



Recording and Distributing an Album

Overview: The DIY Album

The recording industry has undergone massive changes in the past ten years. Technological advances have upended the old business model. Widespread downloading and sharing of music files has left some record labels with dwindling profits while others have simply gone out of business. Technology has also made it easy and inexpensive for musicians to record, promote, and distribute their own music. The model of an independent, entrepreneurial musician is quickly becoming the norm. Today, musicians are taking matters into their own hands and going the do-it-yourself route. Musicians who release their own recordings have some specific advantages: they control the project, artistically and financially, and keep more of the profits, eliminating the need for the middleman.

There are now companies to help with the production, marketing, and distribution of your music. Digital retailers such as Bandcamp, Reverbnation, CDBaby, ArtistShare, iTunes, Nimbit, and Amazon allow you to sell your music directly to fans online. There are also many services for online streaming, including Pandora, Spotify and Soundcloud that help push your music to new listeners.

Many musicians have started their own labels or formed cooperatives with other musicians to start a label. Violinist Gil Shaham's contract with Deutsche Grammophon was cancelled after ten years and more than fifteen albums, so he started his own label, Canary. Cellist David Finckel, of the Emerson Quartet, and his wife, pianist Wu Han, started their own label, ArtistLed, in 1997. Since then they have recorded and produced ten albums, which they market online at www.artistled.com. Flutist Ransom Wilson's label, Image Recordings, has released CDs by violinist Joseph Silverstein and pianist Christopher O'Riley. GM Recordings, founded by composer Gunther Schuller, focuses on jazz, classical, and multigenre works. Other artist-run labels include composer John Zorn's Tzadik label, Bang on a Can's Cantaloupe Music, violinist Paul Zukofsky's CP2, pianist Santiago Rodriguez's Elan Records, and cellist Matt Haimovitz's Oxingale Records. Since 2003, the Borromeo String Quartet has made recordings of their live performances available through their Living Archive Project (www.livingarchive.org).

This handout will offer, in broad strokes, the technical steps required to self release an album. You will also find several references to additional handouts covering topics such as copyright laws and tools for self-promotion. These topics are closely related, but were too complex to cover here in full. We encourage you to reference them as you work through this handout.

Recording and Releasing an Album: The Step-by-Step

Recording an album includes several distinct stages, listed below and fully outlined in this section:

1. Select and prepare the repertoire
2. Create a budget for your recording project
3. Fundraise
4. Obtain rights to record and distribute music that is under copyright
5. Choose a venue/studio and recording engineer
6. Mix , edit and master the album
7. Create album art and craft liner notes
8. Press the album or prepare tracks for online distribution

9. Promote and sell the album

Select and Prepare the Repertoire

For most musicians, the real reason to record an album is to capture a body of work or document an independent project. Most often, the goal for the album will dictate what repertoire you select—see below for a few guiding questions to get you started:

- Are you creating a recording for applications and auditions?
- Will you use it as a demo for booking performances?
- Are you documenting a creative project that you hope will attract publicity?
- Are you documenting original compositions?
- Do you plan to sell the recording at live performances?
- Will you also sell the album online?

Create a Budget for your Recording Project

It can cost as little as \$1,000 and upwards of \$15,000 to record, produce, and package a professional CD. The cost will largely depend on where you do the recording, who you pay to assist you, and what format you chose for packaging.

Start by writing a list of all anticipated costs for recording, editing, mastering, producing, packaging, and promoting your CD. Below is a sample budget that you can use to project your costs.

INCOME	
Donations	\$
Grants	\$
Ticket Sales	\$
In-Kind Donations	\$
Total Income	\$

EXPENSES	
Sidepersons/accompanists	\$
Recording Studio Rental	\$
Recording Engineer: Recording, Mixing and Mastering Fee	\$
Equipment Rental or Instrument Cartage	\$
Recording Producer	\$
Graphic Design	\$
Piano Tuning	\$
Copyright Licensing Fees	\$
Copyright Registration	\$
Packaging	\$
CD Duplication	\$
ISBN # (bar code) registration	\$
Promotional Pieces (Printing)	\$
Online Ad Purchase	\$
Documentation: Photography/Videography	\$
Release Party Venue Rental	\$
Total Expenses	\$

Fundraising

Many independent musicians now use crowd-source funding platforms to raise money to record and release their albums (e.g. Kickstarter.com, Indiegogo.com, pledgemusic.com, etc.). You can also host

fundraising events or house concerts, solicit donations from individuals, or set aside personal savings. There are also several grants available for recordings projects, though they often have longer timelines and are very competitive. Below are a few options to explore:

Iguana Music Fund

The fund awards annual grants between \$500 and \$2,000 to artists with a residential or tour-based affiliation to New England. www.clubpassim.org/about-fund

Aaron Copland Fund for Music

Grants to support the production of new recordings of contemporary American music. Eligibility: Non-profit professional performance ensembles, presenting institutions and non-profit or commercial recording companies. www.coplandfund.org/recording.html

The Jerome Foundation

The Jerome Foundation supports the creation, development, and production of new works by emerging artists. The Foundation makes grants to not-for-profit arts organizations and artists in Minnesota and New York City. www.jeromefdn.org

Local Cultural Councils

See www.nea.gov/partner/state/SAA_RAO_list.html for a list of regional cultural agencies

Obtain Rights to Copyrighted Music

1. To record a copyrighted work, you need to obtain a *mechanical license* from the copyright holder (the publisher or composer). The only exception to this is if the work is in the public domain, meaning, the copyright has expired. Keep in mind that CD manufacturers require proof of mechanical licenses before they will begin work on a client's recording, so it's essential that you obtain the licenses before you record.
2. If you plan to record a work that has never been recorded, then you negotiate the license directly with the copyright holder (the composer or the publisher) and confirm your agreement with a written contract that both parties sign.
3. If a work has already been recorded, you need to obtain a *compulsory mechanical license*. The cost for the license is set by Congress, and the fees are dependent on the length of the work, the number of copies of the recording planned, and the intended online use. The administering organization for mechanical licenses is the Harry Fox Agency (HFA) see www.harryfox.com. If you plan to make fewer than 2,500 copies of your recording as either physical products or permanent digital downloads, you can request licenses at the HFA site under "Songfile." For details, see the FAQ page on the HFA website.
4. Every musical recording inherently contains two distinct copyrights. There is the copyright for the musical composition (the piece itself, no matter who performs or records it), and there is the copyright for the sound recording (a particular performance fixed in tangible form). This means that if you write a song, you own the copyright for the musical composition. If you are the performer who records someone else's song, you own the copyright for the sound recording (as distinct from the composition). And if you perform and record your own song, you own both copyrights. To register your copyright and protect it against future infringements, see www.copyright.gov.
5. For more detailed help and information on copyright and licensing issues, see our handout "Copyright Issues for Musicians."

Where to Record

Recording in a Studio

If you choose to record in a studio, keep in mind that rates vary depending on the studio's equipment, location, and its local competition. Most studios do not provide concert-quality grand pianos; if you need one, you will face fewer choices and higher fees. In the Boston area, the hourly rates, as of this writing, range from \$50 to \$200 per hour. When choosing a studio, get references from trusted colleagues. Ask to hear samples of demos or any commercial releases. You may also want to tour a prospective studio to make sure you'll be comfortable recording there. Studios typically offer various package deals with a certain number of recording hours, an engineer, and editing.

Recording on Location

The second option to consider is recording on location, most often in a performance venue. This is generally how classical recordings are done, to take advantage of the acoustics of a particular hall or to use a specific piano. Do some research to find where musicians in your area record. If you have a church job or a teaching gig, you may be able to use a great space for free or a discounted price.

Do It Yourself

The third recording option is the DIY route. You can do it all yourself or enlist a friend with recording experience and equipment to help. If you have access to a space with good acoustics, you might be able to record with rented or borrowed equipment at minimal cost. If you have the right equipment and know how to use it, almost any good acoustic space will work.

Mix, Edit and Master the Album

There are several steps required to transform your raw recording into a professionally produced album. Editing and mixing include splicing together different takes of a given track and balancing the sound levels. Mastering is the process by which the sound is equalized, compressed and any unwanted noise is reduced. Depending on your technical background, you can edit and mix the individual tracks with your own software (Pro Tools), but it is important to bring in 'outside ears' to master the album. This can be a time-intensive process and makes a huge difference in the quality of the final product. You may also elect to hire a professional sound engineer to handle this whole process for you.

Album Art

The first impression a recording makes is often visual. You see the cover design of an album online first before you hear it, and what you see may affect whether or not you decide to click through, listen, or buy. The same is true at concerts: we peruse albums prior to buying them. Graphics have an immediate impact and make a statement about the energy of your music and your professionalism. CD manufacturing companies offer various packages that often include design, layout, jewel boxes, bar code, assembly, and shrink-wrapping. You can also seek out an affordable graphic designer or visual artist through a local art school or on Craigslist.

Pressing and Distributing

There are many online retailers that will press, duplicate, and package your physical album as well as distribute your tracks to the major music download sites. For example, CDBaby offers an easy interface for uploading your tracks, artwork, liner notes and selecting your packaging. You can also sign-up to have your album distributed to iTunes, Amazon, Spotify, Pandora, Rhapsody, etc. One great benefit of CDBaby or similar DIY services is that they enable you to purchase small runs of your album—as few as 150. This is ideal if you primarily want to sell your music online, but also need physical albums for promotional purposes or to sell at small performances. If you choose to solely distribute your album online, there are many free platforms such as Bandcamp.com that enable you to easily sell tracks through your website and also push your music out to new listeners who are active on the site.

Creating a “Buzz”

Releasing a new album is a great reason to organize a release party or tour. At the performance, make sure there is a dedicated person whose job it will be to talk to audience members and sell your album. Make sure to talk about the new album from the stage, several times, and encourage people to visit your merch table. Releasing an album is also a great hook for reaching out to local and national media—see our handout on ‘Publicity for Musicians’ for more information about how to leverage a recording to attract media coverage. You can also use your album as a ‘business card’ at events—always have a few copies on hand to share with potential collaborators, presenters or funders.

Additional Reading and Resources

- [*Nine Mistakes to Avoid When Recording Your Own Album*](#) from Music Think Tank
- [*How to Get Your Music in Digital Platforms*](#) by Kristin Thompson from the Future of Music Coalition
- [*Kickstarter Expects To Provide More Funding To the Arts Than NEA*](#) by Carl Franzen for Talking Points Memo. This article prompted a national discussion about how Kickstarter is providing a new pathway for independent artists of all media.
- [*We Wouldn't Mind Getting Less Money From Pandora and Spotify, Indie Musician Says*](#) an Op-Ed for Billboard Magazine by Patrick Laird of Break of Reality.
- [*Is Pandora Really Short-Changing Songwriters?*](#) By Graeme Mcmillan from WIRED