



## ***Getting Your ISRC and UPC: What You Need to Know***

### **How Long Does It Take and How Do You Apply?**

Both ISRC prefixes and UPCs are obtained entirely online — no mail required.

**ISRC (US)** Apply through the US ISRC Agency at [usisrc.org](http://usisrc.org), administered by the RIAA. There is a one-time \$95 fee, and most applicants receive their prefix within a day or two. Once you have your prefix, you generate individual ISRCs yourself immediately at no additional cost — one prefix supports up to 100,000 codes per year, for life.

The free alternative: distributors like DistroKid and CD Baby will assign ISRCs automatically when you upload a release. However, in that case the prefix belongs to them, not you.

**UPC** UPCs come from GS1 (the global barcode standards organization) at [gs1us.org](http://gs1us.org). A single UPC costs \$30 and GS1 will send your welcome email within minutes of applying. If you manage multiple releases, a company prefix that lets you generate your own block of codes is available starting around \$250, with annual renewal fees based on volume.

Again, the free alternative: most distributors assign a UPC automatically at upload. The same ownership caveats apply.

### **Should You Own Your Own UPC — or Let Your Distributor Supply It?**

For many casual digital-only artists, a distributor-supplied UPC works fine in the short term. But there are meaningful risks to relying on one, particularly for anyone releasing physical product or building a long-term catalog.

**Portability.** When a UPC lives with your distributor, it may not travel with you if you leave. Switching distributors can result in multiple codes for the same release, splitting your sales data across identifiers. That fragmentation can cost you chart recognition and affect royalty reporting accuracy.

**Data ownership.** The aggregated sales data attached to a distributor's UPC block belongs to them, not you. Distributors use that market data to negotiate deals and leverage that don't benefit the artist directly.

**Physical releases.** For vinyl, cassette, or CD, distributor-assigned UPCs can create complications since the code is tied to their system rather than your release permanently. If you're pressing physical product, owning your own GS1-issued UPC is the cleaner, more professional approach.

**Avoid cheap third-party resellers.** Barcodes purchased from discount reseller sites have been flagged or rejected by platforms like Amazon and Apple Music. If you're buying your own, go directly through GS1 — it's the only source platforms universally recognize.

### **The Bottom Line**

For a solo artist releasing digitally through one distributor indefinitely, a supplied UPC is a reasonable convenience. For anyone releasing physical product, managing a catalog, running a label, or planning to move between distributors, owning your own codes is the smarter long-term investment — and at \$95 once for an ISRC prefix and \$30 per UPC, it's a small cost relative to what it protects.

