

How to Choose the Right Music Distributor

Everything you need to know before picking the platform that controls your music delivery, royalties, and metadata.

2026 Edition · ~12 min read · Complete Comparison

🎯 WHO THIS ARTICLE IS FOR

Whether you're releasing your first single or moving an existing catalog to a new platform, this guide walks you through every factor that matters when choosing a music distributor. If you haven't signed up with a distributor yet — start here.

What a Distributor Actually Does

A music distributor is the company that gets your music from your hard drive onto streaming platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon Music, Tidal, YouTube Music, and dozens more worldwide. They also collect the streaming royalties those platforms generate and pay them back to you.

But that's just the baseline. Modern distributors vary enormously in what they offer beyond basic delivery. Choosing the wrong one can cost you royalties, limit your creative control, complicate your publishing rights, or trap you in contracts you didn't fully understand.

⚡ KEY INSIGHT

Your distributor is not just an upload tool. They are your upstream identity provider on every platform — the metadata they submit becomes the official record of your music's ownership, credits, and licensing. Errors at this stage are expensive to fix.

Key Factors to Compare

1. Pricing Model

Distributors charge in one of three ways — or a combination:

- Annual flat fee: One price covers unlimited releases (e.g. DistroKid). Best for artists releasing frequently.
- Per-release fee: Pay each time you release a single, EP, or album (e.g. TuneCore, CD Baby). Best for occasional releases.
- Revenue share / commission: The distributor takes a percentage of your streaming income (e.g. some CD Baby plans). Watch your long-term earnings carefully here.

2. Royalty Split

Some distributors keep 0% of your royalties (you keep 100%). Others take 9–15%. On high-streaming tracks, even a small percentage adds up significantly over time. Always check the royalty split before signing up.

3. Platform Coverage

Most major distributors cover the same core platforms (Spotify, Apple, Amazon, YouTube, Tidal). The differences show up in niche platforms: regional stores, social platforms (TikTok, Instagram, Facebook), and international markets. If global reach matters to you, check the full platform list.

4. Publishing Administration

Many distributors now offer publishing admin services — collecting mechanical royalties from streams, downloads, and sync uses worldwide. This is often an add-on or separate tier. If you write your own songs, this matters a great deal.

5. Speed of Delivery

Standard delivery to Spotify takes 1–5 days. Some distributors offer priority or "rush" delivery. If you're working to tight release timelines, delivery speed matters.

6. Analytics & Reporting

Dashboard quality varies widely. Look for: real-time or near-real-time stream data, per-platform breakdowns, geographic data, and track-level reporting. Better data means better marketing decisions.

7. Sync Licensing & Opportunities

Some distributors pitch your music to TV, film, and advertising opportunities. This can be a significant revenue stream for artists with commercially viable music.

8. Label / Team Access

If you have a manager, label, or team, check whether the distributor allows multiple users, team accounts, or label sub-accounts.

Full Distributor Comparison

Distributor	Pricing	Royalty Split	Publishing Admin	Best For
DistroKid	~\$22.99/yr unlimited	100% to artist	Add-on (Songtrust partnership)	High-volume independent artists; production houses
TuneCore	Per release (~\$14.99 single / \$29.99 album/yr)	100% to artist	Yes — TuneCore Publishing	Artists who release less frequently; strong publishing needs

CD Baby	Per release + 9% commission	91% to artist	Yes — CD Baby Pro	Full-service; physical + digital; catalog management
LANDR	Subscription tiers	100% to artist	Add-on available	Fast turnaround; mastering + distribution bundle
UnitedMasters	Free / Select (\$59.99/yr)	Free: 90% / Select: 100%	No	Independent artists seeking brand deal opportunities
Amuse	Free / Pro tiers	100% to artist (Pro)	No	Emerging artists; mobile-first workflow
Ditto Music	~\$19/yr per artist	100% to artist	Yes	Labels and artists managing multiple acts
DistroKid for Labels	Higher tier pricing	Customizable splits	Add-on	Production houses releasing under multiple artist names

Royalties & Revenue Splits

Understanding exactly what you'll receive — and when — is critical. Here's what to ask any distributor before signing up:

- What percentage of streaming revenue do you keep? (0% = 100% to artist; any % = less for you)
- How frequently do you pay out? (Monthly is standard; some pay quarterly)
- What is the minimum payout threshold? (Some require \$10–\$50 before releasing payment)
- Do you collect royalties from all territories, including international markets?
- How do you handle splits between collaborators, featured artists, or co-writers?
- Can I set custom royalty splits for featured artists directly in your dashboard?

FOR FEATURED ARTIST COLLABORATIONS

If you regularly release music under a "Featuring" model (e.g. "Your Production Co. Featuring Artist X"), look for a distributor that allows you to set custom royalty splits per release — so you can pay your featured vocalist their agreed share automatically without manual bank transfers.

Publishing Admin Services

If you write original songs, you have two separate income streams from streaming: master royalties (collected by your distributor) and mechanical royalties (collected by a publishing admin). Most artists miss the second stream entirely.

Mechanical royalties come from every stream of your song — paid by the platform to the songwriter. In the US, these are collected by the Mechanical Licensing Collective (MLC). Internationally, collection societies in each country hold these royalties. A publishing admin service registers your songs globally and collects on your behalf.

DON'T LEAVE MONEY BEHIND

Without a publishing admin service, mechanical royalties from international streams simply sit uncollected — and eventually expire. Even moderate streaming numbers across global platforms can mean hundreds of dollars in uncollected royalties per quarter.

Publishing Admin Options

- Songtrust — independent service; one-time setup fee + small annual fee; covers 60+ territories
- TuneCore Publishing — bundled with TuneCore distribution; strong international collection
- CD Baby Pro — add-on to CD Baby distribution; good global reach
- DistroKid + Songtrust — the combination used by many high-volume independent artists

Sync Licensing Opportunities

Sync licensing is when your music is licensed for use in TV shows, films, commercials, video games, or YouTube content. It can generate significant one-time fees plus ongoing performance royalties. Some distributors actively pitch their catalog to music supervisors and sync agencies.

- CD Baby — has an established sync licensing program and pitches music to supervisors
- UnitedMasters — particularly strong at brand deal and sync opportunities for independent artists
- DistroKid — does not actively pitch sync; you'd pursue this independently or via a sync agency

If sync is a priority for your music, factor this heavily into your distributor choice — or budget to work with a dedicated sync licensing agency alongside your distributor.

Switching Distributors

You are not locked in forever — but switching distributors requires careful planning to avoid losing streams, plays, and playlist placements.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU SWITCH

When you remove a release from one distributor and re-deliver it with another, Spotify and other platforms may treat it as a brand new release — resetting your stream count, losing playlist placements, and creating a duplicate artist profile issue. Plan carefully before switching.

For artists just starting out, this isn't a concern yet — you can always switch before you have significant streaming history to protect. The guidance below is most relevant once you have established releases.

How to Switch Safely

- Deliver all new releases through your new distributor first — don't move existing catalog until you're confident
- Contact your new distributor about "label migration" — some have processes to preserve stream counts
- If possible, keep your Spotify Artist URI consistent by working with both distributors during the transition
- Never delete releases from your old distributor until the new ones are confirmed live on all platforms
- Notify your Spotify for Artists team or use the S4A dashboard to flag any profile issues

Master Checklist

Before You Choose

- Estimated how many releases you plan per year
- Determined whether you need publishing admin services
- Checked whether sync licensing matters to your goals
- Confirmed whether you need multi-artist / label account features
- Identified your collaborators and whether you need royalty split tools

Distributor Decision

- Compared pricing models for your release volume
- Confirmed royalty split percentage (0% preferred)
- Verified platform coverage includes all platforms you target
- Checked payout frequency and minimum threshold
- Reviewed publishing admin options (bundled or separate)
- Checked analytics dashboard quality
- Read the terms of service — especially around ownership and termination

Getting Started

- Created and verified your distributor account
- Set up your artist name exactly as it should appear on all platforms
- Connected or registered your publishing admin service
- Saved your account login and recovery information securely

