

How to Register Your Songs with a PRO

Collecting performance royalties most independent artists leave on the table — ASCAP, BMI, and SESAC explained.

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What is a PRO?

A PRO (Performing Rights Organization) is a membership organization that collects performance royalties on behalf of songwriters and music publishers. In the US, the three main PROs are ASCAP, BMI, and SESAC.

When your song is performed publicly — on radio, streamed on Spotify, played in a restaurant, used in a TV show, or performed live — a performance royalty is generated. PROs track these performances and pay the royalties to the rights holders.

THE GAP MOST ARTISTS MISS

Your distributor collects your master recording royalties (from streaming). But the underlying song — the composition — generates separate royalties that only your PRO can collect. If you're not registered, that money goes unclaimed.

What Royalties PROs Collect

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> What PROs Collect	<input type="checkbox"/> What PROs Do NOT Collect
Radio airplay (AM/FM/satellite)	Master recording royalties (that's your distributor)
Streaming performance royalties (Spotify, Apple, etc.)	Mechanical royalties from streaming (that's your publishing admin)
Live performances (concerts, festivals)	Sync licensing fees (you or your publisher negotiate those)
TV and film performances	YouTube Content ID earnings (that's a separate system)
Background music in venues (bars, restaurants, retail)	

ASCAP vs BMI vs SESAC

PRO	Membership	Cost	Key Notes
ASCAP	Open to all songwriters	\$50 one-time fee (writer)	Member-owned; strong international reciprocal agreements; large catalog

BMI	Open to all songwriters	Free to join	No joining fee; very large catalog; strong radio tracking
SESAC	Invitation/application only	Varies	Selective; often better rates for qualifying members; strong TV/film presence

💡 WHICH SHOULD YOU CHOOSE?

For most independent artists starting out, BMI (free) or ASCAP (\$50 one-time) are the practical choices. Both cover all major platforms and have strong international agreements. You can only join ONE US PRO as a songwriter — choose carefully, as switching requires leaving one before joining another.

You can be a member as both a songwriter AND a publisher at the same PRO. If you own your publishing (which you do as an independent artist), you should register both roles to collect both shares of performance royalties.

How to Register

STEP ASCAP

Register at ascap.com/music-creators

- Go to ascap.com and click "Join ASCAP"
- Register as a Writer member (\$50 one-time fee)
- Optionally register a Publishing company (free for ASCAP members)
- After approval, log in to your member portal to register individual works

STEP BMI

Register at bmi.com/join

- Go to bmi.com and click "Become an Affiliate"
- Register as a Songwriter (free)
- Optionally set up a Publishing company (\$150 fee)
- After approval, use your BMI portal to register individual songs

Registering Individual Songs

Joining a PRO is only step one. You must also register each individual song (called a "work") in your PRO's database. Unregistered works generate royalties — but those royalties sit in a holding account and may never reach you.

What You'll Need to Register Each Song

- Official song title (exactly as released)
- All songwriter names and their PRO affiliations
- Songwriter ownership split (must total 100%)
- Publisher name(s) and ownership split
- ISRC code (if available)
- Release date and distributor
- Alternative titles or translations (if any)

REGISTER EVERY WORK, EVERY TIME

Make it a habit — every time you release a new track, register it with your PRO within the same week. Retroactive registration is possible, but royalties from before registration may be lost.

PROs for Featured Artists

If you are a vocalist who appeared on a track as a "featured artist" but did not write the song, your performance may not automatically generate PRO royalties for you — PRO performance royalties go to the songwriters, not the performers.

However, if you co-wrote any part of the song — lyrics, melody, or arrangement — you should be credited as a co-writer and registered as such with the PRO. Always clarify songwriting credit before you record.

For master recording performance royalties (from digital streaming and satellite radio), featured artists should register with SoundExchange — this is separate from PROs. See the SoundExchange Setup Guide in the Knowledge Base for a step-by-step walkthrough of registering as a featured artist performer.

Master Checklist

PRO Membership

- Chosen a PRO (ASCAP or BMI for most independent artists)
- Registered as a songwriter member
- Registered a publishing entity (even if it is just your own name)
- Saved your PRO membership number

Song Registration

- Logged all songwriter names and their ownership splits
- Registered every released track in your PRO portal
- Included ISRC codes in each work registration
- Confirmed co-writers are also registered with a PRO
- Set a recurring reminder to register each new release

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