COMPLETE GUIDE TO THE MUSIC BUSINESS IN

SOUTH AFRICA

MUSIC PUBLISHING

Audio Varsity

MUSIC BUSINESS SERIES

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Section 1 — Introduction to Music Publishing (with Case Studies)

What music publishing is (in simple terms)

Music publishing is the business of protecting, managing, and earning income from the **composition** of a song. This means the melody, the lyrics, and the chords that make up the musical idea.

It has nothing to do with the final audio file or the beat you exported from your DAW. It is about the song as a piece of intellectual property created by a songwriter or composer. When you understand publishing, you begin to see your songs not just as creative works, but as valuable assets that can generate income for many years.

The difference between a song and a sound recording

One of the biggest misunderstandings in the music industry is confusing a song with a recording. A **song** is the written musical work—the words and melody that can be sung or played on an instrument.

A **sound recording** is the captured performance of that song in a studio. These are two separate assets with two separate rights and two separate income streams. Publishing deals only with the song. This is why the same song can be recorded by many different artists, but the original songwriter still earns publishing royalties from all those versions.

Why publishing is where long-term money lives

Recordings can become outdated as trends change, but songs last forever. A song written today can still be performed, covered, streamed, or licensed in movies decades from now. Each time that happens, publishing royalties are generated.

This is why publishing is considered the long-term income engine of the music industry. Even if your original recording stops being popular, the composition itself can continue to earn money in the background for years.

Common myths South African artists believe about publishing

Many artists in South Africa believe that uploading music to streaming platforms is enough to earn all their royalties. Others think publishing is only for big artists signed to major labels. Some assume that if they produced the beat, they automatically own everything. These are dangerous misconceptions.

Publishing applies to anyone who writes music, whether you are independent, unsigned, or recording at home. Ignoring publishing often means losing out on royalties you did not even know existed.

Case Study – Learning from Real Publishers

A good example locally is **Gallo Music Publishers**, one of Africa's oldest music publishers. Their strength lies in managing vast catalogues of songs, ensuring they are registered, licensed, and earning royalties over time. Their focus is not on recordings, but on songs and the rights of composers.

On a global level, **Universal Music Publishing Group** represents songwriters around the world. They pitch songs for film and television placements, handle licensing deals, and make sure writers get paid wherever their music is used internationally. Their work shows how powerful publishing becomes when songs are properly managed.

The lesson for independent South African songwriters is simple: every song you write is an asset. You may not have a big publisher, but you can still apply the same principles—document your work, register it correctly, and understand your rights as a songwriter.

By the end of this section, you should begin to see yourself not just as a creative person making music, but as a **rights owner** with valuable musical property.

Section 2 – Understanding Songwriting Rights

Who owns a song? (composer, author, arranger)

A song is owned by the people who create its core musical ideas. The **composer** writes the melody and chords.

The **author** writes the lyrics. In many cases, one person does both, but sometimes these roles are shared. Anyone who meaningfully contributes to the melody or lyrics becomes a co-owner of the song.

An **arranger** may help shape how the song is performed, but unless they change the melody or lyrics in a significant way, they usually do not own publishing rights. Ownership is not about who recorded the song or who mixed it. It is about who created the musical and lyrical content.

What happens when multiple people write a song

In studios, it is very common for songs to be written by more than one person. A producer may create the chord progression, a vocalist may create the melody, and someone else may write the lyrics.

In this situation, all contributors share ownership of the composition. This means the publishing rights and future royalties must be divided according to each person's contribution.

If this is not discussed and agreed upon early, it can lead to serious disputes later when the song starts generating income.

The importance of split sheets

A split sheet is a simple document that records who contributed to the song and what percentage of ownership each person has. It is signed by everyone involved at the time the song is created.

This small piece of paperwork can prevent years of conflict. Without a split sheet, people rely on memory, which often changes when money is involved.

Professional songwriters and publishers always insist on split sheets because they make ownership clear from the beginning.

Protecting your composition from day one

The best time to protect a song is the moment it is written. Write down who contributed. Agree on the splits. Keep records of lyric drafts, voice notes, and session files as proof of creation.

Register the song with the appropriate bodies as soon as possible. Treat every song like a valuable asset from the start, even if it feels like a simple studio session. This mindset is what separates hobbyists from professionals in the music industry.

Section 3 — The Types of Publishing Royalties

Performance royalties

Performance royalties are earned whenever your song is played in public. This includes radio airplay, live concerts, clubs, restaurants, shopping malls, and even television broadcasts.

The key idea is that the song is being performed or heard by the public. Each time this happens, a royalty is generated for the songwriter and publisher. Many creatives don't realize that even a live band performing your song at an event can generate publishing income for you.

Mechanical royalties

Mechanical royalties are generated when your song is reproduced or copied. This used to apply mostly to CDs and vinyl records, but today it includes digital downloads and streams.

Every time your song is mechanically reproduced on a platform or physical format, a mechanical royalty is created.

These royalties are often overlooked because artists assume streaming only pays the recording owner, but the songwriter also earns from the mechanical side.

Synchronisation (sync) royalties

Sync royalties are earned when your song is used together with visual media.

This includes films, TV shows, adverts, YouTube videos, and documentaries. When a song is “synchronised” with pictures, the producer of that content must obtain permission from the songwriter or publisher and pay a fee.

Sync deals can be very lucrative and are a major income source for well-managed songs.

Print royalties

Print royalties are less common today but still important. These are earned when your music is printed in books, sheet music, or educational materials. Choir books, school music textbooks, and official sheet music publications can all generate print royalties for the songwriter.

How each royalty is generated in real life

In real life, a single song can generate multiple types of royalties at the same time. A song played on radio earns performance royalties.

The same song streamed online earns mechanical royalties. If it is used in a TV advert, it earns sync royalties.

If it appears in a music book, it earns print royalties. Understanding these different streams helps you see why publishing is such a powerful and long-term source of income for songwriters.

Section 4 — Registering with the Right Organisations in South Africa

The role of the Southern African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO)

Southern African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO) is responsible for collecting **performance royalties** for songwriters and composers.

Whenever your song is played on radio, performed live, broadcast on television, or heard in public spaces, SAMRO tracks those uses and collects money on your behalf.

To benefit from this, you must be registered as a member and ensure that every song you write is correctly registered in their system.

The role of the Composers Authors and Publishers Association (CAPASSO)

Composers Authors and Publishers Association (CAPASSO) handles **mechanical royalties**. These are royalties generated when your song is reproduced through streaming, downloads, or physical formats.

CAPASSO works alongside digital platforms and distributors to make sure songwriters are paid for the mechanical use of their compositions. Without CAPASSO registration, many of these royalties go uncollected.

How these organisations work together

SAMRO and CAPASSO do different jobs, but they work together to make sure you are paid from different royalty streams.

SAMRO focuses on performances. CAPASSO focuses on reproductions. If you are only registered with one and not the other, you are missing out on income.

Professional songwriters understand that both registrations are necessary for full royalty coverage.

Step-by-step — how to register correctly

Start by registering as a member with SAMRO as a composer or author. Once registered, you can submit details of every song you create.

Next, ensure your works are linked to CAPASSO for mechanical royalty collection. Keep accurate records of your song titles, co-writers, and split percentages so that your registrations are correct.

This simple administrative process is one of the most important steps you can take as a songwriter to ensure you are paid for your work.

Section 5 — What a Music Publisher Actually Does

The job of a publisher explained simply

A music publisher’s main job is to manage, protect, and make money from songs on behalf of songwriters.

They handle the paperwork, register songs with the correct organisations, track where music is used, collect royalties, and look for opportunities such as film, TV, and advert placements.

In simple terms, a publisher turns songs into income while the songwriter focuses on creating music.

Publishing deals vs being self-published

When you are **self-published**, you act as your own publisher. You register your songs, manage your splits, and monitor your royalties yourself.

When you sign a **publishing deal**, the publisher does this work for you in exchange for a percentage of your publishing income. Both options can work well.

The right choice depends on how organised you are and whether you have the time and knowledge to manage your catalogue properly.

When you need a publisher (and when you don’t)

You do not need a publisher when you are starting out and only have a few songs, as long as you understand how to register and manage them yourself.

You may need a publisher when your catalogue grows, when you start getting licensing opportunities, or when your songs are being used internationally. At that point, professional administration and connections can increase your earning potential.

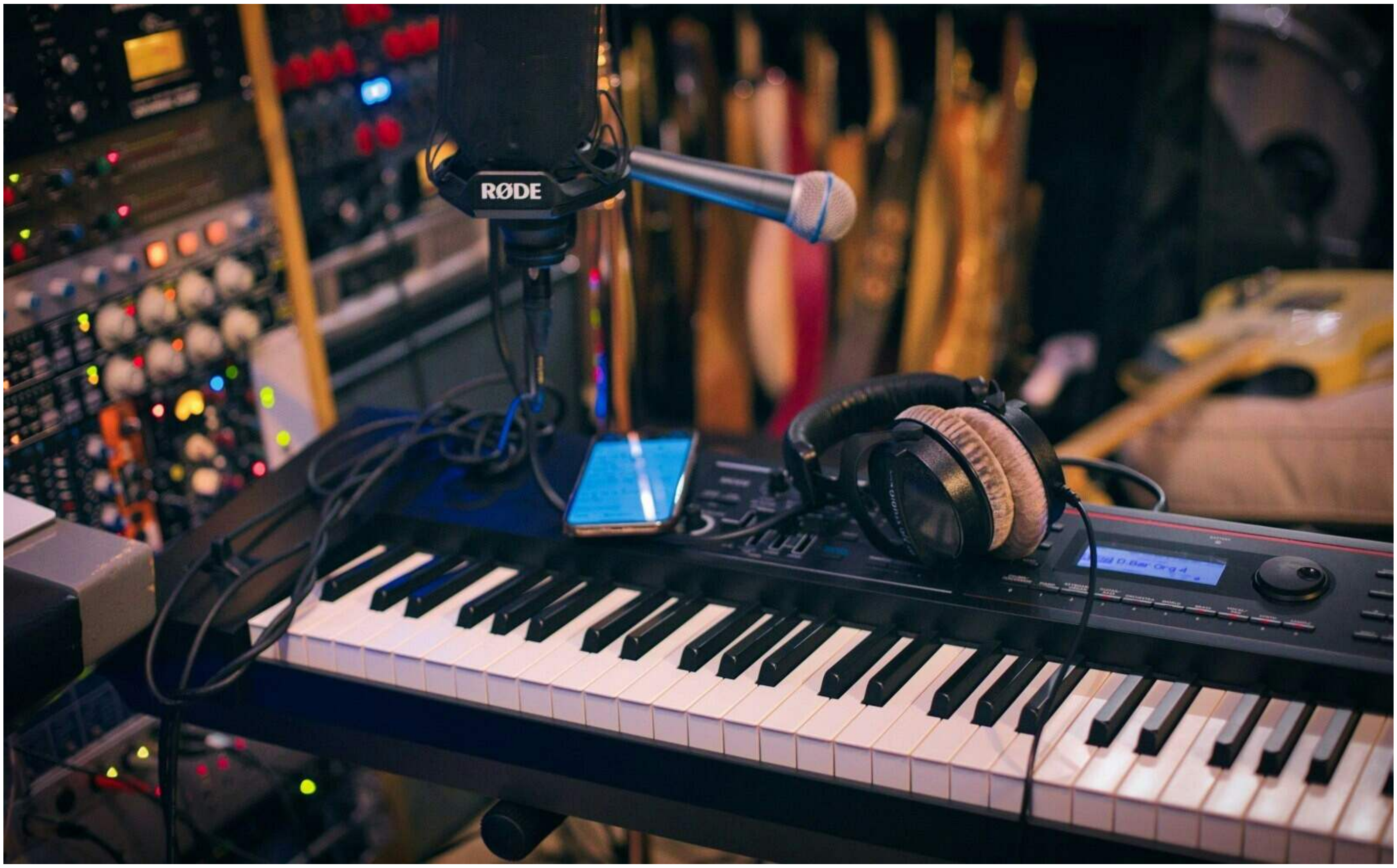
Red flags in publishing contracts

Not all publishing deals are good deals. Be careful of contracts that demand ownership of your songs instead of administration rights, long contract periods with no clear benefits, or vague explanations of how royalties will be handled. A good publisher should be transparent, supportive, and focused on helping your songs earn more—not taking advantage of your lack of knowledge.

Section 6 — Publishing and Collaborations

Working with producers, vocalists, and co-writers

Modern music creation is highly collaborative. A producer may create the chord progression and groove, a vocalist may develop the melody, and another writer may contribute lyrics.



In these situations, everyone who contributes creatively to the melody or lyrics becomes a co-owner of the song. Understanding this from the start helps avoid confusion about who owns what once the track is finished.

Handling ownership splits professionally

Ownership splits should never be guessed later. They should be discussed openly during or immediately after the session while everyone clearly remembers their contributions.

Agreeing on percentages early shows professionalism and mutual respect among collaborators. This simple conversation can prevent serious arguments when royalties begin to come in.

Real examples of split scenarios in studios

For example, if a producer creates the musical foundation and a singer writes both the melody and lyrics, they may agree on a 50/50 split.

If a third person helps refine the lyrics or adds a melodic hook, the split might change to reflect that contribution.

There is no single correct formula, but there must be agreement that reflects who created the core elements of the song.

Avoiding future disputes

Most disputes in the music industry do not start because of bad intentions, but because of poor communication and lack of documentation.

Using split sheets, keeping written records, and confirming agreements in writing ensures that everyone's rights are protected.

Treat every collaboration as a professional business arrangement, not just a creative moment in the studio.

Section 7 – How Publishing Makes You Money Over Time

Radio play

Every time your song is played on radio, a performance royalty is generated for you as the songwriter. You may not even hear the broadcast yourself, but as long as the song is registered correctly, you earn.

Radio remains a powerful source of publishing income because stations play songs repeatedly over long periods.

Live performances

When bands, choirs, churches, or artists perform your song live in public, performance royalties are also created.

Many venues report the songs performed to the relevant organisations, which means you can earn money from performances you were not even present at. This is one of the reasons songs continue to generate income long after they are written.

Streaming platforms

Streaming platforms generate mechanical royalties for the songwriter each time the song is streamed. While artists often focus on the money from the recording side, there is also publishing income being created in the background from the composition itself. Over time, as streams grow, this becomes a steady source of income.

TV, film, and adverts

When your song is used in a movie, television show, documentary, or advertisement, it generates synchronisation income.

This is often paid as a once-off fee plus additional royalties depending on how the content is broadcast. A single placement can sometimes earn more than months of streaming revenue.

Cover versions by other artists

If another artist records and releases their own version of your song, you still earn publishing royalties because you are the original songwriter.

This is one of the most powerful aspects of publishing: your song can live many lives through other performers while you continue to earn from it.

Section 8 — Common Publishing Mistakes in South Africa

Not registering songs

One of the biggest mistakes songwriters make is creating music but never registering their songs with the proper organisations.

If a song is not registered, it cannot be tracked, and if it cannot be tracked, royalties cannot be paid. Many artists only realize this years later when they discover their music has been played publicly without them earning anything.

Confusing publishing with distribution

Another common mistake is believing that uploading a song to streaming platforms is the same as handling publishing.

Distribution deals with the sound recording. Publishing deals with the composition. These are two separate processes. Handling one does not automatically handle the other.

Ignoring paperwork

Songwriters often treat studio sessions casually and ignore documentation. No split sheets, no written agreements, and no records of who contributed what. This becomes a serious problem when the song starts generating money and people remember events differently. Proper paperwork protects everyone involved.

Trusting verbal agreements

Many collaborations happen between friends or colleagues, and people rely on verbal promises. While trust is important, the music business runs on documentation. A simple written agreement signed by all parties can prevent years of conflict and legal trouble later.

Section 9 — Practical Checklist for Every Song You Create

What to do immediately after writing a song

As soon as a song is finished, take a few minutes to document what happened. Write down the song title, the date, and the names of everyone who contributed to the melody or lyrics. Do this while the session is still fresh in everyone's mind. This small habit turns a creative moment into a properly recorded asset.

Registration checklist

Before you move on to the next project, make sure the song is registered with the correct organisations. Confirm the writer details, ownership splits, and song information are captured accurately. Registration is what allows your song to be tracked and paid for when it is used publicly.

Documentation checklist

Keep copies of split sheets, lyric drafts, voice notes, session files, and any written agreements related to the song. Store them in an organised folder, either digitally or physically. These documents act as proof of ownership and contribution if questions ever arise in the future.

Long-term tracking of your works

Create a simple spreadsheet or document where you list all your songs, co-writers, split percentages, and registration status. Update it every time you create new music. This makes it easy to manage your catalogue like a professional songwriter and ensures that no song is forgotten or left unregistered.

Section 10 — Final Summary: From Songwriter to Rights Owner

Recap of the publishing journey

Throughout this guide, you have seen that music publishing is not complicated when broken down into simple steps. It starts with understanding that the song itself is valuable, continues with documenting ownership and splits, registering correctly, and knowing how royalties are generated. Each step builds on the next to create a complete picture of how songs earn money over time.

How to think like a professional songwriter

Professional songwriters do not only think creatively. They also think administratively. They document sessions, complete split sheets, register songs, and track their catalogues. This mindset turns songwriting from a hobby into a professional activity that generates long-term income.

Positioning yourself to earn publishing royalties for life

When you treat every song as an asset from the moment it is created, you position yourself to benefit from it for years to come. Even when you move on to new projects, your previous songs can continue earning in the background. This is the true power of publishing—it allows your past creativity to keep working for you long into the future.

Guide to Music Publishing in South Africa

"Guide to Music Publishing in South Africa" reveals the essential strategies for songwriters to maximize their income through effective music publishing. By understanding the intricacies of performance, mechanical, and synchronization royalties, and the importance of proper registration with organizations like SAMRO and CAPASSO, South African composers can transform their songs into lasting assets. This comprehensive guide empowers independent artists to navigate the complex landscape of music rights, ensuring they thrive in an ever-evolving industry.