



Music Identification Codes: What Independent Artists and Songwriters Need to Know

If you're releasing music independently, three industry-standard codes form the backbone of how your work is identified, tracked, and monetized: the ISWC, ISRC, and UPC. Understanding what each one does — and how to obtain it — is fundamental to protecting your rights and ensuring you're compensated accurately.

ISWC — International Standard Musical Work Code

The ISWC is a permanent, unique identifier assigned to a musical composition. Think of it as a serial number for the song itself — the melody, lyrics, and underlying work — regardless of how many times it's recorded or distributed. This code is what royalty collection societies use to track a composition's usage across platforms, broadcasts, and performances worldwide.

ISWCs are administered globally by CISAC (the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers) and are assigned automatically when you register your song with a Performing Rights Organization (PRO) such as ASCAP, BMI, or SESAC. You cannot apply for one directly through CISAC.

Once assigned, an ISWC is public record and searchable through CISAC's ISWC-Network portal. U.S. songwriters can also look up codes through their PRO's repertory search tools, such as ASCAP ACE or SESAC Search Repertory.

ISRC — International Standard Recording Code

While the ISWC identifies a composition, the ISRC identifies a specific sound recording — the master. Every distinct recording of a song requires its own ISRC, including alternate versions, remixes, or live recordings. These codes enable digital service providers, streaming platforms, and collection societies to track plays and attribute royalties to the correct recording owner.

Globally, ISRCs are administered by the IFPI (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry), with national agencies handling local allocation. In the United States, that responsibility falls to the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America), which manages two pathways for obtaining a code:

- **Become an ISRC Manager directly through the RIAA.** This grants you a permanent Registrant Code that allows you to self-assign up to 100,000 ISRCs per year. There is a one-time registration fee of \$95. This option provides the greatest degree of control and is well suited for artists managing a growing catalog.

- **Use an authorized ISRC Manager.** The RIAA maintains a list of approved managers — including most major distributors — who can assign codes on your behalf. Costs vary by provider. If your distributor assigns your ISRC, be aware that they retain ownership of that code. Should you switch distributors, those codes do not transfer with you.

When registering a recording, best practice is to register the underlying composition with your PRO first so you have the corresponding ISWC ready to include in your recording metadata.

UPC — Universal Product Code

The UPC is the 12-digit barcode that identifies a product — a digital album, single, CD, vinyl release, or merchandise item. Retailers and digital storefronts use UPCs to catalog and sell your releases. Every distinct product you bring to market requires its own UPC.

UPCs are issued by GS1, the global standards organization responsible for product identification. There are two ways to obtain one:

- **Purchase directly from GS1 US.** Individual codes, bundles, or a full membership with your own company prefix are all available. A single UPC currently costs a one-time fee of \$30.
- **Through a GS1 member, such as your distributor.** Most distributors will automatically assign a UPC when you register a release, unless you supply your own. As with ISRCs, a distributor-assigned UPC is not owned by you — it belongs to the assigning party.

A Note on Third-Party Services

For both ISRCs and UPCs, exercise caution when using third-party services that aren't listed as authorized managers or GS1 members. Using an unauthorized provider puts you at risk of receiving an invalid code — one that may not be recognized by platforms, collection societies, or retailers.

Keeping Records

Regardless of how you obtain these codes, maintaining a detailed, organized record of every ISWC, ISRC, and UPC associated with your catalog is essential. These identifiers are the infrastructure behind royalty collection, distribution, and rights management. Treating them with the same care you give your music is one of the most practical steps you can take as an independent artist.

*The information above is provided for general educational purposes and does not constitute legal, financial, or professional advice. Consult a qualified professional for guidance specific to your situation.

