tips and tricks that I've found the most useful over the past year or so in an effort to create a comprehensive list of what you need to know before you publish your first (or next) song.

Composition
Reference Tracks
The first thing to consider when creating a new song is what kind of a track you're going for. Finding songs that have similar structures or sounds can help guide you in the right direction and give you a professional example to work off of. Reference tracks are also incredibly helpful in the mixing and mastering processes, so you can compare things like panning, EQ, and levels to those of a song that's already been finished.

Revisions
I have a tendency to get very attached to the things I write, which usually means that I'm reluctant to make changes once I've finished the first draft. Admittedly, this is not a great method. Writing is a process, and I've found that I produce better work when I allow myself to go back and edit what I've already done. Lately, I've been taking a few days away from a song once I initially finish it so I can come back to it with fresh eyes and ears to address areas that could be improved upon. Another useful strategy is to send the song to someone who you trust will give it an honest critique. Peer feedback can really help give you a new perspective, and it's definitely something I know I should be seeking out more often.

Equipment
Pitchfork has [a great article](#) about how to buy the best home recording equipment that helped me take inventory on what I've been using (and how it compares to what I maybe should be using instead). Ultimately, as long as you have a computer, a DAW (Digital Audio Workstation), and some way to input

sounds, then you have the capability to make music. But there is so much incredible equipment out there that it's probably worth looking into what gear might help you take your sound to the next level. Currently, I'm using a [2017 MacBook Pro](#), a [Scarlett 2i2](#) audio interface, a pair of [Marantz Professional MPH 2](#) headphones, [Logic Pro X](#), an [Akai MPK Mini 3](#) controller, a [Neumann TLM 102](#) microphone, and a pop filter. I'll want to get a pair of monitors at some point because mixing only through headphones can distort how you hear the track, and I'll probably get an external drive to use with my laptop when I'm recording/producing to avoid latency issues (because in the same way that I get too attached to my writing, I get too attached to my photos and documents — my computer has approximately zero space at the moment, and that is not great when you're trying to work in a mixing session with a lot of tracks). As a smaller artist and a current student, I don't have a whole lot of money to pour into new gear, so I try to only get what I think is absolutely necessary for what I'm trying to do. For example, I recently got a really nice mic because I know that quality vocals are a big part of the music I'm making, and the USB mic I had been using was not cutting it anymore. I would also recommend renting or buying used stuff whenever you can, and making do with whatever you have until you can get something better.

Recording
As someone renting a one-bedroom apartment on a busy road, the biggest piece of advice I have to offer is to record more takes than you think are necessary. Because I can't really sound-treat my space — let alone sound-proof it — I watch a lot of really good takes get ruined because the person upstairs slammed their door. Other than that, I try to find the quietest place and time in my apartment to record. For example, there's not as much road noise at night, and you can barely hear my refrigerator humming from the far side of the living room, so that's when and where I record. Also, make sure all your equipment is set up correctly before you start the session. It might sound like common sense, but it's so frustrating doing a whole session and then realizing a certain switch wasn't flipped and now you have to start over. For more home recording techniques, check out [this TuneCore article](#).

Mixing
Possibly the most valuable skill I've learned recently is to practice mindful mixing. Once I realized that every plugin serves a specific purpose in order to make the mix sound more balanced, it all came so much easier to me. For example: EQ should be used to carve out different frequencies for each instrument, otherwise the mix sounds muddy and the instruments will compete with each other. I also learned that the order in which you apply plugins does impact the outcome, and that busing certain plugins to other channels gives you more control over them. Another way to gain some control and organize your session is to use track

stacks, so that you can change the volume, panning, and plugins on multiple tracks at a time. Something else I wish I knew when I was releasing some of my earlier work is that Logic has pitch correction software so that you can manually modify the pitch, gain, and vibrato of every note you sing. Overall, my advice would be to really explore the features your DAW has to offer and to learn how they work and what their purposes are. Personally, I use Logic because it's basically the professional version of GarageBand, so I was already familiar with the layout and basic functionality, and I really like how many built-in features it offers. But Ableton Live seems to be a more popular option, especially among hip-hop and electronic producers (plus it's not exclusive to Apple products like Logic is), and Pro Tools is considered the more industry standard for studio producers. To learn more about how each DAW works, Why Logic Pro Rules, Pro Tools Expert, and Ableton's website are some great resources to start with.

Mastering

If you've ever listened to one of my songs in a playlist and it was significantly quieter than the song before it, that's because I didn't master it. Mastering essentially compresses the final mixdown of a song so that you can bring the overall volume up, and it's fairly easy to make a decent master once you know what to listen for and which tools to use. I use this free template to structure my mastering sessions in Logic, and it even comes with a video tutorial of how to use it. You basically just load your mixdown and some reference tracks into the template session, and then adjust the EQ, compressor, limiter, and gain until the audio quality of your track is similar enough to that of your reference tracks that you're happy with it. But if that all seems like too much, there are also a lot of online services that you can pay to master your songs for you. Although I have yet to use any of them, I've heard that Aria, LANDR, and eMastered are some solid options. No matter what you choose, I strongly recommend that you master any song you plan to publish; I wish that I had. And if you're working on a multi-track project like an EP or an album, make sure to use the same person or service to master every song on it for the sake of continuity and cohesion. Overall, mastering whatever you put out will make you sound a lot more professional and will ensure that your songs level up to others nicely.

Publication
Digital Distributors

Once you've got a song all mixed and mastered and you're ready to share it with the world, you'll want to use a digital distribution company to do so. Digital distributors take your music and send it to digital service providers like Spotify, Apple Music, TikTok, etc. so that the general public can listen to your work and you can collect your mechanical royalties (this is the type of payment you receive every time someone streams or buys your song; we'll talk more about this later). There are dozens of digital distribution services out there, but the biggest ones

seem to be [TuneCore](#), [DistroKid](#), and [CD Baby](#). Ari's Take does [an extensive comparison](#) of these and the other 15 distributors on the market, and basically no one service is inherently better than all the others, so you should just aim to find the service that seems like it will work best for you. You will retain 100% of the rights to your music no matter who you work with, and you can always choose to switch distributors if you find one that you like better. Personally, I've used TuneCore for four songs and DistroKid for one, and there are pros and cons to both. Neither of them take out a commission from your revenue, they both have very helpful blogs, and they both essentially do the same thing, they just have different ways of going about it. TuneCore is very well established within the industry, and they have detailed sales and trends reports so you can see exactly where your royalties are coming from, but they're becoming less innovative than their competitors, they don't offer payment splitting for collaborative efforts, and most of all, they get very expensive very quickly. TuneCore uses a pay-per-song-per-year model where singles cost $10 and albums cost $30 annually until you either switch distributors or don't want your song to be publicly available anymore. So for my four singles that I've released with them, I'll be paying at least $40 every year, and the more music I release, the higher that price will get. On the other hand, DistroKid uses a tiered subscription model where you pay a flat rate of either $20, $36, or $80 per year for an unlimited number of releases. So if I were to switch all of my TuneCore releases to DistroKid, I would be paying significantly less per year than I do now, with no risk of racking up expenses as I release more music. Additionally, DistroKid offers payment splitting, they have a rapidly growing clientele, and Spotify has financial incentive for them to succeed (they acquired a minority stake in DistroKid a few years ago). However, their customer service is notoriously frustrating, their royalty reports are pretty bare bones, and there seem to be a lot of hidden fees that do recur per song per year. For example, it costs $1 extra per song per year to have your music sent to Shazam — something that is included in TuneCore's base fee — so your annual DistroKid fees could, in fact, increase over time as you release more music. And when it comes to the subscription tiers, the more you pay the more you get. When I joined DistroKid for [my collaboration with C O ZY](#), I received a discount code and figured I might as well spring for the "Musician Plus" tier, and it doesn't seem to offer anything that I wouldn't have been able to do with TuneCore. Meanwhile, joining at the lowest "Musician" tier would mean that I couldn't customize my release dates or receive daily stats reports, which are two really useful tools that I've grown to expect from my digital distributor. The moral of the story is that both TuneCore and DistroKid have some really incredible features and some really annoying drawbacks, but there are a ton of other digital distributors out there to explore, so if neither of these seem good for you, just keep looking.

Royalties

As an independent artist, a big part of what you do will be chasing and collecting royalties. We've already talked a bit about mechanical royalties, which are ongoing payments from physical or digital recordings that are made available through a store, and these should be covered by whatever digital distributor you use for the song. So in my case, TuneCore and DistroKid collect my mechanical royalties for me. The next types of payments are performance royalties, which are ongoing payments from how your song performs to the public. These can be classified as non-interactive: when the listener is passively engaging with the song, like if your song was on the radio; or interactive: when the listener is actively engaging with the song, like if your song was played at a live concert. Non-interactive performance royalties are covered exclusively by [SoundExchange](#) in the U.S., while interactive performance royalties can be covered by a number of performing rights organizations (PROs). I'm personally in the process of registering with SoundExchange as I write this, so I'm not collecting any non-interactive royalties yet, but my interactive performance royalties are coming from BMI, the PRO that I'm affiliated with (more on this in a minute). The final type of payment you can receive for your music is a sync licensing fee, which is a one-time payment from a licensing company so your music can be synchronized with some visual media. These fees are negotiated for things like movie soundtracks, commercials, and TV shows. I have no personal experience with sync licensing fees, but you can contract with a licensing company if you're interested in being scouted for these types of opportunities. Royalties are the only way to get paid for people listening to your music, so it's important that you register with the necessary organizations in order to access this revenue stream.

Performing Rights Organizations

PROs are basically the middle man between the person who wants to publicly perform a copyrighted work, and the person who holds the copyright for this work. So when someone wants to play music at their store, for example, they have to pay to license that music through a PRO, who then distributes that payment to their affiliated artists in the form of public performance royalties. There are three main PROs in the U.S.: [BMI](#), [ASCAP](#), and [SESAC](#). They all do essentially the same thing, but unlike digital distribution services, you can only be affiliated with one at a time. I'm affiliated with BMI because it's free to join for songwriters, and I knew that a lot of the songwriters I admire were affiliated with BMI. ASCAP has a $50 registration fee, but it also includes a lot of benefits that BMI doesn't offer, such as discounts on insurance and travel expenses. If I wanted to switch to ASCAP once my 2-year contract with BMI expires, I could, but I think it makes more sense for me to stick with BMI for the time being. SESAC is a little bit different from BMI and ASCAP in that it's a for-profit venture instead of a nonprofit organization, and their registration is on an invite-only basis. So if

you're relatively new to the music scene and you're not making a whole lot of cash yet, my recommendation is to register with BMI to catalogue and collect your public performance royalties at first. You can always reconsider in a couple years, but it's best to be affiliated with someone as soon as possible so you can start getting paid.

Copyright

Another legal component of the publication process is copyright, which, according to the U.S. Copyright Office, "protects the expression of an idea through publication or reproduction for the copyright owner." Something worth noting is that there's a difference between copyright protection and copyright registration. Just the act of publishing something grants you copyright protection, because it means that you can prove that you expressed that particular idea at a particular time. But if you ever wanted to sue someone for copyright infringement and be retroactively compensated in full for any money they made off of your song, you would have needed to have a copyright registration through the U.S. Copyright Office. Online applications cost $35 each, and they can take anywhere from 1-9 months to get approved. There's a way to register up to 10 songs at the same time for just $55, as outlined here, but all of those songs must have the same release date, and that release date must be in the future. So if I were to register every song I currently have on Spotify, it would cost me $175, and if I wanted to register a small collection of songs that I haven't released yet, it would cost me $55 but I would need to set their release date for many months in the future. Personally, I don't know that it's financially worthwhile for me to register any of my works for copyright at the moment. I could still sue someone for copyright infringement with the copyright protection I do have from publishing my songs online, I just wouldn't be compensated in full, were I to win. Maybe that's worth it to you, maybe it's not, but it's something to consider.

Promotion
Album Art

Now that we've got all the obligatory behind-the-scenes stuff out of the way, we can move on to the dimension that your fans will engage with the most: promotion. By the time you're ready to send your new music to your distributor, you should already have your album art ready to go. The image should be a .jpg, .png, or .gif with 3000 x 3000 pixels at 300 dpi, and there are a lot of other restrictions, as TuneCore outlines here. While you technically only need this one image in order to publish your new music digitally, it's never a bad idea to have some alternative versions in different dimensions for promotional purposes. I like to make some vertical 9:16 variations to add to social media stories and also some horizontal variations for social media banners. You should also consider coming up with unique content for Spotify Canvas, the brief video or

image that plays behind your song on mobile. And if you're planning on distributing physical copies like CDs or vinyls, you'll also need to create content for booklets, sleeves, stickers, etc. You might even want to change your profile pictures to reflect your new work. If you're working with a purely digital medium for all your visual elements, it shouldn't be too much of an issue to create all this additional content later on in the process, but if you're using photography, you should have this all planned out well in advance. Up until this point, I've only ever made digital album art, but my advice for photoshoots would be to take way more pictures than you think you'll need. Get different angles, go to different locations, wear different outfits, use different lighting; make sure that you have a wide variety of pictures to choose from so you can decide what looks best on different platforms, mediums, etc. In my experience, it's better to have too much content to work with than not enough. For more tips and ideas, check out Icon Collective's [article about how to design effective album art](#).

Social Media Engagement
In order to gain name recognition and establish your brand, you'll need social media pages that represent you. This is where you can increase your audience by engaging with fans and showing them what kind of an artist and person you are, in the hopes that they'll be interested and eventually want to support your work. One thing to remember is the 3:1 rule: for every post that you ask something of your followers (like telling them to stream your song or read your new incredibly long blog post), you should have at least three posts giving them something in return (like a selfie, a snippet of a new song you're working on, a picture of your dog, etc.). This balance between give and take is incredibly important in building an enthusiastic fan base, because people generally want to form meaningful connections, and they don't want to be treated like a statistic. Organic engagement with fans is extremely valuable, and if you play your cards right, you could get to a point where they're streaming your songs and reading your blog posts without you even having to ask. Meaningful social media interactions should be mutually beneficial.

Social Media Marketing
Once you've accumulated an online following, you can start developing a social media marketing strategy to get your work to the people who want to hear it. This is a direct and fairly inexpensive marketing method, and it can be very effective if you've built a strong enough connection with your audience. Personally, I get the most engagement regarding my music on my [Instagram](#) page, so that's the platform I spend the most time planning for. A good place to start is by making sure that your account is set to "business" instead of "personal." In addition to showing people that you're serious about your work, this will give you access to detailed analytics that will help you gage how well your posts are performing. Having a business account also allows you to boost posts, which

basically means you can pay to make sure certain posts are seen by larger audiences than just your followers. You can set your budget at anywhere from $1 to $30,000, and you can also customize the duration, demographics, and intended outcome of the campaign. Once your campaign is approved, Instagram will send your post out and you'll see your engagement on that post climb. For new singles, I like to boost videos with a snippet of the song played over the album art, [like I did for 'Princess of Social Distance.'](#) I generally spend about $30 on the campaign over the course of a week, and I set the demographics to the ages, locations, and interests of my target audience. There's a lot that goes into developing an entire social media strategy, but for the purposes of this article, that's basically all you need to know regarding release day. My only other pieces of wisdom are that you need a Facebook page in order to be visible in Google searches, and that YouTube is a global superpower in music streaming that you should not overlook. [Sprout](#), [Later](#), and [ThriveHive](#) are some great resources if you want to learn more.

Landing Pages
Landing pages are a great way to promote music that exists on multiple platforms through just one link. If you've ever clicked on a link to an artist's new song and it asked you to choose where you wanted to listen to it, that was a landing page. [Linkfire](#) is probably the most common service for this, and it offers both free and paid subscriptions. All you have to do is provide a link to your song, and they'll generate the page for you with a customizable URL. You can also provide the ISRC (International Standard Recording Code) or UPC (Universal Product Code) that was assigned to your song through your digital distributor, and Linkfire will locate the song on every platform that it can access, so you don't have to go searching for every URL yourself. Once your link is live, you can track the analytics to see how many people have clicked on it. It's a really useful tool for sharing all of the places that your song exists without having to link each platform separately.

Merch
At some point in your career, you'll probably want to design merchandise to promote your work and generate a little extra revenue. Personally, I have yet to pursue this path, but there are tons of customizable print places online that could be a good starting point. If you're interested in offering physical copies of your music, something worth noting is that even though [vinyls are making a comeback](#), CDs are still significantly faster and cheaper to make. Some digital distributors give you the option to have physical copies as well, but you might have to go through another service. Keep in mind that everything comes with a price, so you should be sure that there are people who want to buy merch from you before you start producing it.

Touring

Similarly to selling merch, going on tour is another time-honored tradition for established artists to promote new music. It connects you to your fans, it builds your brand recognition, it allows you to travel while doing the thing you love, and it's also super expensive. Jack Conte of Pomplamoose published [a detailed description](#) of everything that went into their month-long U.S. tour in 2014, and long story short: it's a serious investment. They filled venues and received sponsorships and donations, and they still ultimately lost $12,000. Needless to say, that's not something I'm in a position to do yet. Touring is an incredible and rewarding experience in a lot of ways, but for now, it's just something to dream about. Not to mention that no one can tour until it's safe to gather in large groups again anyway.

Check List

I have this checklist of things to do leading up to, on, and following release day that I thought I'd share. There's a lot involved, so I like to make sure I don't forget anything along the way. Plus I love lists.

Before release day
- ❏ Send mastered song to distributor
- ❏ Plan, create content for, and execute promotional social media strategy
    - ❏ Upload anticipatory banners to Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and SoundCloud (optional)
- ❏ Make landing page for song

On release day
- ❏ Upload lyrics and store links to my website
- ❏ Update Instagram and Twitter bios with the landing page
- ❏ Update Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and SoundCloud banners to say "out now" instead of the anticipatory ones or whatever you had before
- ❏ Make official song announcement post across platforms to boost
- ❏ Send newsletter to subscribers with links to the song

After release day
- ❏ Maintain fan engagement with the song
    - ❏ Do Q&As, go live, put out music videos, put out merch, post snippets of the song, have listening parties, etc.

Final Thoughts

So that's basically everything I know about self-publishing new music. Most of this is stuff that would be handled by a record label if I was signed to one, but I think one of the appeals of being an independent artist is that I get to make my own decisions every step of the way. I'm still working on developing most of

these skills, and I'm sure that one day I'll make another blog post with all the new things I've learned between now and then. But until that day, this is everything I wish I knew when I was putting out my first single.