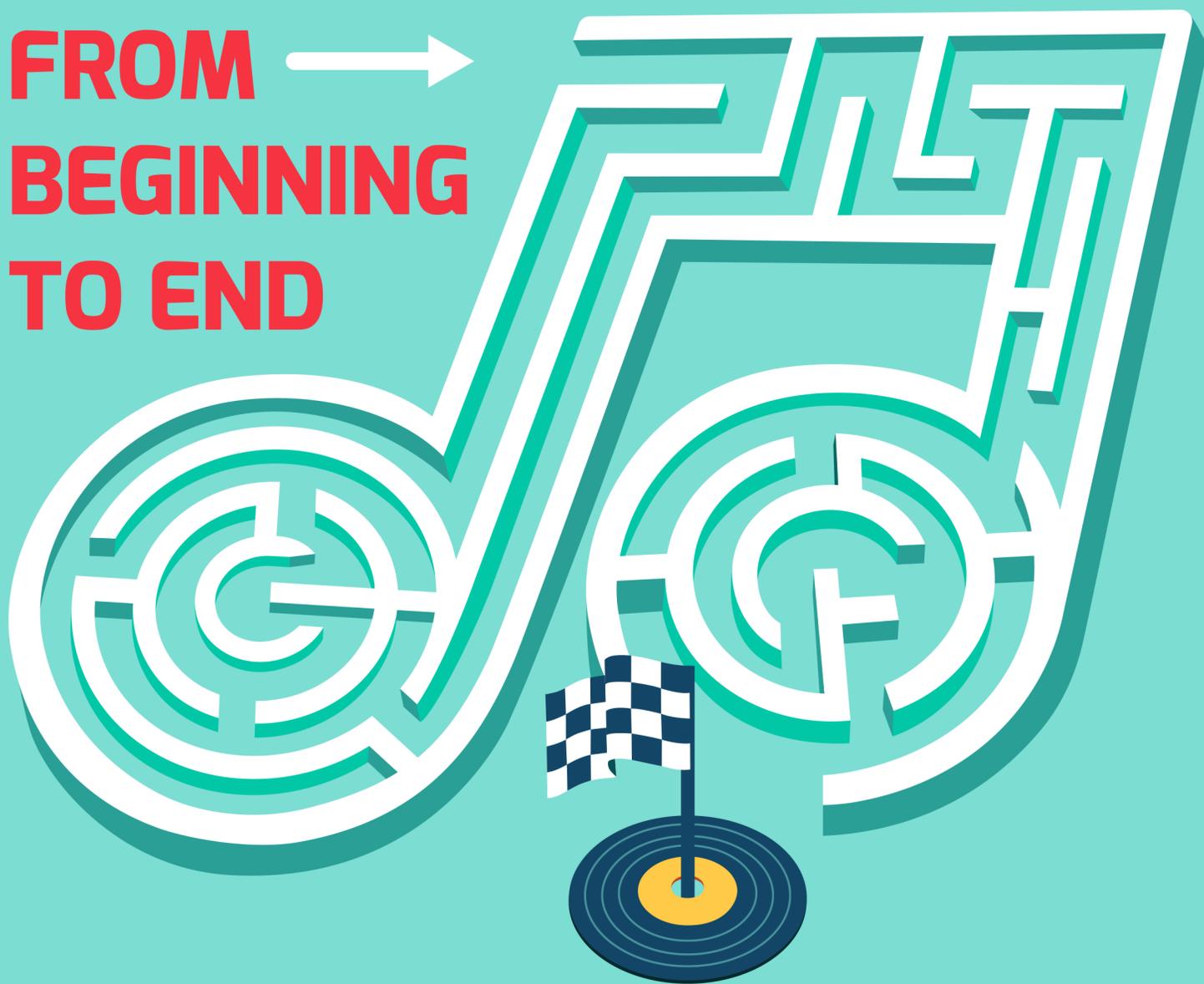


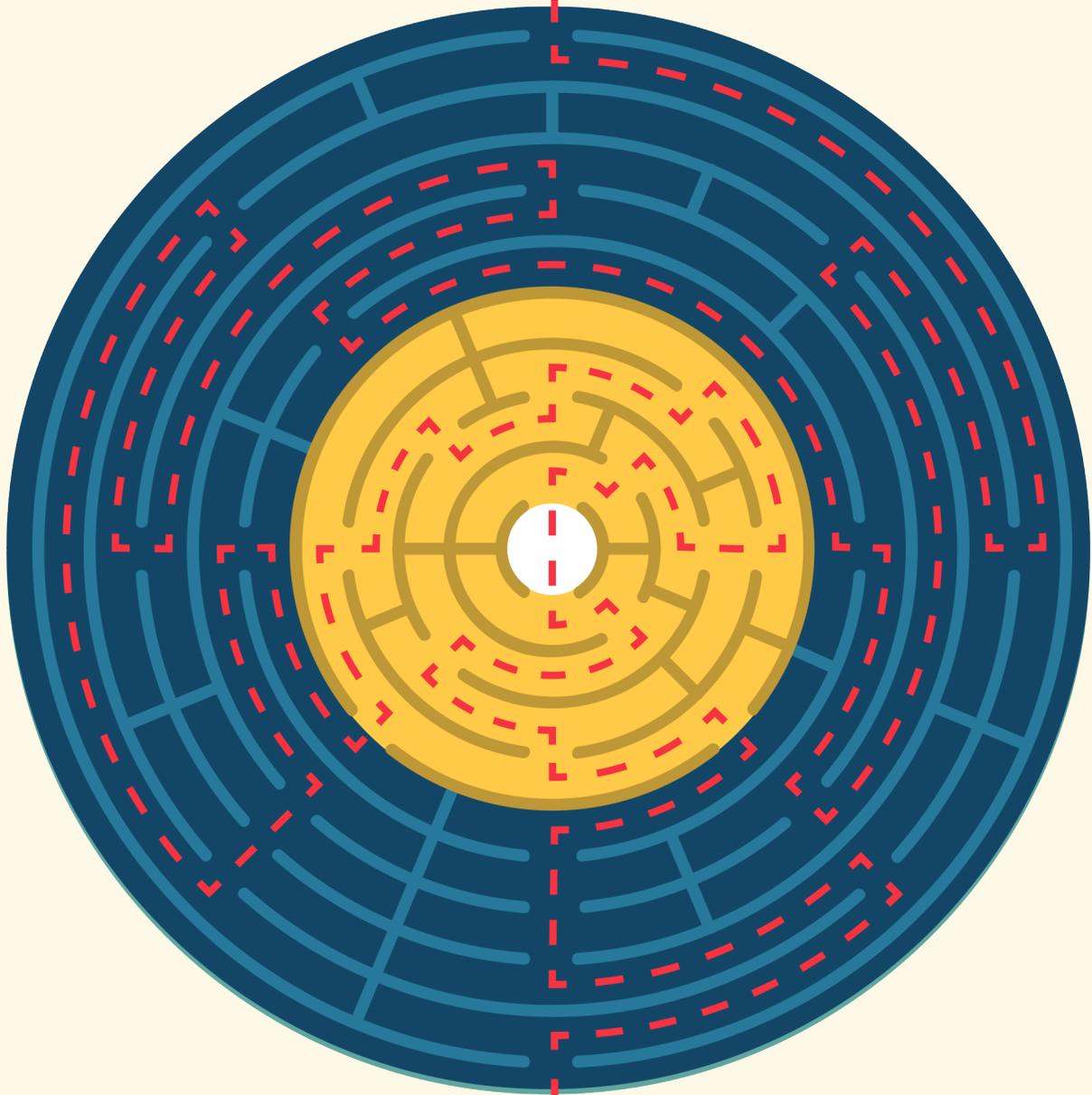
PLANNING YOUR

A L B U M

FROM →
BEGINNING
TO END



BY RANDY CHERTKOW AND JASON FEEHAN



By Randy Chertkow and Jason Feehan

Authors of *The Indie Band Survival Guide*, *The Complete Manual for the Do-It-Yourself Musician*, 2nd Edition (Macmillan); creators of the 15-hour online course, *Making Money with Music* (CreativeLive); and regular contributors to *Electronic Musician* magazine, including the free weekly web column, "The DIY Advisor."

"[Chertkow and Feehan] are the ideal mentors for aspiring indie musicians who want to navigate an ever-changing music industry." –*Billboard* magazine

→ If you're sitting down to tackle making an album, there's a lot to think about.

From clearing the rights for your cover songs to converting the cover art to the right format, there are a number of issues that can trip you up, or cause the album to take a lot longer than you'd expect. Some musicians get so lost in handling the technical production of the album that they forget to generate publicity and create buzz about a new release.

This checklist organizes everything that goes into making an album — from beginning to end — to help you plan everything ahead of time so there are no surprises. Planning ahead will not only help you make the album as good as it can be, it will let you focus on promoting your album to maximize your sales. Think of it as your checklist before heading out on a long trip. You don't need to do everything that's listed below, but our goal here is to list everything you may want to do, so you're reminded of what you should tackle and when.

Before you start

This checklist may be a bit overwhelming at first since it lists everything. But keep in mind that “doing it yourself” does not mean “do it all yourself.” There are a lot of places you can go to get help. In the second edition of our book, [The Indie Band Survival Guide: The Complete Manual For The Do-It-Yourself Musician](#), we discuss how to work with your fans, friends, and family to help you succeed so you can focus on the music and building your fan base. These are the people who form the foundation of your “skill,” “opportunity,” and “business partner” networks. But if you can't find what you need within your network to help you with some of the steps of making and promoting an album, you can also use a host of other services, tools, and professionals.

In this checklist we'll not only offer you advice for what you need to do, we'll highlight all the areas where [Disc Makers](#) can help you. By choosing what to do yourself, what to have friends and fans help with, and what you'd like a professional service to do, you can stay focused on what only a musician can do: working on your music and building your fan base.

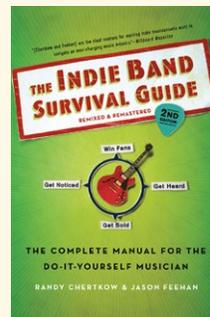
How this checklist is organized

We've divided the steps in this checklist into three phases:

Phase One: Making Your Album

Phase Two: Preparing for the Album Release

Phase Three: The Album Release Show and Post-Release



Check out the updated second edition of our popular, critically-acclaimed book, [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#). It's nearly 400 pages of practical advice covering everything about being a musician and doing it yourself without a label. The comprehensive book tackles topics that include

getting distributed; getting heard; playing live; creating a web, mobile, and social presence; getting publicity; building a brand; and creating and utilizing your network.

If you're focused particularly on making money with your music, or if you learn better through video presentation than books, you can get our 15-hour comprehensive online educational course “[Making Money with Music](#)” through [CreativeLIVE.com](#).



The Complete Checklist

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PHASE

ONE

Making Your Album

Whenever we ask our favorite recording engineer, John Lisiecki, about recording techniques and equipment, he always waves his hands in the air and says, “You’re jumping the gun! *How* you record something is secondary to *what* you’re recording.” In other words, the music is the most important thing. It’s the centerpiece of your album, and the most important part of the recording process. It can also be the most fun.

Pre-recording and planning steps

Before you even hit the record button, there are a few things to consider.

Are you making an EP, an album, or an album series?

As we emphasize in our course, “[Making Money with Music](#),” when it comes to increasing sales of your music, the formula turns on quantity. It takes a lot of time and energy converting one person into a fan who is willing to purchase your music. It takes less time and energy getting a fan who has already purchased some of your music to purchase swag and additional music from you. This is where having a back catalog of music to sell comes in.

“The number one mistake I’ve seen artists make is to not have enough product to sell,” says Tony van Veen, CEO of [Disc Makers](#). “Whether at a show or selling through the web, the easiest sale you can make is to a person who has already bought from you in the past. Think about it – you’re at a gig, you have a captive audience excited about your performance. If you’ve only got your one, sole album there, and they already own it, what else can you sell them? You’ve got the opportunity to drive incremental revenue from these customers, but nothing else to sell. That’s a place where artists just leave money on the table.”

Rather than leave money at the table by focusing all your time, money, and energy on one album, think of it as a collection that can be packaged and released multiple times. For instance, set out to make one main album and a series of additional albums or EPs (Extended Play, a short album of four to six songs) with material based on the songs of the main album. That way, while you’ll focus publicity efforts on creating awareness of the main album, you can also build your discography and back catalog with a series of EPs such as:

- Songs that didn’t make the cut (outtakes and b-sides).
- Live versions of some of the songs found on the main album.
- Original demos of the songs found on the album.
- Acoustic versions of some of the songs on the album.
- Remixes of some of the songs on the main album.
- A “commentary” album where you talk about the music much like a director talks over the movie on a DVD.

These extras are not only ideal for increasing your product line to boost sales, but they’re also perfect rewards to incorporate in any crowdfunding campaigns you may do. Generating pledges and getting backers to pledge additional funds often turns on the rewards you can offer them. Having acoustic or other versions of your songs available as special rewards going only to top pledges can help maximize the amount of funding you receive and can make the difference between an unfunded and funded goal.

Choose your songs

It should go without saying that your album should contain your very best music. This is where the concept of producing an album series becomes helpful – it's easier to cut the songs that aren't the "best" but still give them a home on another release that's a part of the series (outtakes and b-sides).

Focusing on honing your songwriting skills should be a part of this process, and it's one of the most difficult things to include on a checklist. As John Ondrasik says in Disc Makers' [Songwriters on Songwriting Guide](#), "Songwriting is an exercise in failure. For every good song you write there will be dozens of ideas, pieces, attempts that never make the cut."

Additionally, you need to decide if you're recording all original songs or if you're including cover songs. If one or more of the songs are covers, then you'll need to clear the rights so you can record it. If they're original songs, then you'll still need to keep track of who wrote what and who owns the sound recordings as we recommend later in this chapter.

Record at home or at a professional studio?

Professional studios cost money, but they have the know-how and talent to make your recordings sound "radio-quality." However, time is a factor since studios typically charge by the hour. Recording at home costs money up front, but pays off over time the more you record. Of course, one of the hidden dangers of recording at home is you can spend months or years "perfecting" just one song!

Disc Makers' [Home Studio Handbook](#) is a great resource if you're looking to get recording tips for the studio or building a home studio of your own.

TIP

- **Involve your street team**, aka your most die-hard fans. Let them get behind the scenes on early mixes and get their feedback on your music. They'll identify the "best" songs and maybe even start suggesting a running order or album title. Not only will this continue to develop the relationship between you and your fans (and make your street team feel special), it will generate buzz within your fan base as to what you're working on and start the promotion ball rolling.
- **Consider releasing some of these early mixes** as part of your album series to generate buzz within your fan base. Also, if you're crowdfunding, providing early mixes and behind-the-scenes access to the process makes great rewards that can boost pledges from backers. To learn more about crowdfunding, watch our classes "Elements of a Crowdfunding Campaign" and "How to Run a Successful Campaign" from our online course, "[Making Money With Music.](#)"

Rehearse

Whether you choose to record at a professional studio or in a home environment, rehearse and arrange the songs before you step into the studio or begin to record. This will save you time and money. Some musicians write out parts using sheet music, while others record their practices or preproduction demos as guides they can refer to later while in the studio. Do whatever works best for you, but be prepared before you start the recording process.

Fine tune your gear and instruments

Whenever you record, make sure your gear is up to the task. You don't want to use instruments or cables that crackle or cut out or amps and speakers that play right "most of the time." If you play drums, make sure you have fresh heads. Put new strings on your guitar a few days before the session – in fact, you should change your strings for every 24 hours of play time, especially if you're recording. If you're recording at a studio, bring extras of everything as time is money, and always make sure you

have fresh batteries! At a recording studio, the meter will be running while you're out at the store buying supplies. Get them ahead of time.

Recording steps

Recording is part science and part art. There's no right way to record, but many people have an opinion about it. We'll stay out of the debate and keep our tips here simple.

Make mixes, listen, get feedback, and repeat

Record your parts, listen, get ideas, and make decisions on what to change, add, or re-record. When filming movies, directors get copies of what was filmed that day (called "dailies"). You'll want to get mixes of what you recorded so you can get feedback, get new ideas, make any necessary changes, and make sure you're on track. Get others to listen to your tracks and solicit feedback.

Make final mixes

When the time comes, you'll produce the final mix. Listen to the final mixes on many speakers to hear how it sounds. Mastering your album after mixdown is highly recommended. Disc Makers has its own in-house

mastering studio called [The SoundLAB](#). Keep in mind that while mastering can make good mixes sound great, it can't always make a bad mix sound good.

Mastering and post-production steps

Mastering is frequently misunderstood by musicians. Often it's seen as an extra step that's not necessary.

This misconception can be easily dispelled when you hear what a mastering studio can do for your music. Getting your album mastered will (among other things) equalize the entire album, edit minor flaws, eliminate hum and hiss, apply noise reduction, adjust stereo width, adjust volumes, and add dynamic expansion and compression. Mastering can make the difference when it comes to licensing and placement of your songs on TV, movies, and commercials, and it can get your album noticed and played on radio and other media outlets where the quality of the sound is important.

With more and more musicians recording at home, professional mastering can make even more of an impact. As Brian Lipski, senior mastering engineer at

Hear what mastering can do for your music

Writing about mastering is like dancing about cooking: it needs to be heard to be understood. You can [hear before-and-after samples](#) of Disc Makers' mastering house's work online on [The SoundLAB's website](#).

Better yet, you can [request a free CD](#) comparing before-and-after samples so you can hear it on your home sound system. But don't just listen to the CD on

your best system — challenge it. Compare the before-and-after sound quality in your car, through your TV, on a boom box, and with headphones. Put it through the test. You'll hear the difference in each of these settings and come away with a better understanding of what mastering is and how it can really put the polish on your music.

The SoundLAB at [Disc Makers](#) says, “If you’re recording and mixing in a small project studio, with less than ideal acoustics and only a small set of near field monitors, be aware that certain frequency ranges (particularly the low end) may not be reproduced accurately. Over the course of many days or weeks working in this environment, your ears will become used to this inaccurate sound and you will tend to over mix or EQ those frequencies to compensate. The result may be a mix that sounds severely unbalanced when played back on systems outside of the studio.”

Given the tools and experience mastering engineers have, they can identify the problem areas of a mix and “fix it” to help you achieve a balanced mix – one that sounds great regardless of the system it’s playing on.

Choose a mastering house

Although you probably need to record somewhere local to you, you are not tied to home for mastering. Mastering houses are only as good as the specialists they employ and the rooms they inhabit. When looking for a quality mastering house, you’ll want to hear examples of their work and determine if it’s the right sound for you.

Have the right formats and ask what files they need

Confirm with the mastering house which format they require for your music (i.e. wav, aiff, but never MP3). [The SoundLAB](#) accepts masters on audio CD; data files (.wav, .aiff, FLAC, etc.) on CD-R, DVD-R, flash drive, or via upload; Digital Audio Tape (DAT); DDP file set (on CD, DVD-R, flash drive, or via upload); or 1/2” or 1/4” analog tape.

Most musicians think mastering houses only work with your final mix, however some will ask you to prepare two separate mixes – one with a mix of just the music and another with just the vocals. This allows them to adjust the vocals in the mix so they’re not too loud or buried in the mix. It also allows them to make “radio edits” by dropping obscenities so radio can play the song over the airwaves.

Decide the track order for the album

This can be one of the hardest parts (especially if you’re in a band as everyone has an opinion!), but determine your preferred song running order for the album in advance so you don’t waste time on the clock debating your song order.

Decide on the amount of space between songs

A mastering house usually helps with this as the space between the songs helps set the pace of the album. Sometimes you’ll want the next tune to kick in immediately, other times you’ll need to give a song some time to breathe before launching into the next song.

Legal steps

Before you can ask [Disc Makers](#) to mass produce copies of your disc, there are a few legal issues to clear first. You are required to sign an Intellectual Property Rights Declaration (IPR form) declaring that all the music on your album is original and “owned” by you. If all your music is original, you’ll check that box and move on. However, if you record any cover songs or incorporate any copyrighted samples or loops, you have to provide proof that you received the proper permissions. That’s where the next steps come in.

Document who owns the songs and sound recordings

If you’re in a band or collaborating, co-writing, and co-recording your music with another person, you should document who wrote what while you’re making it.

Items you should document include:

- Who owns the copyright in the song and/or how writing is split among the songwriters.
- Who owns the sound recording(s).

Additionally, you should document who the publisher is. Publishing is too large a topic to cover here. If you want

details on publishers, see the chapter on “Your Rights” in [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#), which covers rights, ownership, and licensing.

Get permission to record any cover songs or use samples or loops

Cover songs are any songs that you or your band members did not write. For instance, if you decide to record your own version of “Freebird,” you need to get permission from the copyright owner and [pay a license fee](#) to duplicate it. All CD manufacturers will ask you to guarantee that you’ve done this before printing any copies of your disc. This is true even if you have no intention of selling your version of the cover song. It’s the duplication of it that makes it a “copy” under the law, not selling it.

Additionally, any samples and loops you incorporate into your music need to be cleared as well. One way around this is to use samples and loops that are already pre-cleared and royalty-free. Most sample libraries or discs sold at music retail stores and sites are royalty-free. Also, some musicians create and release their own pre-cleared and royalty-free samples and loops licensed under Creative Commons. For example, [ccmixter](#) is one such resource.

For help and for all the forms you’ll need, including an IPR (Intellectual Property Rights) form and design forms, check out the [Disc Makers website](#).

If you want more information on recording cover songs, loops, and music copyright, you can also read the “Your Rights” chapter in [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#), which includes practical and detailed information on the rights you have to your music, how to register music copyrights, how to license your music, and how to set yourself up as your own publisher so you can fully profit from your music.

Clear the legal status of all the artwork

Just like you need permission to use cover songs, you’ll need permission to use any graphics, fonts, or photographs you don’t own. One way around this is to use pre-cleared and royalty-free artwork or artwork and photos you’ve taken or commissioned. In addition to paid stock photo services, there are numerous “open source” and “free graphics” resources you can use by searching these keywords.

Clear the legal status of all the text

If you intend to print the lyrics to a cover song you got permission to record, this needs a separate license. It’s one thing to get permission to record the cover song, it’s another to type out the lyrics. Under the law, there are actually two different things that you’re copying. As a result, you’ll need to get permission to copy the lyrics to the liner notes of your album. If you don’t, it’s best to leave them off. And, yes, technically you need permission from yourself to print the lyrics to your original songs!

Get permission for guest musicians

Ever see a sentence in a CD’s liner notes that reads: “So-and-so guest musician appears courtesy of so-and-so label?” This is usually due to exclusivity clauses in the label’s contract that bind the musician to the label. To the extent you collaborate or work with a musician signed to a label, you’ll need the label’s permission for them to participate. You’ll want to ask the guest musician if this is something that needs to be done.

Replication and digital distribution steps

While compact audio players, the Internet, and distribution channels such as iTunes, Amazon, and file-sharing rely on compressed file formats such as MP3s, CDs remain the highest-quality format to deliver your music. Plus, if you want to get radio airplay or do a press campaign, they usually expect a CD.

To learn more about selling your CDs online or getting them digitally distributed, head to the members' section of [CD Baby](#).

Selling at shows has a lot of components to it, and is a broader topic that we cover in our book. Read the "Your Gigs" chapters in [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#) to learn more about maximizing your sales at shows.

Online distributors such as [CD Baby](#) will sell and deliver your CD to the world, but you'll likely find that the bulk of your CD sales occur at shows. It's the most personal way you can sell your music to a fan, and it's usually an easy sale: after a great show, fans often want their own copy of the music. Plus, CDs are usually the biggest money makers since the cost to produce them is far less than what you can sell them for.

If you've released a CD in the past, check your sales from shows and determine the total units sold, and if you haven't started tracking this yet, start doing so. Once you know this, and factor in give-aways and promotions, you can calculate a break-even-point on how many CDs you expect to sell and how many you'll want to order.

Of course, some fans will prefer digital access to your music, and one way to provide it and improve music sales at shows is to offer [digital download cards](#). These cards allow you to sell digital downloads from [CD Baby](#) at gigs, conferences, and wherever you go.

Manufacturing CDs

Depending on how many you order, how fast you need them done, the kind of package and insert you need, and your shipping choice, your cost per CD could range anywhere from under \$1 to \$4 or more. Once you know your cost and number of giveaways, you can determine how many you need to sell to break even. See all of [Disc Makers' packaging options](#) and get an instant quote.

Determine how many CDs to make

Do you want five CDs? 100? 500? 1,000? 5,000?

Essentially, it all turns on your goals. Are you going to promote your release to the press? New media? Are you going to target college radio? Are you going to focus on podcasts and music blogs? These decisions will help you reach a decision on how many CDs you'll want to make.

To determine the size of the print run that makes the most economic sense, you should do your best to estimate the amount of copies you'll need for:

- **Your press campaign.** Determine the number of press outlets, both new and traditional media, you plan to send a CD to.
- **Your radio campaign.** Determine the number of CDs you plan to send to radio stations.
- **Promotional copies.** Estimate the number of CDs you'll need for promotional purposes such as giveaways, contests, fan thank-yous, etc.
- **Free copies.** Determine the number of CDs you'll pass out to your fellow band members, family, friends, street teams, etc.
- **Copies for sale.** Estimate the number you'll want on hand to sell for a profit. If you have past sales figures of CD and digital sales of your music, you can use these to project the number you expect to sell through show CD sales, online CD sales, consignment sales, and any other physical CD distribution.

Decide on the type of packaging (jewel case, sleeve, etc.) and insert

You have a host of options to choose from. [Disc Makers](#) offers jewel cases, slim cases, eco-friendly Digipaks and wallets, jackets, paper sleeves, and more. With regard to booklets, the options are too numerous to mention.

[Merchly](#) offers affordable custom t-shirts, hoodies, hats, and promo items for your merch table, with free ground shipping on every order.

When it comes to radio campaigns, the CD case you pick is important. CD libraries used by radio stations, journalists,

and reviewers are modeled around the size of a standard jewel case. So, to the extent your goal is to get your CD in the hands of radio and the press, you'll want to keep this in mind.

However, every rule is made to be broken. [George Hrab](#), a successful indie musician and podcaster out of Pennsylvania, has done a fantastic job packaging his CDs in unique ways to help them stand out from the crowd. For example, one of his CDs comes in a tin box, another in an embossed paper sleeve, and another in a large DVD-style box. All of them feature detailed liner notes, photos, and other extras. Each one stands out as a piece of art, giving his fans a genuine reason to buy the physical CD, and his sales have benefited from this approach.

Get design templates and use qualified design services

If you or your graphic designer is designing your CD cover and art, always use [Disc Makers design templates](#) for your artwork and supply the art to the [specifications of our printers](#). If you don't, it may cost you time and money down the road to get it right (not to mention your own grief and frustration).

If you don't have a qualified designer in your network, seriously consider using the [Design Studio at Disc Makers](#). As we talk about in the "Get Publicized" chapter of [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#), the press and media often judge your work by how things look. Imagine what you'd think if you were a music critic and got a CD burned from a computer with a band name scrawled in permanent marker. Creating a professionally designed disc sends the message that you're serious about your music and they should take it seriously as well.

Print your own discs

Depending on your specific needs for quantities and customization, it may save you money to do your duplicating yourself. [Disc Makers](#) has its own [line of CD/DVD duplicators and printers](#), priced anywhere from \$200 to over \$3,000. Keep in mind, this is just the equipment cost. You'll still need inserts, ink, cases, and blank discs (preferably one without a brand logo on them). [Disc Makers](#)

also sells [blank media](#), including blank [CD-Rs with your artwork](#) silkscreened on them, which adds a level of professionalism to your small-run CD manufacturing.

Digital download cards

Just like iTunes sells gift cards that allow the purchaser to buy any music from its site, you can sell your own [digital download cards](#) specifically for your album. [Disc Makers](#) can create custom-printed cards with your album's artwork for downloads on [CD Baby](#).

On the back are instructions and a unique code that allows your fans to download your album. This is a great way to sell your music at shows or wherever your fans are. For anyone who prefers digital files of your music, just stash a stack of download cards in your wallet and you're ready to sell your music on the go.

Artwork and design

One of the things that separates a CD from an MP3 is the artwork, design, and depth of information you can convey. Below is a comprehensive list of what you may want to consider for your album art.

Choose a name for the album

Think of how the name will appear – not only on the album – but also how it will sound when you refer to it on your website or through your social networks. Plus, you want to think of how it will appear within music players like iTunes, Spotify, and other stores.

Get a UPC barcode

If you want to sell your album in a retail store or online through [CD Baby](#) or other aggregators, you'll need to have a unique [Universal Product Code](#) (UPC), or barcode. In addition, the primary sales tracking authority, SoundScan, only tracks albums with barcodes. If your release becomes a big hit, but doesn't have a barcode, SoundScan won't know about your sales. The *Billboard* charts, as well as other charting authorities, base their rankings on these SoundScan numbers.



Liner Note Checklist

Must-Haves

- Album Title
- Artist/Band Name
- Copyright and publishing information/notices for:*
 - Music (original or covers)
 - Artwork
 - Text
- Performance Rights Organization the songs are registered to (if applicable)
- Track Listing
- Your website
- Key social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Contact Information — You never know where your CD may end up. Be sure to include ways you can be contacted.

Optional

- Where and when the album was recorded
- Where the album was mastered
- Who played what
- Producer/Engineer(s)
- Running times for songs (this is helpful for DJs to know if you're seeking radio play)
- Guest musicians
- Other albums for sale and where they can be purchased
- Song notes
- Lyrics
- Thank yous

Disc Makers offers promotional materials – including posters, postcards, stickers, and more – that can be printed with your CD artwork and logos.

Hire a professional designer for your artwork and design

As mentioned already, the artwork and graphics on your CD are almost as important as the music inside — especially when it comes to promotion and publicity.

If graphic design isn't among your talents, find a professional graphic artist – either in your network, a reputable local designer, or via [The Design Studio at Disc Makers](#). How much CD artwork you'll need depends, in part, on your packaging, but in general you'll need to design:

- Cover art
- Tray card
- On-disc print
- Booklet/liner notes

A design studio can do more than just prepare album artwork. You can also use them to generate a good set of logo images ready to go for your website, T-shirts, merchandise, banner ads, and more if you don't have them yet. Merchandise plays such an important part of an indie musician's income that it's worth time to create a variety of brand-related images based off your name and logo so you can make an assortment of merchandise for your fans to choose from.

Replicate the CD

Once all the artwork is finalized and your album is mixed and mastered, you're ready to get it replicated.

Collect your materials

You need five things when you send in your CD order:

- Your audio master on CD-R or ready to upload
- Your design files ready to mail in or upload
- Payment
- Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) documentation
- A signed quote form

Your audio master

Make sure your audio master (the disc you're sending of your finished recording, or the file you are uploading) sounds and functions exactly the way you want it to. The finished discs you get back will be an exact match of the master you send (unless you're ordering post-production mastering), so it's important that your master sounds exactly the way you want it to, with all of the tracks in the correct order and the right amount of spacing between songs. Always make a safety copy of your master before you ship or deliver it anywhere.

Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and mechanical licenses

Before [Disc Makers](#) (or any CD manufacturer) can legally reproduce the product you're ordering, you need to prove that you own the rights to the music. Without a completed [IPR form](#), your order cannot go through to production.

Get more information and forms related to intellectual property rights, samples, copyrights, and more on [Disc Makers' website](#).

Proof your design files

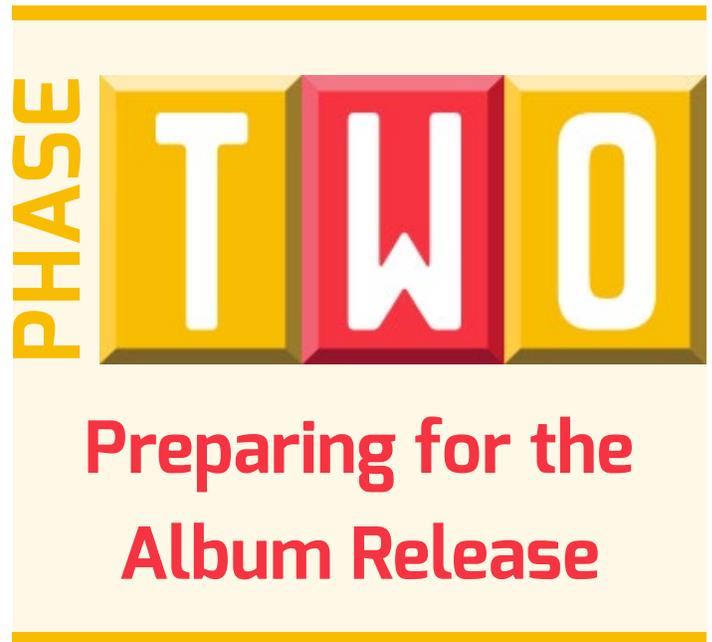
Always proof your artwork, and have someone who is not involved with the creation of the artwork proof it as well. Once approved, any missed errors or misspellings are your responsibility, and you'll have 1,000 or more copies printed with the same mistake. It's a good idea to proof a physical copy, not just an online PDF, as there's something about holding a physical proof in your hands that can help you spot problems better than checking images on a computer monitor.

Proof your audio master

Same goes for the audio master. Listen to it from start to finish to make sure it's flawless.

Don't hold up the production

Your order won't be sent to print or replication until you have approved your proofs and audio master. If you order a 10-day turnaround but take three days to approve your proof, you're adding time to the production process. Be thorough, pay attention to detail, but get your work done quickly to ensure your production times aren't delayed.



Album releases are a great way to generate buzz for your music. This means you need to pick an official “release date” far enough into the future to give you time to do all the necessary things to build awareness about your album and grow any publicity.

It's best to not set your release date until your CDs are in your hand. If you are going to publicize your album in the traditional press or do a radio campaign, you'll want to set the official release date at least 8-12 weeks after you've received the copies of your album from the CD manufacturing house. If you forgo the traditional publicity and radio route and focus more on running a new media campaign (blogs, podcasts, etc), which craves immediacy, then you can have a shorter lead time. Keep in mind you still need time to get all your album-related merchandise – including [T-shirts](#), [posters](#), and other items – in order.

Of course, this means you'll be sitting on the album for a while before the release date, but fight the urge to simply release it to the public the moment you get it delivered to your house. Following the steps below before the release will help give your album the greatest chance for success and sales.

Pick a release date

This date will be used on all of your press materials (whether traditional or new media), fliers for your CD re-

lease party, and more. Once you have this date, you can work backwards from it to plan out the time you need for the rest of steps in this section. The official release date should give you enough time to make all the necessary preparations.

Prepare for online sales

One of the big reasons you don't want to get your albums back from your CD manufacturing house and simply release the album to the public is that it takes time to get it in the stores, both physical and digital. You'll want it available for purchase while you're busy promoting it to encourage sales. Otherwise, you're wasting part of the benefit that your hard-earned publicity is generating.

Pick your CD/digital distributor and sign up

You want to make your album available everywhere. CD and digital distributors are your ticket to worldwide sales. In exchange for the fee and/or cut of the album or song

[Indieguide.com](#) has an enormous amount of content related every facet of the music industry as well as how-to information to help you navigate your music career so you can recognize and make the most of every opportunity.

The [Disc Makers Blog](#) is a rich resource for any independent musician. From posts with in-depth recording tips and interviews with producers to step-by-step tutorials on using social media and creating press kits, the [Disc Makers Blog](#) provides actionable insights for independent artists.

track sale, they handle all the business transactions. [CD Baby](#) is the web's biggest distributor of independent CDs, and there are plenty of other outlets from which to sell your physical CDs and downloads.

While you can sign up with as many CD stores as you'd like (these are usually non-exclusive deals), there can't be more than one distributor bringing the same album to the same store (iTunes, Amazon, etc.). [CD Baby](#) will sell and deliver your physical CDs ([and vinyl!](#)) as well as make your music available in all the major digital distributors including iTunes, Amazon, Spotify, and Apple Music.

Create your album's profile and upload your album's artwork

Most distributors ask you to fill in the details about your album and songs at their website. Here's what you should have available for the online stores:

- Album title
- Artist or band name
- Album summary (a one-line sentence about the album)
- Album description
- Genre
- Track names, order, and timings
- Songwriters and publishers
- Album cover art ready for upload
- Your bio/artist description
- Your website
- Key social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Your contact information
- Your logo

Since your distributor will likely share whatever information you enter into their database with other stores, getting this information right and thinking through what you're entering is important. A typo, misspelling, or half-thought-out description about you and your music at this stage will be replicated across the web, and even if you fix it, the search engines will keep the mistakes for quite some time afterwards. Get someone else to check it over!

TIP

Make it easy for someone to buy your music.

Keep a list of the hyperlinks where your music is sold handy (your [CD Baby](#) album page, your iTunes page, etc.). These hyperlinks are the ones you'll be going back to again and again as you add them to your website, a new web presence, in your newsletter, in your email signature, or on a press release. You'll also want to add them to other "offline" promotional items you create such as your [postcards, stickers, and posters](#).

If the hyperlink is too long or hard to remember, **you can create a shortened URL** for it. Services like [tinyurl](#) and [bit.ly](#) will shorten lengthy URLs. Some will allow you to come up with your own custom name.

Prepare your audio for promotional purposes

Make MP3s from mastered WAVs

If you intend to promote your music through podcasts, MP3 blogs, Facebook, Twitter, or the press, having ready-made MP3 versions of your music will save you time and energy.

Tag and name MP3s correctly

Audio promotion is not simply encoding WAVs to MP3. Once you send an MP3 of your music out in the world, you don't know where it'll wind up. You have to fill out the ID3 tags and add the album art so anyone who ends up with your MP3 on their phone or music player knows who you are and where to find more of it. After all, your music is your greatest sales and fan generation tool.

Plan your album release show, listening party, and/or tour dates

If you play live, your CD release show will become an integral part of the next step — your publicity campaign.

A live show to support your album release gives you an additional reason to contact the press and media and keep them updated. If you don't play live, then throw a listening party. As we say in [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#), publicity is all about multiple impressions. To the extent you plan a tour in support of the album, this gives you additional, targeted places in which to focus your publicity efforts.

If you are going to play live in support of your album, start cementing venues and dates early. While in the past most musicians had to play locally or in concentric circles from where they reside, you now can tour more effectively by playing shows where your fans are. We recommend using [Eventful.com](#)'s free and powerful "Demand" tool. With this tool, you can target (and budget) your tour based on where your fans are and where they want you to go.

Get your album merchandise and promotional materials

You'll want album-related merchandise ready for sale by your release date.

Album-related T-shirts and merchandise

Since you are doing all of the publicity and marketing for your new album, you can get the most out of your work by having merchandise and T-shirts created to sell along with your new album. [Merchly](#) offers affordable custom T-shirts, hoodies, hats, and promo items for your merch table.



Album Release Show and Listening Party Checklist

Some of the steps you'll want to cover for the all-important first show or listening party of your album include:

- Booking the venue.
- Scheduling your CD release show/listening party in advance with enough lead time for all your publicity efforts to pay off. Give yourself about 8-12 weeks.
- Involving your street team and inviting them in advance.
- Sending an announcement to your mailing list.
- Updating your music résumé documents, website, and web presences.
- Writing a press release about the show/party.
- Sending the press release at least 8-12 weeks in advance for traditional media and one to two weeks for new media (sometimes even the day before or day of).
- Put up posters and get a CD display case to the venue a few weeks before the show to introduce their regulars to your music.

Posters, postcards, stickers, fliers

Having posters and sending out postcards to advertise your new album and shows is a tried and true way to generate promotion. Because they have much of your artwork, Disc Makers makes it easy and affordable to print [posters, postcards, and stickers](#) for you to help you promote your release.

Plan and prepare a publicity campaign

The following material has filled many books, so rather than go into detail about how or why you'll want to do all the steps below, we'll simply list them out so you don't forget to do them.

Plan your PR campaign

This should be your overall strategy for the album and any live shows you do in support of it. Most bands do both a traditional media campaign (newspapers, magazines, radio), as well as a new media campaign (podcasts, music blogs, MP3s, entertainment blogs, [Last.Fm](#)).

Promotion requires creativity

Publicity is not just compiling lists and following steps mechanically. It can and should be fun and creative. It's at the planning stage that you should be channeling the same creativity you put into your music to build excitement and buzz about your upcoming album.

Here are some planning ideas to get you started:

- Hold a contest
- Make a video
- Let your fans remix a track
- Partner with a blog or podcast

Set up alerts with your new album name and song titles

You'll want to keep up-to-date on what people are saying about your new album and songs. This is as easy as setting

The Importance of Video

What's the biggest music search engine in the world? YouTube. In fact, video is possibly the only true viral media on the web. Beyond being an amazingly powerful medium for generating awareness and sales of your music, it also can be monetized and generate revenue for you. To learn more, watch "Making Money From YouTube" from our online course, "[Making Money With Music](#)."

up a Google Alert with your band name, as well as the name of your album.

Update your music résumé documents (Part I)

Your "music résumé" contains the following important brand elements:

- Your bio
- Your fact sheets
- Your online press kit
- Your offline press kit
- Your tour schedule
- Other PR documents with the new album information

These are the documents that you'll either send out (to the press, bloggers, music reviewers, etc.) or need updated online if they have questions or need more information. Updating these now will save you time and energy later when you start sending these out or people start asking you for them. Plus, by crafting the message, tone, and language for your release and promotion here, you can repurpose the content as you update your website and web presences.

Prepare PR documents such as press releases

Sending a press release is a simple way you can notify the media of your album and CD release show. They're not that difficult to write and there are free press wires that will help you blast out your release to the media.

Compile your target PR lists

There are plenty of outlets within your arm's reach that you can target to get your music reviewed and heard. This is a large topic and we tackle this throughout [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#). But, in short, you'll want to compile a list of:

- Album review press, magazines, zines, and websites
- Traditional local and national press
- New media press
- Commercial, college, and public radio stations
- Internet radio stations
- Music blogs
- Music podcasts
- Radio stations
- Non-music blogs covering topics in your niche
- Non-music podcasts covering topics in your niche
- Other websites

If you find a website, blog, radio station, or podcast that looks like it may play your music but lacks details about submitting, reach out to the blogger, podcaster, or website owner directly. [Always obey the rules of submission](#). Don't miss out on coverage by making a reviewer's life more difficult.

Start your publicity campaign (Part I: your own network)

There's a lot you can do within your fan network to build buzz about your upcoming album.

Work with your street team and fans

It's people, not technology, who make things happen. Your fan network is no exception. Don't be afraid to involve them and ask for their help. Keep your fan network up to date about the upcoming album and give them exclusive cuts from the album as a reward and to whet their appetites.

Involve your fan network early so you can create missions and steer their enthusiasm from random acts of buzz to a coordinated effort that's in line with your overall strategy.

Update your website (Part I)

Once you update your music résumé documents, you're ready to update your website to announce and feature

Maintain your own website

Don't rely on a social network to act as your website. Platforms like Facebook are important for promotional purposes, but these are your "web presences." Every musician needs a home base — a site you control, with your own domain, where you're not competing against advertising.

If you're looking for a place to build and host your own website with your own domain, check out [HostBaby](#), a

web hosting service created for musicians. HostBaby features include responsive design templates, an email newsletter tool, gig calendar, streaming audio, video, guestbook, and blog/news page tools. You also get unlimited email addresses @yourdomain. Often overlooked, writing from your own band's domain name is a simple, consistent, and effective branding and promotional practice.

your new album. This should include blogging about the upcoming release, but also could include adding songs and videos on your site to generate interest.

Update your web presence (Part I)

Update your web presences with news about your upcoming album (Facebook, Twitter, Eventful, etc.). Remind fans about your mailing list and blog so they can stay informed as to when the album drops. Add the “radio single” to your web presence audio players.

Contact your mailing list

Nothing justifies a new newsletter or email campaign like announcing your upcoming album and shows and following up with news of the promotion and press being generated.

Start your publicity campaign (Part II: the outside world)

The media lists you’ve compiled will become the focus of this phase. These are the people who should get your album in advance — before the public (i.e. the press and radio copies you planned for in Phase I). The goal is to generate reviews and build buzz about your album before the official release date when the album goes on sale to the public.

Note that how and when you approach the traditional media and how and when you approach the new media is different. This is a big topic — if you want more information about this, see the “Get Publicized” chapter of [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#).

Set up a tracking system

To coordinate a publicity campaign, you’ll need to keep track of who, when, and where you sent your CDs, MP3s, and press releases to. This can be as simple as a spreadsheet that you complete as you send albums or MP3s out, or something more elaborate, like an off-the-shelf customer/relationship management software system.

Send out your CDs, MP3s, and press releases

Finally, it’s time to reach out and write or send your CDs, MP3s, press releases, etc. to your targeted media.

Put up posters and flyers

If you purchased album-related posters and flyers, start using them to spread the message about your upcoming release. Enlist your street team for help in distributing these materials. Be sure to allow them to keep a few for themselves as well.

Follow up

You’ll want to verify that everyone received the CD (if shipped) or MP3 (if sent or linked to through an email or uploaded to a website). Most musicians fail to follow up, but this gives you an excuse to make a second impression and get your name in front of the reviewer, blogger, radio manager, or podcaster.

Update your music résumé documents (Part II)

As reviews come in, be sure to update your music résumé documents (bio, fact sheets, press kits, etc.), future press releases, website, and web presences with any review quotes and clippings.

PHASE

THREE

The album release and post-release

Most of the hard work will be behind you by this point, but there are still a few things you need to do – namely, releasing the album for sale to the public. While your music is at the heart of what you do, your identity, image, brand, website, web presence, merchandise, and publicity is what you use to connect with your fans. It's what you need to focus on after the music is released, and it's a big part of what we cover in [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#).

Most of all, celebrate all your successes – you've put in a lot of hard work!

Submit your CD for online sales

You'll want to give enough lead time so your CD can be available at stores and your music available for download at digital retailers such as iTunes, Amazon, etc. Unfortunately, timing is everything and the exact digital release date is not one of the things you have direct control over.

Be aware that it can take days, weeks, or even months before your music is completely distributed and available.

Add your CD to Gracenote

If your fans are putting your CD into an Internet-enabled device (a computer using iTunes, for example), the computer is accessing an online database to match your information to your CD. The information they see does NOT come from your actual CD. There are a couple major databases online, and [Gracenote](#) is the largest.

To ensure your CD's song titles will be visible in Apple iTunes, Microsoft Groove Music, Amazon Music, and other players and services, you need to register your album with Gracenote. Disc Makers does it for you when you purchase a [Mega Distribution Bundle](#) with your CD order.

TiVo Corporation now provides music metadata and album information to AllMusic and other online services. Read the "[Product Submissions](#)" page on AllMusic for more information.

Legal steps (Part II)

Once your album is released, you'll have all the information you need to register:

- 1. Your song and sound recording copyright with the U.S. Copyright Office.** Your songs and sound recordings are copyrighted at the time you transcribe or record them. However, you should always register them with the [US Copyright Office](#). Doing so provides third party evidence

that you claim you own the song or sound recording and establishes a date. It also gives you additional rights. Waiting to register after the release ensures you have all the information they'll ask you to disclose in their forms (including the official publication date to the public – aka, the release date).

2. Your original songs with a Performance Rights

Organization. Registering your songs with a PRO such as [ASCAP](#) or [BMI](#) will ensure they'll know where to send the checks when your song generates performance royalties.

Update your website and web presence (Part II)

Be sure to update your website and web presences. Some of the items you don't want to forget include:

- Announcing the album is out and linking to all the places it can be bought.
- Promoting where you've been played (podcasts, blogs, websites, radio, etc.).
- Posting any new positive album reviews.
- Thanking those people and fans who helped make the album a reality or helped promote the album.
- Listing and thanking the blogs, podcasts, and websites that promoted you.
- Asking fans/street team to continue to spread the word and creating missions to keep them organized and on task.
- Updating websites you maintain presences on to announce that the album is out and where it can be bought.
- Thanking those who helped (and cross-promoting when possible).
- Asking fans to spread the word through their networks.

Copyright, publishing, performance royalties, and licensing your music for profit is a big topic, so for more information see the "Your Rights" chapter in [The Indie Band Survival Guide](#) or watch our class, "7 Registrations (You Must Do) Before Releasing Music" from our online course, "[Making Money With Music.](#)"

PHASE FOUR
Repeat!

Make more music!

Work on your next album and repeat the steps we've outlined in this guide. With every album release you'll find the process easier and easier. You'll have your systems down pat. Your name will gain recognition, and you'll accumulate more fans who can help. You'll start to build relationships with the press, bloggers, podcasters, etc. When you've done that, promotional opportunities will start to come to you.



About the Authors

Randy Chertkow & Jason Feehan

Randy Chertkow is an IT specialist and Jason Feehan is an attorney. *Billboard* magazine has called Chertkow and Feehan “the ideal mentors for aspiring indie musicians who want to navigate an ever-changing music industry.” They’ve written three books with major publishers (Macmillan, Random House), teach music business (including a 15-hour online course on “[Making Money with Music](#)” through [CreativeLIVE.com](#)), and are regular contributors to *Electronic Musician* magazine, including the free weekly web column, “The DIY Advisor.”

Beatnik Turtle

The authors’ band, Beatnik Turtle – a horn-powered geek-rock group – has recorded 20 albums, released over 500 songs, and successfully completed a “song of the day” project where they released one song for every day of 2007 at its website, [TheSongOfTheDay.com](#). They’ve written music for TV shows, commercials, films, podcasts, theatre (including Chicago’s world-famous Second City), and have licensed music to Disney/ABC Family and Viacom.

The Indie Band Survival Guide, Remixed and Remastered 2nd Edition

(St. Martin’s Press; 390 pages)

[The Indie Band Survival Guide: The Complete Manual For The Do-It-Yourself Musician](#) is the ultimate resource for musicians looking to record, distribute, market, and sell their music. Chertkow and Feehan cover every step of the process and lay out practical steps to get your music heard, noticed, sold, and win fans worldwide.

IndieGuide.com

[IndieGuide.com](#) is a free and open resource based on the authors’ books. It shares practical know-how, how-to’s, forms, and other information about today’s music business.

Making Money with Music – 15-Hour Online Course

[Making Money with Music](#) – This 15-hour online course focuses on how to make money without a label through global digital distribution, licensing, merchandising, and royalties. The course also explores entirely new sources of income, such as affiliate sales, generating YouTube revenue through ContentID, crowdfunding, sponsorships, advertising, and more. Learn the seven registrations you need to do before releasing your music so you get all of the royalties you’re owed; the 16 categories of places to get your music heard so you can boost sales and royalty income; the three rules to a successful crowdfunding project; and more.