

Cover Art That Gets Clicked

Specs, design principles, and platform-specific requirements for cover art that stands out in the feed.

2026 Edition · ~8 min read · Design Guide

Why Cover Art Is a Marketing Tool

Your cover art is the first thing a potential listener sees before they hear a single note. On mobile screens — where most music is discovered — your artwork displays at roughly 50x50 pixels in a playlist or search result. It has less than a second to stop a scroll.

Great cover art communicates genre, mood, and artist identity instantly. It signals professionalism and tells a listener whether this music is for them before they even press play. Weak cover art — regardless of how good the music is — can kill click-through rates before the music has a chance.

THINK SMALL FIRST

Design your cover art to look great at 50x50 pixels — the smallest size it will appear anywhere. If it reads clearly at thumbnail size, it will look great everywhere else. If it doesn't read at thumbnail size, you have a problem.

Universal Technical Specs

Dimensions	3000 x 3000 pixels minimum (square — 1:1 ratio)
File format	JPG or PNG (JPG preferred for file size; PNG for transparency needs)
Color space	sRGB (not CMYK — CMYK is for print, not screens)
File size	Under 10 MB (most distributors require this)
Resolution	72 DPI is fine for digital; 300 DPI if you plan physical releases too
Prohibited content	No website URLs, no streaming platform logos, no pricing, no social handles, no explicit nudity

DISTRIBUTOR REJECTION TRIGGERS

The most common reasons cover art gets rejected by distributors: too small (under 3000x3000), CMYK color mode, website URLs embedded in the image, or explicit content without proper flagging. Check all of these before submitting.

Platform-Specific Display Sizes

Platform / Context	Approx. Display Size	Key Consideration
--------------------	----------------------	-------------------

Spotify — Album page	640 x 640px	Full detail visible; this is where art really shows
Spotify — Playlist / search	56 x 56px	Design for readability at tiny size
Spotify — Now Playing (mobile)	~340 x 340px	Prominent display; make it visually compelling
Apple Music — Full view	1000 x 1000px+	Highest quality display; invest in art quality
YouTube Music — Thumbnail	120 x 120px	Needs strong contrast at small size
Social media share (auto-generated)	Varies; ~600px wide	Text must be legible at medium sizes
TikTok / Instagram sound	~50–80px circle	Circular crop — keep key elements centered

Design Principles That Work

1. Strong Contrast

High contrast between your main subject and background makes art readable at small sizes. Light subject on dark background — or the reverse — always outperforms low-contrast designs at thumbnail scale.

2. Limit Your Colors

The most impactful covers typically use 2–3 dominant colors. A cohesive palette reads as professional; too many colors create visual noise that doesn't compress well at small sizes.

3. Keep Text Large or Remove It

If you use text on your cover, use it boldly — large enough to read at 100px. Small decorative text becomes illegible and adds clutter. Many successful modern releases use no text at all, letting the visual do all the work.

4. Communicate Genre & Mood

Your cover art should signal the genre and emotional feel of the music — a listener should have a sense of what they're about to hear before pressing play. A dark, grainy photo signals something different than a bright, clean illustration.

5. Consider the Circle Crop

On TikTok, Instagram Reels, and some playlist contexts, your cover is cropped to a circle. Ensure your main focal element (face, logo, key image) is centered so it survives the circular crop intact.

Before designing, spend 10 minutes in the "New Releases" section of your genre on Spotify. Notice what visual patterns dominate. You don't need to copy — but you should understand the visual language of your genre so you can speak it (or intentionally break it).

Common Cover Art Mistakes

- Using a low-resolution image upscaled to 3000px — a blurry 800px image stretched to 3000px is still a blurry image. Start with a high-resolution source.
- Too much text — artist name, album title, track listing, website, social handles, and a quote all on one cover. Pick one message.
- Stock photo without licensing — using a stock image without purchasing the appropriate license can result in a copyright claim. Always verify your image rights.
- Designing only at 3000px — always zoom out and preview at 50px and 150px before finalizing. What looks great at full size often fails at thumbnail.
- Embedding social handles or URLs — most distributors will reject this outright. Keep marketing language off the artwork.
- Using CMYK color mode — screens display RGB/sRGB. CMYK art will look dull or color-shifted on digital platforms.

Tools to Create Great Cover Art

Tool	Cost	Best For
Adobe Photoshop	Subscription	Professional photo editing and compositing; industry standard
Adobe Illustrator	Subscription	Vector-based illustration and typography; scales infinitely
Canva Pro	Free / \$13/mo	Fast, template-based design; excellent for non-designers
Figma	Free / Pro	Collaborative design; great for teams
GIMP	Free	Free Photoshop alternative; powerful but steep learning curve
Procreate (iPad)	~\$13 one-time	Hand-drawn illustration; unique, non-generic results
Hire a designer	\$50–\$500+	Professional results; platforms: Fiverr, 99designs, Dribbble

OUR RECOMMENDATION

For most independent artists, Canva Pro offers the best balance of speed, quality, and cost — especially if you're releasing frequently. If your brand requires something more distinctive or you want to stand out in a competitive genre, Procreate or a hired designer is worth the investment.

Master Checklist

Technical Requirements

- Canvas size: 3000 x 3000 pixels
- File format: JPG or PNG
- Color mode: sRGB (not CMYK)
- File size: under 10 MB
- No website URLs, social handles, or platform logos embedded
- No prohibited content

Design Quality Check

- Previewed at 50x50 pixels — still readable?
- Previewed in a circular crop — key elements still visible?
- Strong contrast between subject and background
- Limited color palette (2–3 dominant colors)
- Any text is large enough to read at thumbnail size
- Genre and mood are communicated visually
- Image source is properly licensed (if using photography or stock)

A KajamBand™ Resource

Keeping Local Music Alive · Philadelphia, PA · kajamband.com · whatsup@kajamband.com