

BAND TIPS: Getting your music on iTunes by Joe Shambro



FirstMusicContact

As an independent artist, you'll probably be very familiar with the fact that digital downloading is huge -- and you're probably wondering how to get your cut of the action! And it's not just illegal downloading taking a huge bite out of traditional sales -- legal downloading services such as iTunes, eMusic, Napster, and Rhapsody have created a huge opportunity for major and independent labels alike: the ability to sell your music to a large, diverse market, with little to no overhead costs.

At around €1 per song, €10 per album, these services represent a great way to get your music distributed to the masses. However, as an independent artist, getting your music digitally distributed on the big services may seem like an impossible task -- until now!

Need recording advice for a small space? Visit our guide to Dorm Room Recording!
Digital or Traditional?

While it may be tempting to go the all-digital route and avoid the printing costs of a CD, it's also important to understand that the market is still there for CD sales, especially independent musicians. The numbers tip towards downloads, but till, an estimated 66% of people still prefer physical CDs.

You'll still want to consider retaining the option to sell CDs -- especially at your shows. Most artists see CD sales at their merch tables, even if they're not doing so great in local CD stores. Before making a decision on which way to go exclusively, consider the benefits of doing both, especially if you have a budget to do so.

Need advice on duplicating? Check out our guide to Duplication vs. Replication.

Getting Your Release Ready - Mastering & Artwork

As an independent artist, you'll need to make sure your release is up to commercial standards before releasing it digitally. By now, I'm sure you're familiar with the process of mastering -- evening out the dynamics and maximizing the volume of your recording. Make sure that, whether you're doing the mastering yourself or hiring an engineer to do it for you, that your final product sounds it's best. Remember, you'll be on an even playing field (well, almost) to the big, major-label acts when you're being digitally distributed, so make your release stand out as best you can.

You'll also need to make sure you have complete artwork to submit, along with the complete track credits. Remember, none of the online services will post your music without artwork.

Want to learn about mastering? Learn all about it here.
Obtain a UPC Code

In order to sell your music in any online store, not just iTunes, you'll need a UPC code assigned to your release. There's a few options, and they're all about the same price if you know where to look (and contrary to popular belief, you don't have to pay the €750 fee that's standard if you're getting your own UPC, unless you want to register a UPC as your own company). One option is going through your CD duplication company. For a small fee (between €20 and €50), you'll be assigned a unique UPC code for your product, which you can use on both your regular CD and your digitally distributed version. Just ask them, if they haven't offered it already. Another option is the great service CD Baby. They're an online store that's a major player in the digital distribution market, as well (more about that later). They'll assign you a unique UPC for €20. You can also do a Google search for "UPC Code", and you'll get some great results -- don't pay more than €50, though!

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Find a Distributor

Unless your independent label (or you) are a major player, then you won't be able to deal directly with Apple. Unfortunately, but understandably due to the volume of interest, iTunes requires that you as an artist partner with an established distributor. This works to your benefit when you compare the selling and bargaining power you as one of the many independent artists would have! This offers them the ability to work only with high-volume sellers, who'll be committed to the level of content quality they strive for. Of course, the downside here is that it'll cost you a little more in sales revenue, due to the fact you'll have to help pay a minimal overhead for the other companies involved.

The number one thing to look out for in a digital distributing partner is a non-exclusive licensing agreement. Make sure that you will continue to own all rights to your own music. Don't sign anything -- and if in doubt, take it up with an experienced entertainment lawyer -- if you feel you may sign your rights away to your material, which goes without saying. You'll also want to make sure that the pay cut is fair -- the average payout is around 60 cents per song download, and most digital distribution services will take a 9-10% cut of that. Still, when compared to the overhead of printing and distributing an actual CD copy, you're coming out ahead!

One of the best distributors, as mentioned above, is CD Baby. They've partnered with not only iTunes, but many of the other major players in the digital market. They'll set up to sell your CD -- digital only, or, if you have real copies, on their online store, as well -- for €35 per album. There's some setup work, but it's all easily done. They handle the digital encoding of your material for you, to make sure that your music stays in the proper format at the highest quality.

Another great option is a company called Tunecore. Tunecore offers similar features to CD Baby, although they only deal in digital distribution. Their pricing model is quite different; Tunecore's pricing is based on whether it's a single -- which costs €9.99 to upload -- or a full album. You can either do unlimited songs and all 19 stores for €46.99, or choose your stores and songs for an additional fee. You'll go live on iTunes worldwide, eMusic, and many others. They also don't make any claim to your material, just distribute it. They offer free UPC code generation, and can hook you up with a good artwork person if you don't have cover art already made.

And remember, promote your digital downloads!

Written by Joe Shambro of Ask.com
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