

THE MARKETING

BLUEPRINT 101

"THE TRAP RAPPER EDITION"



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The Trap Rapper Edition

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A guide to the indie rap and R&B business from twenty-nine years on both sides of the glass.

FROM THE AUTHOR

A note before you read.

I signed my first record deal in 1996 in Atlanta. I was a teenager. The producer was Carl "Cooly C" Dorsey, the man behind hits for Luke, Raheem the Dream, Ghetto Mafia, and Kilo Ali. The label was Prophets of Rage on Ichiban Records. The contract was forty-some pages of language I did not understand. I signed it anyway.

A few years later I signed a second deal, with Success Records through Breakaway and EMI. That contract I read more carefully. I still missed things that mattered.

Somewhere in the middle of that second deal I made a quiet decision. I was going to figure out where the money in this business actually lived. I was going to learn the parts of the business that the artists never saw. The contracts. The publishing splits. The royalty streams. The licensing pipelines. The relationships that made things happen behind closed doors.

Years later I brokered a publishing deal between a songwriter and producer I knew and APG / Warner Chappell. The kind of paperwork that quietly funds a career for decades.

The Marketing Blueprint 101 is what I wish someone had handed me at nineteen. It is the most practical document I can put on paper about how the indie rap and R&B business actually works. Not theory. Not motivation. Not "trust the process." The mechanics. The contracts. The royalty streams. The relationships. The play-by-play of how a song becomes a career and how a career becomes a business.

Read it in one sitting if you can. Then come back to specific chapters as you need them. Most of these chapters end with a "What to do this week" section. Those are not suggestions. Those are the work. If you do every one of them across the twenty chapters that follow, you will be ahead of ninety percent of the artists on your platform of choice. You will save years.

One thing to remember while you read. None of this is fast. The fast version of this business is what TikTok sells you. The real version is slow, then sudden. The artists who build careers are running a long game with discipline. The fast moves are inside the long game, not instead of it.

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PART ONE

Maximize royalties and fair compensation.

There are two reasons most indie artists are broke. They are not collecting the money they have already earned, and they are giving away money they do not have to give. The next seven chapters fix both.

CHAPTER 1

The two sides of every song.

Every song you make has two pieces. The master, and the composition. They are two separate rights, owned and paid out separately, and most independent artists go a decade without understanding the difference.

The master is the recording. The actual audio file. The thing you hear when you press play. Whoever paid for it owns it, unless they signed it away. If you recorded the song yourself or paid for the session, you own the master. If a label paid for it, the label owns the master and you collect a royalty on it.

The composition is the song itself. The melody, the lyrics, the chord changes, the arrangement. The thing that exists on paper before anyone walks into the studio. Whoever wrote it owns it. That is you, unless you sold it.

Each of those two rights generates its own stream of income. Each gets registered with different organizations. Each is collected by different entities. Each can be sold, licensed, or split independently from the other. A producer can own a piece of the master without owning any of the composition. A songwriter who never set foot in the studio can own half the composition without owning any of the master. A label can buy the masters and leave the publishing entirely with the artist. Every combination is possible. The contract dictates what is being sold.

Here is where most indie artists get cut. They walk into a producer's studio, the producer plays a beat, the artist writes to it, they record it, and they leave. No paperwork. A few months later the song does some numbers. Now the producer wants half the master because he made the beat, half the publishing because he helped arrange it, and a piece of the live show income because he says he co-produced. Without a written agreement, all of these claims are arguable. With a written agreement signed before the session, all of these claims are resolved in advance.

The piece of paper you need is called a split sheet. It lists every contributor to the song, what they contributed, the master share they own, and the publishing share they own. Everyone signs it before the song leaves the studio. There are free templates at songtrust.com, theMLC.com, and several other places. Use one. Every time. If a producer or co-writer refuses to sign a split sheet, that is information. Reconsider whether you want to be in business with them.

When a label offers you a deal, read it carefully. They might be buying your masters. They might be taking a percentage of your publishing. They might be doing both. The difference between losing fifty percent of one stream and losing fifty percent of both streams is the difference between being broke and being made.

Before you sign anything, before you take a meeting, before you let anyone tell you what they can do for you, understand this. You are not selling "your song." You are selling specific rights inside the song. Sometimes both pieces. Sometimes one. Sometimes a percentage. The contract dictates what is being sold. Your job is to read it.

What to do this week. Make a list of every song you have released. Next to each one, write down who owns the master, who owns the publishing, and what the splits are between you and any co-writers, producers, or features. If you cannot answer any of those questions for any song, you have already lost ground. Find the paperwork. If there is no paperwork, get split sheets signed retroactively now, while the relationships are still good. The day the song has real value is the day people's memories start changing about what the splits were.

CHAPTER 2

Performance royalties and the PROs.

Every time your song plays on the radio, in a bar, in a TV show, on a streaming service, or in a coffee shop, a performance royalty is generated. That money exists. Somebody is going to collect it. The only question is whether it is going to be you.

Performance royalties are collected by Performance Rights Organizations. In the United States there are three. BMI, ASCAP, and SESAC. You pick one. You only join one at a time. You can switch later, but you cannot be in two at once.

BMI and ASCAP are open membership. Anyone can join. ASCAP charges a small one-time fee. BMI is free. SESAC is invitation-only and skews toward artists who already have major industry traction. For an indie artist starting out, BMI or ASCAP.

The differences between BMI and ASCAP are small but real. BMI tends to pay more for radio plays, ASCAP tends to pay more for live performance and certain TV uses. Both pay out quarterly. ASCAP has slightly more transparent reporting. BMI has a larger writer roster. For a brand new indie artist with no specific reason to choose one over the other, either is fine. The decision becomes meaningful at the level where you are generating thousands of dollars a quarter in performance income, at which point your accountant can run the math and tell you whether a switch makes sense.

Once you sign up, you register every song you have ever released. The PRO represents you and collects performance royalties on your behalf from every venue, broadcaster, and platform that uses your song. They pay you quarterly. The money usually takes a year to start flowing because the system tracks plays slowly, but once it starts, it never stops as long as the song is in circulation.

There are two pieces of every performance royalty. The writer share, and the publisher share. The PRO sends the writer share to whoever wrote the song. The PRO sends the publisher share to whoever is registered as the publisher of the song. If you have not set up your own publishing entity, that publisher share goes uncollected. It sits in a holding account at the PRO and eventually gets redistributed to the system as "black box" royalties.

There is a fourth player most indie artists never hear about. SoundExchange. SoundExchange collects a different kind of royalty called the digital performance royalty, paid when your master recording is played on satellite radio (SiriusXM), webcast radio (Pandora's non-interactive service), and some internet radio platforms. This is separate from the performance royalties your PRO collects, and separate from the streaming royalties Spotify pays through your distributor. It is its own pipeline. Registration at soundexchange.com is free. If you have music on streaming and you have not registered with SoundExchange, there is money in your name sitting there.

If you are touring or performing live, you also need to know about set list reporting. When you play a venue, the venue pays a blanket license fee to the PROs. The PROs then pay a small performance royalty to the writers of the songs that were performed. The PROs do not know which songs were performed unless someone tells them. BMI Live and ASCAP On Stage are free programs that let writers report their set lists from gigs to claim their performance royalties for live shows. Most indie artists never do this. It is free money for ten minutes of typing per show.

What to do this week. Pick a PRO. Sign up as a writer. Then sign up as a publisher under the same PRO (separate account, separate name, usually your company name plus the word Publishing or Music). Register every song you have ever released under both accounts. Also sign up at soundexchange.com. If you are doing live shows, sign up for BMI Live or ASCAP On Stage. This is a weekend of paperwork. It will pay you for the rest of your life.

CHAPTER 3

Mechanical royalties and the MLC.

There is a second stream of royalty income most indie artists never collect. Mechanicals.

Every time your song is reproduced, a mechanical royalty is generated. "Reproduced" includes downloads, physical sales (CDs, vinyl), and streaming. Every Spotify stream creates both a performance royalty (collected by your PRO) and a mechanical royalty (collected by a different system entirely).

In the United States, mechanical royalties from streaming are collected and distributed by the Mechanical Licensing Collective. The MLC. It was created in 2018 under the Music Modernization Act. Before the MLC, mechanical royalties from streaming were a mess. Money sat in escrow because the streaming services could not figure out who to pay. Hundreds of millions of dollars went unclaimed.

The MLC fixed that. But you have to register. Until you register your songs with the MLC, the mechanical money generated by your streams is sitting in the MLC's account waiting for someone to claim it.

Setup is free. Create a publisher account at themlc.com. Register every song you have ever released. The system links your registrations to the streaming data the DSPs are required to report. Then it pays you quarterly.

When you first register, look at the unmatched royalties database on the MLC site. If you released songs before the MLC existed, or if your distributor reported the data incorrectly, your songs might be sitting in the unmatched pile. You can search by song title, writer name, or ISRC code, and claim what is yours. Some indie artists find a few thousand dollars sitting in their first scan. Some find more.

For physical sales (CDs, vinyl, cassette) and downloads, mechanical royalties are handled differently. Those are paid by the label or the licensee directly to the publisher (you) under a mechanical license. The Harry Fox Agency handles these licenses for many publishers and labels in the US, but they are not mandatory. The statutory mechanical rate set by the Copyright Royalty Board is currently around 12.4 cents per song under five minutes. If anyone presses up a thousand CDs that include your song, the entity pressing them owes you that mechanical for every copy made, whether they sell or not.

Internationally, mechanicals are collected by separate organizations in each country. CMRRA in Canada. MCPS in the UK. GEMA in Germany. SACEM in France. JASRAC in Japan. Most distributors and publishing administrators handle international mechanical collection for you automatically, but it is worth verifying. International mechanical income can be 30 to 50 percent of total mechanical income for songs that travel.

If you have a cover version of someone else's song on a release, you owe a mechanical to the original songwriter. There are services that handle this licensing for you (CDBaby's cover song license,

Songtrust's mechanical service, etc.). Use them. The fines for unlicensed covers are significant and the licensing fee is small.

What to do this week. Open an account at themlc.com as a publisher. Register every song you have ever released. Spend an extra hour searching the unmatched royalties database for your name and your song titles. Claim anything that comes up. The first payout often surprises new registrants because the money has been accumulating since the song hit streaming.

CHAPTER 4

Self-publishing (and when not to).

A music publisher does five things. They register your songs with the PROs and the MLC. They administer your publishing, which means making sure all the paperwork is filed correctly across territories. They collect royalties on your behalf. They pitch your songs for sync placements and other licensing. And they negotiate covers, samples, and other uses of your work.

A traditional publishing deal gives the publisher fifty percent of your publishing in exchange for these services. That means the publisher takes half of every royalty dollar generated by your songs, for the life of the contract and often beyond.

If you write your own songs, you can do most of this yourself. The first three items (register, administer, collect) are free or near-free using the tools described in the previous chapters. The fourth (sync pitching) is where most indie artists need help, and the fifth (covers, samples) is usually handled case by case.

If your only need is the first three, self-publish. Set up your own publishing entity (just a name, no legal entity required at the start), register with a PRO as a publisher, register with the MLC as a publisher, and collect both the writer share and the publisher share yourself. One hundred percent of the publishing pie.

When you have real income coming in, formalize. Set up an LLC for the publishing entity (single-member LLC is fine in most states, \$50 to \$300 to file). The LLC gives you legal separation between your music business and your personal finances. It also makes tax season simpler. Income passes through to your personal taxes, but your business expenses (PRO fees, registration costs, software, studio rent, equipment) are properly deducted from the business's income before any of it touches your personal return. Most successful self-publishers also work with a CPA who specializes in entertainment. Worth every dollar.

If you want to pursue sync placements actively and you do not have the relationships, consider a publishing administrator. These are services like Songtrust, CD Baby Pro, Sentric, and others. They charge an admin fee, typically ten to twenty-five percent, in exchange for handling registration and collection across territories and providing access to a sync pitch pipeline. You keep ownership of your publishing. You pay them a percentage to administer.

There is a middle path between self-publishing and a full publishing deal. It is called a co-publishing deal. In a co-pub deal, you give the publisher fifty percent of the publisher share (which is fifty percent of the total publishing), but you keep one hundred percent of the writer share. The publisher does the

work, you keep most of the upside. Established songwriters with leverage often negotiate co-pub deals at favorable terms. New writers without leverage take what is offered.

A full publishing deal (where the publisher owns fifty percent of your songs for life or for a long term) only makes sense if the publisher is bringing real placements, real advances, and real industry pull. If they are just registering your songs and collecting royalties, you can do that yourself for free or at admin pricing.

The math, made simple. One hundred percent of self-published is more than fifty percent of a real publishing deal, unless the publisher is generating enough additional income from sync and licensing to make up the difference. For ninety-nine percent of indie artists in their first five years, self-publishing wins.

What to do this week. Decide which path. If self-publishing, complete the PRO and MLC registrations from the previous chapters. If using an administrator, evaluate two or three and pick one. If a full publishing deal is on the table, ask the publisher how many of their existing artists generated more than fifty thousand dollars in sync income last year. If they cannot give you a real number, they are not a sync publisher. They are an admin company taking a publishing percentage.

CHAPTER 5

Sync licensing: the quietest money in music.

Sync licensing is when your song gets used in a TV show, film, commercial, video game, or any other visual media. It is the quietest seven-figure room in music. Most indie artists never see the inside of it. The artists who do change their financial situation in a single placement.

Here are the working numbers nobody publishes. A national television commercial can pay between fifteen thousand and three hundred thousand dollars for a sync license, depending on the brand, the campaign length, the geography, and how prominently the song is used. Cable television shows pay between five hundred and fifteen thousand per use. Streaming series like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime pay a little more on average than cable, often two thousand to twenty thousand for a featured use. Major studio films pay anywhere from five thousand to several hundred thousand. Independent films often pay a few thousand or less. Video games are highly variable. Trailers are their own market.

Each placement also triggers performance royalties on the back end every time the show or commercial runs. Those come through your PRO and stack on top of the sync fee. For a song placed in a major TV show that re-runs for years, the backend can equal or exceed the original sync fee over time.

Sync is gatekept by music supervisors. A music supervisor's entire job is to find the right song for a scene. They get thousands of submissions a week. Cold pitches from artists almost never land. The pipeline runs through publishers, sync agencies, and a small number of trusted publicists and managers who have the music supervisors' attention.

To enter this pipeline, three things have to be in place. First, your splits have to be clean. Every writer and every publisher on the song has to be documented in a split sheet that everyone has signed. If the supervisor pursues your song and the splits are murky, the placement falls through and another song gets in. Music supervisors will not chase paperwork. They have a hundred other options.

Second, you need an instrumental version of every song. Music supervisors often want only the instrumental, or they want to clean up vocals over a scene. If you do not have an instrumental version, you are not pitchable. You also need a clean radio edit (no explicit lyrics) and a TV edit (shorter, often around thirty seconds or one minute, with the hook positioned for impact in a short window).

Third, you need a relationship with someone who has the calls answered. A sync agent, a publisher with an active sync department, or a publishing administrator with a pitching arm. Some indie-friendly sync agencies to know: Marmoset, Position Music, Riptide Music, Smash Hit Music, and Tinderbox. Each one has a different style and a different roster. Research before pitching.

There is an alternative path for steady (smaller) sync income called library music. Production music libraries license tracks in bulk to TV networks, ad agencies, and content creators on a non-exclusive or

exclusive basis. The placements pay less per use but happen more often. Some indie artists keep a side income going by writing instrumental tracks for libraries while building their artist career separately. Companies like Audio Network, APM Music, and Premium Beat work with indie composers on this model.

The unspoken truth. The music that syncs best is not always the music that streams best. A song with explicit lyrics, an extreme mix, and heavy 808s is hard to drop into a Toyota commercial. A song with cleaner production, a memorable hook, and an available instrumental version is sync-ready. A lot of indie artists never create the clean version of their song. They are leaving the easiest sync money on the table.

Also worth knowing: trailer music is its own world. Movie trailers and TV promo spots have their own music supervisors and their own library system. The trailer market favors big, cinematic, emotionally heavy production. If you make epic instrumentals or hybrid orchestral hip-hop, look into trailer-focused music houses like Position Music, Audiomachine, and Two Steps From Hell.

What to do this week. Create a clean radio edit and a full instrumental version for every released song. Create a clean split sheet (writers, publishers, percentages, signatures) for every song. Get those into a folder along with the ISRC code, the ISWC code, and the mastered files. The day a sync opportunity appears, you will be ready in five minutes instead of two weeks. The artists who lose sync deals usually lose them in the paperwork phase, not the music phase.

CHAPTER 6

Distribution: what you are actually signing.

Most indie artists upload through DistroKid, TuneCore, CD Baby, or Amuse for one reason. The price. Twenty dollars a year buys unlimited uploads. The downside is that most users have no idea what they signed.

When you upload through one of these services, you keep the rights to your masters. Good. You also grant them a license to distribute your music to streaming services. Fine. But read what you signed. The license is non-exclusive in most cases. The agreement also gives the distributor the right to audit your account, freeze payouts in case of suspected fraud, and remove your music at their discretion. Most of the time none of this matters. Once in a while it matters a lot, especially if there is ever a question about stream legitimacy.

The bigger issue is what happens when you leave. The DSPs (Spotify, Apple, Amazon, Tidal) see the distributor as the supplier of your music. If you ever switch distributors, you usually have to take your music down and re-upload through the new distributor. The stream counts on Spotify reset. Playlist placements get lost. Editorial pitching restarts from zero. The history of your release on each platform gets fragmented.

There are exceptions. Some distributors offer "migration" or "catalog transfer" programs that preserve some of your data when you move. Always ask about migration before you sign with a new distributor. If they cannot give you a clear answer, assume you will lose your data.

There are a few practical implications. First, pick a distributor you can stay with. Migration is painful. Second, if your release is going to do real numbers and you can afford to upgrade, consider a distributor with actual humans on the phone and label-level service. Symphonic, Stem, Vydia, EMPIRE Distribution, and ONErpm sit in this tier. They charge a percentage (usually ten to thirty percent) instead of a flat fee, but they offer real label services, including playlist pitching, marketing, and DSP relationships.

Quick comparison. DistroKid: cheapest, easiest, no humans. TuneCore: similar to DistroKid but with per-release fees in the basic tier. CD Baby: takes a one-time fee plus a small percentage of royalties, includes publishing administration with the Pro tier. Amuse: free tier exists, paid tiers offer label services. Stem: percentage-based, strong analytics, label-quality service. EMPIRE: percentage-based, can function as a full label partner for the right artist.

Third, set up an LLC if you can. Run your distribution through the LLC, not your personal name. This builds credit for your music business, simplifies taxes, and prepares you for actual label conversations later. It also gives you a cleaner story when a label or sync agency wants to know how serious you are about the business side.

Worth knowing about other revenue platforms. Bandcamp pays artists significantly higher percentages than streaming services and lets you set your own prices for downloads and physical sales. It is not a discovery platform for most genres, but it is excellent direct-to-fan revenue infrastructure. Patreon and Substack let you monetize a smaller, dedicated audience through subscription models. SoundCloud has direct monetization for verified artists. None of these replace streaming distribution, but they supplement it well.

Read this before you sign. Some distributors have signed deals with major labels that give the major a first look or a right of first refusal on artists doing big numbers on the platform. The fine print on these arrangements is in the terms of service. Read it. It might be fine. It might not. Either way, know what you signed.

What to do this week. Pull up your current distribution agreement. Find the clauses on ownership, license duration, termination, audit rights, and right of first refusal. If you cannot find those clauses or do not understand them, that is the first signal it is time to learn or get help.

CHAPTER 7

Reading a record deal without a lawyer.

Never sign a record deal without a lawyer. That is the headline. Now here is what to look for so you know what you are reading before the lawyer charges you to find out the same thing.

The advance. The money the label pays you up front. It is not a gift. It is a loan against your future royalties. You will not see another royalty dollar until the label has recouped the advance from your share. So if the advance is fifty thousand dollars and your royalty rate is fifteen percent of net, you have to generate enough revenue for the label that fifteen percent of net equals fifty thousand before royalty payments resume. That is roughly \$333,000 in net revenue to the label. Depending on the song's streaming-to-physical mix and other deductions, that often means three to five million streams just to clear a fifty thousand dollar advance.

The royalty rate. Standard for new artists is twelve to eighteen percent of net. Established artists with leverage can negotiate eighteen to twenty-five percent. Be cautious of deals that pay royalties on "net" instead of "gross." Net means after the label has deducted whatever they call marketing expenses, and the label decides what those expenses are. Some deals include a packaging deduction that reduces the royalty base by ten to twenty-five percent before the percentage is even applied. Read every deduction.

The term and the album commitment. Most deals are three- to four-album commitments, with the label having options to extend after each album. The label holds the options. You do not. If they pick up the option, you are tied to them for the next record. If they drop you, you are free. This is heavily asymmetric. Negotiate options with minimum performance triggers, so the label has to keep you on if you hit certain numbers (a million streams, a charted single, a tour reaching certain markets).

Master ownership. In a traditional deal the label owns your masters for life. They pay you a royalty on them, but you never own them. Newer deals sometimes include a reversion clause that returns master ownership to you after a defined period, often ten to twenty years. Always ask for a reversion. The longer you can negotiate the reversion period down, the better.

Cross-collateralization. This is the silent killer. A cross-collateralization clause says that an advance on one album can be recouped from the royalties of another album. So if your first album recoups but your second album does not, the label can use the profits from the first album to cover the losses on the second, and you never see a royalty payment. Cross-collateralization across multiple albums is standard in major deals. Push back on it. At minimum, get the cross-collateralization limited to specific projects rather than all of them.

The 360. A 360 deal means the label takes a percentage of all your income, not just music. Touring, merch, brand deals, endorsements, sometimes more. This is the norm in modern deals. The percentage matters. So does what is excluded. Some deals exempt acting income, songwriting income, brand deals,

or income from other artists you work with. Some do not. Negotiate exemptions for anything that does not directly involve the label.

Key person clauses. A key person clause says that if a specific executive at the label leaves (your A&R, the label president), you have the right to leave the deal. Without this clause, the person who signed you and championed your career can leave, and you are still locked into the deal with whoever replaces them, who may have no interest in your career.

Marketing and recording commitments. The label should commit in writing to a minimum marketing spend and a minimum recording budget for each album cycle. Without those commitments, the label can drop you in promotion without dropping you in contract, and your career goes dark while you remain unable to release elsewhere.

Audit rights. Your contract should give you the right to audit the label's books on your account, with reasonable notice, at least once per year. Without this clause, you have no way to verify what they are paying you. Royalty audits regularly turn up underreported income. Build the right in.

Leaving member clauses (for groups). If you are signed as a group, your contract needs to address what happens if a member leaves. Without this clause, the leaving member may take rights with them, and you can end up unable to release new music as the remaining members.

Read all of this with the understanding that the label's lawyer wrote the contract to protect the label. Your lawyer's job is to push back on the worst parts. If you cannot afford a lawyer, Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts has chapters in most major cities and will review a contract for free. The Future of Music Coalition also publishes a free record contract analysis guide that walks through standard clauses in plain English.

PART TWO

Harness social and visual content.

If the songs are the product, the brand is the storefront. Most artists treat them in the wrong order. They polish the product and ignore the storefront. The next six chapters reverse that.

CHAPTER 1

Brand identity before brand strategy.

Most indie artists try to do strategy before they have identity. They run ads, pay for playlists, hire publicists, drop content into the algorithm. None of it works the way they hoped because the underlying brand has not been defined. Before anyone amplifies a thing, the thing has to be unmistakable.

Brand identity is the answer to three questions. Who are you, in two sentences. What do you sound like, in one word the listener would use, not a word you would use about yourself. And what world do you live in, visually.

If you cannot answer any one of those, the strategy work that follows will be diluted. Every dollar spent on marketing will return less than it should, because the asset being marketed is not sharp enough to land.

The exercise looks easy. It is not. The two-sentence answer to "who are you" should be something a stranger could repeat after seeing your page once. "South Atlanta rapper, melodic trap, songs about getting out without forgetting where you came from" is a working answer. "I make music that touches people's souls" is filler.

The exercise that breaks this open is to take a piece of paper and write fifty answers to the question "who are you as an artist?" Force fifty. The first ten will be the generic answers everyone gives. The next twenty will start to scrape against something real. The last twenty are where the actual identity lives. By the time you hit fifty, the real two sentences will have emerged. This exercise takes ninety minutes. Most artists will not do it. The ones who do come out of it with a brand that lasts.

The one-word descriptor a listener would use is the hardest. You cannot pick this for yourself. Ask five honest people who have heard your music and your social presence. Listen to what they say. Patterns will appear. The word might not be the word you wanted, but if three of them say "raw" and you wanted "polished," you have important information. Either you change your music or you change your branding to match what is landing.

The visual world is the third piece. What city does your music sound like it was made in? What does the inside of your studio look like in the audience's head? What colors does it live in? What is the texture of your covers, your videos, your social grid? When everything you put out comes from the same visual world, the brand compounds. When every post looks like a different artist, nothing compounds.

Look at the artists you respect. Tyler the Creator's visual world is yellow, brown, vintage, suburban. Kendrick's visual world is dim, washed, cinematic, Compton. Doja Cat's visual world is surreal,

internet, fragmented. None of those are accidents. They are decisions made early and protected for years.

What to do this week. Run the fifty-answer exercise. Distill it into two sentences. Ask five trusted people for the one-word descriptor. Pull a mood board of twelve images that represent the visual world of your music. Save it. Every visual decision you make from now on will reference that mood board. The cover art designer, the video director, the photographer, the social manager. They all start from the mood board, not from a fresh search bar. The brand is now an asset, not a guess.

CHAPTER 2

The platform breakdown.

Each platform rewards different behavior. The same content posted across all of them does worse than tailored content posted to each. Most artists do not have time to make four different versions of every piece of content, so they have to choose where the focus lives.

TikTok is for moments. Short, hook-driven, snippets of personality or song. The algorithm rewards completion rate (did the viewer watch the whole thing) and rewatch rate (did they loop it). Both of those metrics favor short content (eight to fifteen seconds) with a hook in the first second and a payoff that pulls the viewer back to the start. Native edits work better than reposts from Instagram (TikTok has been known to suppress content with watermarks from other platforms). The platform is brutal to artists who treat it as a billboard. It rewards artists who treat it as a sketchbook.

TikTok's most important feature for musicians is the Sounds tab. When users hear a snippet they like, they tap into the sound and create their own video using it. That is how songs go viral on the platform. To set this up correctly, your song needs to be in the TikTok library (most distributors deliver to TikTok automatically), and you need to actively use the snippet in your own videos so the algorithm learns to associate it with engagement.

Instagram is for identity. The grid is your visual world made permanent. Stories are your daily presence. Reels are your TikToks, performance-wise, but Instagram's algorithm tends to reward slightly longer Reels (fifteen to thirty seconds) than TikTok's sweet spot. The algorithm rewards consistency more than virality. A daily story and three Reels a week beats a viral post followed by two weeks of silence.

Instagram's carousel posts (multiple images in one post) get significantly more engagement than single images, because viewers swipe through them, which signals deep engagement to the algorithm. For musicians, this means turning a song release into a five-slide carousel (cover art, lyric snippet, behind-the-scenes photo, call to action, alternate cover) rather than a single cover post.

YouTube is for depth. Music videos, behind-the-scenes, interviews, longer-form storytelling. YouTube also pays. AdSense plus Content ID royalties from third-party uses can generate real revenue once you have a back catalog with traction. Most indie artists never set up Content ID properly, which means a meaningful percentage of their YouTube money is being claimed by other parties or going uncollected. Distributors like DistroKid, CD Baby, and EMPIRE all offer YouTube Content ID monetization. Turn it on.

YouTube Shorts is the fastest-growing surface on the platform. The algorithm there behaves more like TikTok than like long-form YouTube. Vertical, short, hook-driven. The same content can usually be repurposed from TikTok with minor edits.

Spotify is your storefront. Most platform-driven discovery happens elsewhere. Spotify is where the listener lands after they have decided you are worth checking out. Your Spotify presentation (canvas videos, profile photo, bio, song titles, release pacing) should look like the work of someone who already won. Canvas videos (eight-second looping videos that play behind the song on mobile) significantly increase streams, saves, and shares. Most indie artists do not bother. Spend the hour making canvas videos for your singles.

Spotify for Artists is the dashboard where you can see who is listening, where they are listening, and what they are doing. It also lets you pitch one upcoming song every two weeks to the Spotify editorial team. Always pitch a song five to ten weeks before release. Late pitches do not get considered.

X (formerly Twitter) is for personality and industry. Most fan discovery does not happen here. Most relationships with media, A&Rs, publicists, and producers do. A consistent, thoughtful presence on X is one of the cheapest ways to build the network you will need later. Follow the journalists who cover your lane. Follow the music supervisors who post publicly. Engage with their content meaningfully (not just liking, but adding to the conversation). Over a year of this, you become a known quantity in their feed without ever pitching anything.

Pick the two platforms where your strongest content lives. Make those two great. Maintain a basic presence on the others. Trying to win on all five with the same content does not work.

What to do this week. Audit your current presence. Where is your best content? Where do you have the most reach? Where do you feel most native? Where are the people who actually buy your music? The intersection of those answers is your primary platform. The next strongest is your secondary. The rest get whatever effort is left.

CHAPTER 3

Music videos that earn their cost.

The music video budget is one of the worst-allocated dollars in indie music. Artists spend four hundred dollars on warehouse shoots with generic concepts and underdressed extras, post the result on YouTube, and wonder why nobody shares it. Then they do it again the next month.

A music video earns its cost through one of three outcomes. It generates streams (the song lifts because the visual moved people). It generates leverage (the visual is good enough to send to an A&R, a publicist, or a brand). Or it generates assets (clips that travel as TikToks, Reels, and YouTube Shorts for the next six months).

If a video does not produce at least one of those three outcomes, the money was poorly spent. Most four-hundred-dollar warehouse shoots produce none of them.

The play is to spend less often and more deliberately. Two music videos a year at five thousand dollars each, with real concepts, real directors, and real production design, beats twelve videos a year at four hundred each. The first set produces leverage and assets. The second set produces noise.

If five thousand dollars is not available, the alternative is not four hundred. It is a vertical video shot on a phone with a strong creative concept and one specific idea. A real visual story executed simply with intention can travel further than a generic budget production. Bo Burnham filmed an entire special in his guest house. Lil Nas X built his career on visual ideas first and budgets second.

The director matters more than the camera. Two questions to ask a director before you book them. What is your favorite music video you have made and why? How do you make a decision when the budget will not stretch to do everything we discussed? If they answer the first question with "the one with the most views" instead of a creative reason, they are an executor, not a director. If they answer the second question with "we will cut something to save money," without knowing the project, they will probably cut the wrong thing.

There is a shot list every music video needs, regardless of budget. The performance shot (you, performing the song, multiple angles, multiple wardrobes). The narrative shots (whatever story or visual concept ties to the song). The B-roll (atmosphere, environment, texture). The hook shots (the visual that hits when the chorus hits, designed for the loop). And the cuttable seconds (short, isolated moments designed specifically to be pulled out and used as TikToks). The last category is what most directors skip. Tell yours to shoot for it.

When you watch the rough cut, ask one question. Is there a ten-second clip in this that I would post by itself to TikTok? If the answer is no, the video does not have the assets the modern release cycle needs. Re-edit before locking.

Working with a colorist is the difference between a video that looks like film and a video that looks like a phone with a filter. A colorist takes the raw footage and grades it into a specific visual palette that matches your brand. If your director does not work with a colorist, ask if you can add one to the post-production budget. It is usually three hundred to a thousand dollars for an indie video and it transforms the final look.

Distribution-wise, do not just post the video on YouTube and walk away. Premiere it (YouTube's premiere feature builds anticipation and gathers a live audience). Pitch it to YouTube's editorial team through your distributor. Submit it to music video websites and YouTube curator channels that cover your genre. Post the cuttable seconds as TikToks and Reels in the days following the release. The release is a campaign, not a single upload.

What to do this week. Stop the warehouse shoot cycle if you are in it. Save the next four shoot budgets and combine them into one real video twice a year. Or shoot a vertical story on a phone with a friend who has visual taste. Either is better than the middle option.

CHAPTER 4

The content cadence that actually works.

There is a fantasy that haunts indie artists. The fantasy says one perfect post will change everything. So they spend a month making a single piece of content, post it, get a few thousand views, and feel disappointed.

The reality is that cadence beats perfection. Algorithms reward presence. The artist who posts five medium pieces of content a week beats the artist who posts one perfect piece every two weeks. The reason is simple. The platforms have to decide who to show to new viewers. They show the people who give the platform new things to show.

A workable cadence for an indie artist looks like this. One **hero** post per week. This is the polished piece. The video, the cover, the photo shoot. The thing you would not be embarrassed to send to a magazine.

Three to five **hub** posts per week. Conversational, performative, casual. Studio clips, voice memos of you talking about a song, fan reactions, freestyle ideas. These are the muscles of the brand.

Daily story or status presence. Just a heartbeat. Not even your face every time. A reposted track you are listening to, a quote, a photo from a session. Something that says "this artist is alive and active today."

Across all of this, the key metric to watch is not views or likes. It is comments and saves. Comments mean the content gave the viewer something to react to. Saves mean the content gave the viewer something to come back to. Both signal real engagement to the algorithm and to potential industry observers.

Batch and schedule. Trying to create content live every day will burn you out and kill the quality. The artists who run a clean cadence usually batch. They shoot a week of content in a half-day session, edit it in the same week, and schedule it through a tool like Later, Hootsuite, or Metricool. This frees the rest of the week for music, relationships, and life.

Repurpose ruthlessly. One piece of content can become seven if you think about it right. A music video becomes the long-form YouTube post, three TikTok clips, two Instagram Reels, an Instagram carousel of stills, an X thread about how it was made, and a behind-the-scenes story sequence. That is seven posts from one production day. Most artists make one. The artists who scale make seven.

The two-week test. When you find a content format that works (a type of post that gets significantly more engagement than your baseline), do that format twice more over the next two weeks. Sometimes it was a one-time spike. Sometimes it is a real pattern. The two-week test tells you which.

What to post when you have nothing new. The artists who never go silent always have a few categories to fall back on. The throwback (an old song with new context). The teach (something you learned about the business or the craft). The react (your honest take on something happening in the genre). The build (showing the work in progress on a current project). The personal (a moment of life that connects to the music). Save these as fallback categories. On any given day when you have nothing planned, pull from one of them.

What to do this week. Plan the next four weeks of content. Decide what your one hero post will be each week. Plan rough ideas for the hub posts. Batch-shoot at least the first two weeks before you post anything. You will see the difference in your stress level by week three.

CHAPTER 5

Why most viral indie artists are broke.

Going viral is not a financial event. It is a publicity event. The two are different and most artists do not understand the difference until they are looking at a Stripe account that does not match their TikTok metrics.

A song that goes viral on TikTok with a hundred million video views might generate three thousand dollars in actual revenue for the artist. The TikTok payout pool pays a fraction of a cent per video that uses the sound. The Spotify streams that follow from the viral moment, if they happen, pay a fraction of a cent each. By the time the moment passes, the artist might have made between two thousand and fifty thousand dollars on a song the world heard.

Meanwhile that same artist now has a hundred thousand new Instagram followers, requests for shows in seven cities, a hundred DMs from "managers" they have never heard of, and no infrastructure to handle any of it. The viral moment created demand. The artist had no supply chain.

This is why most viral indie artists are broke a year later. The moment came and they spent it on a music video, a publicist, a feature, and a stylist, all on credit, all assuming that the next single would do the same thing. It almost never does.

The artists who turn a viral moment into a career do a few things differently. They use the moment to build direct relationships with fans through email and SMS lists, not just social follows. They lock in a publishing deal or a brand deal while the iron is hot, because their leverage is at its peak. They release the next single fast, while the algorithm is still warm. And they take meetings, not deals, until they have the right person on their side.

The infrastructure checklist. Before a viral moment hits, the following needs to already be in place. An email signup that captures fans on every page. A merch store that can actually ship. A clear next-single roadmap so you can drop on momentum. A booking email that goes to a real person. A publicist or PR contact for the inbound media. A lawyer on retainer or on call. Without these, the viral moment is just an attention spike that fades.

Pre-positioning for virality. Most viral moments are accidents. But the artists who go viral repeatedly have learned to engineer the conditions. They post short snippets of unreleased music with strong hooks. They lean into specific niches where their content resonates rather than trying to appeal to everyone. They engage actively with creators in adjacent spaces. They use trending sounds (their own and others) strategically. None of this guarantees virality, but it raises the floor.

The other side of this is that going viral is not necessary. A lot of artists who never had a viral moment are making a comfortable living because they built a small, loyal audience and treat it like a business.

Seventy-five thousand active fans who buy what you sell is a better business than three million people who watched your TikTok and moved on.

Virality is a marketing event. A career is a business. The artists who confuse the two get a year of attention and not much else.

What to do this week. Audit your infrastructure before the viral moment, not after. Walk through the checklist above. Anything that is not in place, set up before the next release. The artists who win are ready before the moment arrives.

CHAPTER 6

Email lists, SMS, and owned audience.

Every follower on Instagram is rented. The algorithm decides whether they see your posts. The platform decides whether to keep showing your content to its users. The relationship between you and your audience is mediated by a company whose interests do not always align with yours. If Instagram changes the algorithm tomorrow, your reach is gone.

Email and SMS are owned. The subscriber gave you a way to reach them directly. No algorithm sits between you and them. When you press send, every subscriber gets the message. The deliverability is not one hundred percent (some emails land in spam), but it is far higher than the percentage of your Instagram followers who see any given post.

Most indie artists do not collect email or SMS because they do not think of themselves as the kind of artist who needs an email list. That is a category error. Every artist who plans to make a living from music needs an email list and ideally a text list.

The setup is straightforward. For email, use a service like Mailchimp, ConvertKit, or Beehiiv. They have free tiers for small lists (typically up to a thousand or two thousand subscribers free). For SMS, use Community, ManyChat, or a similar SMS marketing tool. SMS has higher engagement than email but costs more per message.

Build the list by offering a reason to subscribe. "Sign up for my email list" is not a reason. "Get the unreleased version of [song name] before anyone else" is a reason. "Be the first to hear when tickets go on sale for my city" is a reason. Tie subscription to something the fan actually wants.

The welcome sequence. When someone subscribes, the first email they get matters more than any other email you will ever send them. It sets the tone, delivers the promised reward (the unreleased song, the early access, the exclusive content), and tells them what to expect. The next two or three emails over the following week introduce them to your story, your music, and your world. By the end of the welcome sequence, a subscriber should feel like they actually know you. Most indie artists send no welcome sequence. The subscriber signs up, gets nothing, and forgets. Then when the first marketing email arrives weeks later, it feels like a sales pitch from a stranger.

Once people are on the list, use it. A weekly or biweekly email that updates them on what is happening, drops behind-the-scenes content, and asks for engagement. SMS for time-sensitive things only (releases, ticket sales, big news). If you spam SMS, you will burn the relationship fast.

Email subject lines that work. Curiosity beats clarity. "You won't believe what happened in the studio yesterday" outperforms "New song dropping Friday." Specificity beats generality. "The story behind the bridge of [song name]" outperforms "A song breakdown." Personal beats corporate. "Quick

favor?" outperforms "Important Announcement from [Artist Name]."

Segmentation. As your list grows, segment it. Superfans (people who open every email, click through, buy things) get the high-priority content. Casual fans (people who occasionally engage) get the wider net. You can send different emails to different segments. Most email platforms make this easy once you have a few hundred subscribers and some engagement data.

SMS compliance. SMS in the US is regulated under the TCPA (Telephone Consumer Protection Act). You need explicit opt-in from subscribers (a checkbox on your signup form is fine), you need to give them a clear way to opt out (replying "STOP" should always work), and you need to honor opt-outs immediately. SMS marketing tools handle most of this automatically, but you are responsible for the compliance. Violations are expensive.

The metric that matters. The single most useful number for an indie artist's business is the size of their owned audience (email plus SMS) multiplied by their average revenue per subscriber per year. A list of five thousand fans where each spends forty dollars a year is a two hundred thousand dollar business. The artists who treat this number as their primary metric outearn the artists chasing streams every time.

What to do this week. Set up the email service. Create one signup page. Post the link in your Instagram bio, your TikTok bio, your YouTube descriptions, and your link tree. Offer one specific thing in exchange for signup. Write the welcome sequence (three to four emails) and queue it up. The first hundred subscribers will come slowly. The next thousand will come faster. The thousand after that will be the foundation of your career.

PART THREE

Build the relationships that move records.

Music is a relationship business. The records are the proof, but the rooms are where the deals happen. The next seven chapters cover the relationships that actually move records, and how to build them on purpose.

CHAPTER 1

The real job of a manager.

Most indie artists who say they have a manager do not. They have a friend with the title. The difference matters because a real manager will change the shape of your career and a fake one will quietly siphon money out of it.

A real manager makes their money when you make money. They do not take a percentage of nothing. They do not take a flat fee up front, ever. They do not own a piece of your masters. They guide your career, open doors, negotiate on your behalf, and live and die by your success.

The standard manager rate is fifteen to twenty percent of gross income from music-related activity. Some take twenty-five if they are really putting in major-label-level work. That percentage comes out of revenue that is coming in because of them. Not money from your day job. Not money you make selling merch you designed yourself. Music-related, which they helped generate or steward.

The contract should also have a sunset clause. After the relationship ends, the manager keeps collecting on deals they put together, but only for a defined period and at a declining percentage. After three years, they should be at zero on any deal they originated. Without a sunset clause, you can be paying a manager for life on deals you closed before you understood what was happening.

Three types of managers, often confused. A personal manager handles your career strategy, day-to-day decisions, and the relationships that drive growth. They are who most people mean when they say "manager." A business manager handles your money. They do bookkeeping, taxes, royalty audits, and financial planning. They typically charge a percentage (often three to five percent) or a flat fee. A tour manager handles the logistics of the road. They are usually paid per tour or on a salary during active touring. Most indie artists do not need all three at the start, but knowing the difference helps you understand what you actually need at any given moment.

How to find a real manager. Not LinkedIn. Not Instagram DMs. Real managers find artists through three channels mostly. Referrals from people they trust (lawyers, publicists, A&Rs). Showcases and live events where artists demonstrate they are real. And by watching artists they noticed online develop over time. If you have done the work in this book (built a brand, released real music, generated real numbers), real managers will start noticing. The artists who chase managers usually end up with the fake ones.

The shadow manager trial. Before you sign with anyone calling themselves a manager, work with them informally for three to six months. No contract. No percentage. Just a working relationship to see if they actually do the things a manager does. If they show up, take meetings on your behalf, bring you opportunities, and demonstrate real industry traction, then sign with them. If they ghost you for two weeks at a time, they are not the manager you want, paperwork or no paperwork.

If anyone calls themselves your manager and they have never asked you for a copy of your contracts, never sat in on a session, never had a conversation with anyone in the industry on your behalf, they are not your manager. They are someone using a title.

You can do without a manager for a long time. What you cannot do without is a lawyer, even sporadically. If you can only afford one, get the lawyer first. A music attorney typically charges two hundred to five hundred dollars an hour, or a few thousand dollars to review a specific deal. That money buys you a real read of any contract that lands in your inbox.

What to do this week. If you have a manager, find the contract. If there is no contract, that is the first problem. If there is a contract, read it. Look for the four things above (percentage, scope, sunset clause, signed proof of services rendered). If three of those are missing, you do not have a manager. If you do not have a manager, do not get one out of FOMO. The wrong manager is worse than no manager.

CHAPTER 2

Working with a publicist.

A publicist's job is to get your story in front of the right people. Press features, blog placements, podcast appearances, radio interviews, television segments, playlist editor contacts. They are not your social media manager. They are not your tour manager. They are not your assistant. Their currency is media relationships.

Publicists run between fifteen hundred and ten thousand dollars a month for indie artists, depending on tier. The high end is reserved for publicists with major-label-level rosters. The mid range is realistic for indie artists with a real release schedule.

Before you hire a publicist, you need a real story. "I have a new single coming out" is not a story. "I am the only artist from my zip code to chart on Billboard's hip-hop genre chart in the last decade" is a story. "My new project was recorded entirely in my mother's basement after her diagnosis" is a story. Publicists turn stories into placements. They cannot manufacture a story you have not lived.

Publicist vs. PR firm vs. marketing agency. A publicist is usually a single person or small team focused on earned media (press, podcasts, radio). A PR firm is a larger version of the same, often with multiple specialists handling different verticals. A marketing agency might do publicity but also paid media, brand campaigns, social, and strategy. Match the type to your need. If you just want press for a release, you want a publicist. If you have a full launch campaign with paid components, you might want an agency or a publicist plus a paid media specialist.

The first thirty days of any publicist relationship should be planning, not pitching. They should be learning your story, building your media kit, identifying the right targets, and writing the angles. If a publicist starts pitching to outlets in the first week, they are using a generic template, which is the opposite of what you are paying for.

Measure a publicist by the type of placements, not the quantity. Ten features on small SEO content farms is not better than one feature in a real outlet that the industry reads. The right outlets vary by lane (Complex, HotNewHipHop, The Fader, Pitchfork, Rolling Stone, your regional press). Ask any publicist before you hire them which five outlets they would target for you and why. If they cannot name five outlets and explain why each one fits your story, do not hire them.

The campaign rhythm. A typical campaign is three months around a release. Pre-release announcement and feature pitches. Release week press, interviews, premieres. Post-release follow-on coverage, playlist features, podcast bookings. If a publicist proposes a campaign that does not stretch across these three phases, they are running a short campaign, which is rarely worth the rate.

DIY publicity that actually works. If you cannot afford a publicist yet, there are a few things you can do yourself. Build a press list (a spreadsheet of journalists, blogs, and podcasts that cover your lane, with email addresses). Send a polished, short pitch with one clear story angle, the music, and high-quality assets. Follow up once after a week if you do not hear back. Track every response. Build the relationship over time. The journalists who cover your lane today are the ones who can cover you for the next decade. Treat them well.

Building a relationship with one journalist for ten years. The most valuable PR asset for an indie artist is not a viral feature. It is a journalist who knows your story and cares about your career. The way to build that is to show up consistently for them across years. Comment thoughtfully on their work. Send them tips on other artists when relevant (not just yourself). Be available when they need a source. By year three or four of this kind of presence, that journalist becomes someone who will write about you because they want to, not because they have to.

What to do this week. Write your one-page artist bio (three hundred to five hundred words, third person, story-led, not credit-led). Pull together your best three photos, your top three streaming links, and a one-line elevator pitch about your project. This is your media kit foundation. With this in hand, you can either pitch yourself to smaller outlets or hand it to a publicist and immediately know whether they are good (they will sharpen it) or bad (they will use it as-is).

CHAPTER 3

The features economy.

A feature from the right artist can take your song from invisible to charting in a week. A feature from the wrong artist can drain your bank account for no return. The economy is more layered than most indie artists realize.

The major artist tier. Established artists with a recent hit charge between fifteen and a hundred thousand dollars for a feature, depending on heat and relationship. Some charge less if there is a real friendship. Some charge more if your song does not move them. This tier is a stamp. It tells listeners and the algorithm that you are credible. It also costs the most for the least guaranteed return. A forty thousand dollar verse on a song that still flops is a forty thousand dollar mistake.

The mid-tier feature. Mid-level rappers with regional buzz but no major label deal charge three to ten thousand dollars. This is the smart play for an indie artist building toward something. The verse is real, the exposure is real, the price is real, and the featured artist's audience overlaps with the kind of audience you can convert.

The local feature. Local artists with momentum charge five hundred to three thousand dollars. This is the relationship play. The artist on your record this month might be the one who introduces you to the right manager next month. The Atlanta scene is built on these relationships layered over years.

The friend feature. Friends and collaborators who do not charge. Fine for album cuts. Rarely the move for a single.

The trade feature. An underrated option. You appear on the other artist's song, they appear on yours, no money changes hands. This works at any tier but requires honest negotiation. The leverage usually goes to the bigger artist, so they get the better placement. But for two artists at similar levels, a trade can be the best deal for both.

Whatever level you go for, get the agreement in writing before any money moves. The agreement should specify the turnaround time, the number of bars, who owns the master and the publishing on the verse, how the feature is credited, and what the song can be used for (single only? album cut? live performance? music video?). Verbal deals are how lawsuits start.

The side artist agreement. The proper paperwork for a feature is called a side artist agreement. It is a one- to three-page document covering all the points above. Templates are available from any entertainment lawyer or through platforms like LegalZoom and Rocket Lawyer. Get one signed before money is sent and before the verse is delivered. Most lawsuits between artists over features happen because the terms were verbal and memory turned out to be unreliable.

Two things most indie artists miss. First, the publishing split for the feature is usually fifty-fifty between the main artist and the featured artist on the portion of the song they wrote. If the feature wrote their verse, they own fifty percent of the publishing on the song. That is normal. Document it clearly so the PRO and the MLC have the right percentages registered.

Second, the right of refusal on remixes and licensing. If you do a feature deal and then someone wants to license the song for a film, the featured artist has to approve. Build that into the agreement so the approval process does not stall a six-figure sync.

What to do this week. Decide which tier of feature actually fits your goals for the next release. Most indie artists default to chasing the major artist tier when the mid-tier or local tier is the right move. Be honest about the budget and the goal. Match the tier to both. And get the paperwork drafted before the conversation starts so when the right opportunity surfaces, you can move in a day instead of a month.

CHAPTER 4

College radio (the real process).

Your song does not show up on a college radio station because the algorithm picked it. There is no algorithm. There are music directors. They are usually students, usually nineteen years old, usually hungry to discover something nobody else is playing.

College radio in the United States runs about fifteen hundred stations with regular music programming. Each one has a music director who decides what gets added to rotation. Adding a song to rotation means it gets played three to fifteen times that week, depending on the station's format. Multiply that by fifteen hundred stations and the reach starts to matter, especially in the cities where college radio still drives discovery (Atlanta, Boston, Austin, Los Angeles, Chapel Hill, Minneapolis).

To get an add, your song has to physically arrive at the station, get listened to, and beat out the other twenty submissions that week. The way you arrive matters.

A printed CD with handwritten artwork and a sticky note that says "play this please" gets thrown out. A digital one-sheet sent through a service like Radio Submit or a college radio promoter gets read. A personal email from a publicist who has been working with that music director for two years gets played.

Most indie artists try to do this themselves. It does not work. The music directors get hundreds of cold submissions a month, and yours is just another link. The artists who get college radio rotation are working with a publicist or a service that has the relationship built.

The specialty show hack. Beyond the music director, most college stations have specialty shows for specific genres (hip-hop show, R&B show, mixshow). The DJs of those shows often have more autonomy than the music director to add songs to their show specifically. Pitching directly to specialty show DJs is sometimes more effective than pitching to the music director, especially for genre-specific releases. The trade-off is that a specialty show add gets you fewer total plays than a general rotation add, but the listeners of a specialty show are deeper fans of the genre.

Top tier college stations to know. WBRU (Providence, formerly Brown, now independent), KCRW (Santa Monica, technically public radio but college-adjacent), WNYU (NYU, hip-hop-focused mixshow), WERS (Emerson, Boston), WXYC (UNC Chapel Hill), KEXP (Seattle), KCSB (UC Santa Barbara). Getting added at any of these is meaningful both for plays and for the data they generate.

Beyond the US. If you have international ambitions, BBC Introducing in the UK is the equivalent gatekeeper for new artists, and CBC Radio 3 in Canada plays a similar role. Both accept submissions through formal pitching channels.

Here is the secret most indie artists never understand. Once you get added to college radio, those plays generate two things. Performance royalties, which come back through your PRO. And data. The data shows up in BDS and Mediabase, the systems that the bigger industry uses to track airplay. When a song shows up in Mediabase, real industry people see it and start paying attention.

College radio is not where you become famous. It is where the people who decide who becomes famous can see that you are real.

The interview circuit. Beyond getting your song played, many college stations have interview shows where they bring artists in for ten to thirty minute conversations on air. These interviews are a great way to build your story, generate clips for social media, and establish relationships with the next generation of music industry people (those college DJs and music directors become tomorrow's editorial team members, A&Rs, and publicists).

What to do this week. Research two or three college radio promoters or services that specialize in your genre. Pricing typically ranges from two hundred fifty to eight hundred dollars for a one-month campaign. Compare what they offer (number of stations, follow-up reports, relationships). If you have not done a college radio push on your last two releases, you are leaving an entire pipeline of industry attention untapped.

CHAPTER 5

Music supervisors and the sync pipeline.

Sync placements (TV, film, commercials, games) are gatekept by music supervisors. Their job is to find the right song for a scene. The good ones are some of the most respected curators in the music business. The great ones can launch a career with a single placement.

Music supervisors do not respond to cold pitches from artists. They get thousands of submissions a week from publishers, sync agencies, and a small number of trusted publicists. They mostly delete the ones that did not come through a trusted source. The reasons are practical. They cannot vet rights and clearances on a stranger's pitch. They cannot risk pitching a song to a brand only to find out the song's splits are murky and the brand walks away. The trusted intermediaries solve that problem.

If you want to be pitched for sync, the practical paths are these. Sign with a publisher who has an active sync department. Sign with a sync agency that takes on indie artists. Use a publishing administrator that has a sync pitching arm (Songtrust, Sentric, and a few others offer this).

Each of these intermediaries takes a percentage of any sync income they generate. The percentages vary. Sync agents typically take ten to thirty percent of the sync fee and a corresponding cut of the backend performance royalties. Read the agreement carefully. Make sure the agency is non-exclusive (so you can still pitch through other channels), and make sure their exclusivity ends if they have not landed a placement within a defined window.

The library music alternative. If you want steadier (smaller) sync income, the library music path is worth exploring. Production music libraries license tracks in bulk to TV networks, ad agencies, content creators, and YouTube channels. The placements pay less per use (sometimes as little as a few dollars per cue) but happen far more often. Companies like Audio Network, APM Music, Universal Production Music, and Premium Beat work with composer-producers on this model. Some indie artists run a library music side career alongside their artist career. The income is reliable. The credit is usually anonymous (your name is in the metadata, not on the screen).

Trailer music. A separate world from main sync. Movie trailers and TV promo spots have their own music supervisors and their own library system. The trailer market favors big, cinematic, emotionally heavy production. If you make epic instrumentals or hybrid orchestral hip-hop, look into trailer-focused music houses like Position Music, Audiomachine, Two Steps From Hell, and Really Slow Motion.

The other path is to build the relationships yourself, slowly, by being a known quantity to the supervisors who matter in your lane. This is a multi-year game and requires showing up at the right industry events (Sync Summit, Music Sync Summit, Production Music Conference), getting on the right newsletters, and contributing to the conversation in public ways. Cold emails from artists never work.

Cold emails from artists who have been in the room and recognized at three events in a row sometimes work.

Sync-ready means clean splits, an instrumental version, a clean lyric version, ISRC code, ISWC code, and metadata that is correct on every platform. If a supervisor pursues your song and any of those is missing, the placement falls through and another song gets in.

What to do this week. Make a checklist for every released song. Split sheet signed by all writers. Instrumental version. Clean lyric version. ISRC code. ISWC code. Metadata correct on Spotify and Apple Music. Until that checklist is complete on every song, you are not sync-ready. Once it is complete, identify two sync agencies or publishing administrators that work with indie artists. Reach out to them with the checklist done. You will be in a different conversation than ninety-five percent of the artists who pitch them.

CHAPTER 6

Brand deals at every level.

When indie artists hear "brand deal," they think of the chart-topping rapper in a Cîroc commercial. They think of Coca-Cola checks and Pepsi tours. Then they look at their own following of three thousand on Instagram and decide brand deals are not for them.

That math is wrong.

Brands have budgets at every level. National brands like Pepsi want the Megan Thee Stallions and Travis Scotts. Regional brands, small consumer goods companies, and local businesses have smaller budgets but they need real artists too. A rapper with five thousand engaged Instagram followers in a specific city is worth real money to a local clothing brand, a barbershop chain, a beverage startup, or a regional events company.

The deal does not have to be a national TV spot. It can be a paid Instagram post (two hundred fifty to two thousand dollars). A story takeover (five hundred to three thousand). An appearance at an event (fifteen hundred to seventy-five hundred). A song placement in a brand's social campaign (one thousand to fifteen thousand). The fees range widely.

Categories that work for hip-hop and R&B artists. Apparel and streetwear brands. Beverage companies (especially alcohol, energy drinks, and newer wellness drinks). Tech (especially audio gear, gaming peripherals, and creator tools). Cannabis (where legal). Automotive accessories. Sneaker resellers and authentication services. Barbershops and grooming brands. These categories regularly work with mid-size artists because the audience match is strong.

Most indie artists never pitch themselves for these because they think they need to be famous first. The brands do not need famous. They need authentic and aligned. A clothing brand selling to young Black men in Atlanta would rather work with three local rappers with five thousand followers each than one rapper with a hundred thousand followers who has no specific connection to the city.

The media kit. The document brands need to evaluate you. One page, three to five pages max, PDF format. Includes who you are (two-line bio), your audience demographics (age range, geographic concentration, gender split, top cities), your reach numbers (followers, monthly listeners, average post engagement), past brand work if any (with photos of the deliverables), creative samples (your best Instagram posts, your most viewed Reels, your top-performing TikToks), and your rates (or at least your willingness to discuss rates). Make this once and update it every six months.

Rate cards. A simple rate card helps a brand know what to expect. Common rates for an indie artist with five to twenty thousand engaged followers might look like: dedicated Instagram post (five hundred to fifteen hundred), Story sequence (three hundred to one thousand), Reel (seven hundred to

twenty-five hundred), TikTok (five hundred to two thousand), event appearance (fifteen hundred to five thousand depending on travel and time). These are starting points. Adjust based on what your actual engagement and conversion data shows.

Flat fee vs performance deals. Flat fee is what most indie brand deals look like. The brand pays X, you deliver Y, the deal is closed. Performance deals (you get paid based on conversions or sales generated) are common in affiliate marketing but rare in pure brand deals at the indie level. Stick to flat fees until you have real data on your conversion rate, at which point performance deals can be more lucrative if your audience converts well.

The whitelisting clause. Some brand deals include a whitelisting provision that lets the brand run paid ads against your organic content. This means your post gets boosted to a wider audience using the brand's ad budget. It can extend the reach of the campaign significantly. It also means the brand is paying to reach people you do not control. Negotiate the whitelisting fee separately from the post fee. A common structure is the post fee plus a smaller fee for thirty or sixty days of whitelisting rights.

To get into this, you need a few things. A media kit, which is just a one-page PDF that shows who you are, your demographics, your reach, and your past brand work or visuals. A clear price list. A target list of brands that fit your story. And someone willing to do outreach.

The outreach is the hard part. Most artists do not know how to write a pitch email that does not get deleted. The pitch has to lead with what you can do for the brand, not what you want from them. Show them a creative idea, a specific reason your audience matches theirs, and a clean ask.

Brand money is some of the cleanest money in music. The brand pays you, you deliver the content, you keep your masters, and there is no recoupment. It is the part of the business most indie artists ignore because nobody told them they were invited.

What to do this week. List five local or regional brands whose customer base overlaps with your audience. Look up the marketing director or brand manager of each (LinkedIn, the company website). Write a one-page pitch email for one of them and send it. Most artists never send the email. The artists who send the email get the deals.

CHAPTER 7

Writing for other artists.

The fastest path to a real check as an indie artist is not your own music. It is writing songs for other people.

There is an entire economy of artists who can sing or rap but cannot write a good song to save their lives. They have labels, budgets, deadlines, and they need songs. They pay songwriters to deliver. The songwriter gets a writing credit, a writer share of the publishing, and sometimes an advance.

A single placement on a major label release can pay you between two thousand and fifty thousand dollars in advance, plus an ongoing royalty stream for the life of the song. A single hit can pay a writer half a million dollars over a few years. And that is just one song.

To break in, you need to be in the rooms. The rooms are writer camps, songwriting sessions, and publisher meetings. Publishers exist precisely for this. They sign songwriters, give them an advance, and put them in rooms with artists who need songs. In exchange, the publisher takes a piece of the publishing they generate.

Top-line writing. A specific kind of songwriting where you write the topline (melody and lyrics) over an existing instrumental. Most pop and modern hip-hop sessions work this way. The producer makes the beat. The topliner writes the melody and lyrics. The artist sings or raps it. Each contributor gets a percentage of the publishing based on what they brought. Top-lining is a different skill from full songwriting. Some songwriters are stronger toplines and lean into that.

The producer-songwriter split. When a producer makes a beat and a writer writes a topline, the standard split is fifty percent of the publishing to the producer (for the music) and fifty percent to the writers (for the lyrics and melody). If there is one writer and one producer, the split is fifty-fifty. If there are two writers and one producer, the split is twenty-five-twenty-five-fifty. If a sample is involved, the sample publisher takes a piece off the top before the remaining publishing is split.

The writers' camp culture. A writers' camp is a multi-day event where a label or an artist's team brings together a roster of songwriters and producers to write songs for an upcoming project. Camps are often invitation-only. Getting invited usually requires a publisher who works with the label, a track record of placements, or a personal relationship. The first camp invitation is the hardest. After you place a song at a camp, you become someone who gets invited again.

If you are an indie rapper sitting on a hundred unreleased songs, twenty of them might be wrong for you but right for somebody else. That girl in your city with a label deal who needs hooks. The R&B artist signed to an indie label who needs verses. The artist's manager you DM with who has been looking for the right writer. These are real opportunities.

The demo deal. A common entry point for songwriters. A publisher or A&R hires you to record a finished demo of a song for an artist's consideration. You get paid a flat fee (often a few hundred to a few thousand dollars) to deliver the demo. If the artist records the song, the demo deal converts into a full songwriter deal with publishing share. If they pass, you keep the demo fee and the song stays yours. This is one of the lowest-risk ways to test the songwriting waters.

Administration for songwriters. If you are placing songs with other artists regularly, you will eventually want either a publishing administrator (admin deal, lower percentage, you keep ownership) or a publishing deal (higher percentage taken, but they put you in rooms). For most songwriters in their first three years of placements, admin is the better path.

Most rappers will not do this because they have an artist's ego. The song was written for them, by them, and they cannot imagine giving it away. That ego costs a lot of money. The writer's ego is different. A writer is proud when their song is sung by someone else and it goes number one. They get paid the same as the artist on the record, sometimes more, and they did not have to tour to support it.

What to do this week. Identify three songs in your catalog or in your unreleased folder that are not quite right for your project but could be right for another artist. Make instrumental versions. Make demo versions with placeholder vocals if you can sing or have a friend who can. The next time an opportunity surfaces, you will have product ready.

EPILOGUE

The 90-day plan.

Three months. Three movements. No theory, no manifestation, no waiting for permission.

Days 1 to 30. The infrastructure.

Sign up with a PRO as a writer and as a publisher. Register every released song.

Open an account at the MLC. Register every released song as the publisher.

Register with SoundExchange. Sign up for BMI Live or ASCAP On Stage if you perform live.

Set up an email list. Add the signup link everywhere.

Pull a clean media kit together (bio, photos, links, demographics, elevator pitch).

Audit your current distribution agreement. Decide whether to stay or migrate.

Get a lawyer review for any deal you are currently in.

Create instrumental and clean radio edit versions of your top three songs.

Days 31 to 60. The content and the relationships.

Plan the next release. Make the clean radio edit, the instrumental, and the split sheet for the song.

Batch-shoot four weeks of content (one hero post per week, three to five hub posts per week).

Pitch yourself to five local or regional brands. Send the email this week, not eventually.

Pitch yourself to three sync agencies, publishing administrators, or publishers.

Reach out to two college radio promoters who work in your lane. Get quotes for the next release.

Have an honest conversation with anyone calling themselves your manager about scope and percentage.

Build the press list for your next release. Twenty-five names, real email addresses, story angle by name.

Days 61 to 90. The release and the data.

Release the song with a real promotional push. College radio campaign, blog and playlist pitching, content cadence at full speed.

Track the data. Streams, listener count, repeat listener rate, email signups, brand inquiries, sync responses.

At day 90, review. What worked. What did not. What is the next 90 days going to do differently.

This plan will not make you a star in 90 days. It will put you on the path that stars are on. The artists who do this for four consecutive 90-day cycles, with honest reviews in between, end up somewhere completely different than the artists who do not.

The slow, then sudden version is real. The slow part is years. The sudden part is what other people see. You do the slow part because you understand what it leads to. Everyone else gets to be surprised when the sudden part arrives.

AFTERWORD

Work with Fly Shy.

You have the framework. You have the chapters. You have the action items.

What you do not have, yet, is the conversation. The one-on-one walk-through with a coach who has lived all of this on both sides of the glass. The personalized strategy for your specific career, your specific lane, your specific city.

That is what Time 2 Win Coaching is. Three weeks, one-on-one, the full B.A.M. Framework applied directly to your career. Five hundred dollars. A thousand-dollar retail value. The same plays the majors run on day one, translated for the indie artist who refuses to wait.

The thirty-minute discovery call is free. No charge. No pitch deck. You bring the questions. Fly Shy brings twenty-nine years.

Book the free Time 2 Win call:

calendly.com/flyshy72/new-meeting

Or email:

monetizewin72@yahoo.com

Welcome to the rooms most artists never enter.

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