How to release your first song step-by-step

If you want your project to reach more ears, here's a checklist to help you get it done right.

Pre-release Checklist

1) Sign up for a publishing rights organization (ASCAP, BMI, or SESAC) that can collect royalties for you.
If you use ASCAP, make sure you set up an LLC in your state that can act as your publishing company and register that as a publishing company. This usually costs no more than $300 depending on state. If you use BMI, you won't need to do this.

2) Before you release your song, you will need to submit each track to your PRO to ensure everyone who worked on the project (producer, engineers, writers, musicians) gets the credit they deserve. Performing Rights Organizations (or PROs) such as ASCAP and BMI will help you collect performance royalties whenever your original songs are played on the radio, in venues, etc. To register tracks, you usually need a completed split sheet including everyone's government names listed with their PRO, their PRO #, and their IPI #, as well as any information for their publishing LLC if they have one. You should have a separate split sheet for each song and negotiate the % of ownership with everyone who was involved with creating the track ahead of time.

3) Register with SoundExchange, which collects royalties from digital media like Pandora, internet radio, and satellite ratio.
Distribute your project to all virtual retailers via Tunecore, Distrokid, or CD Baby. When you upload your music to your distributor, it's best to give 3 weeks minimum ahead so they can distribute to stores. This is also the amount of time ahead curators on Spotify and Apple Music need bare minimum to consider for playlists. You'll need your final album art (minimum 3000 x 3000 pixels) and masters (final tracks) for all the songs to upload. Your music needs to sound great on every online music store. So you need to start with a file that's at least 44.1kHz – 16bit WAV—the current industry standard. If your tracks aren't 44.1kHz – 16bit WAV, you won't be able to release them with the big stores. Build in extra time here and work back from that for your planning.

4) Obtain and update all social pages, including Spotify and Apple Music profiles for your artist or band name. Both Spotify and Apple Music have newly launched apps that allow you to gain analytical insights to your audience and listeners, as well as submit a track to Spotify's editorial team. (Note: You can only submit UNRELEASED music to Spotify's editorial team, so do this before it goes live.)

5) Set up a pre-order on iTunes and pre-save on Spotify, and urge your fans to do so ahead of your release date.

6) Create a press list of blogs, influencers, and press outlets you want to share your project with, and send it 3-4 weeks before the release date. Sometimes, it's a good idea to offer the project exclusive (only) to one outlet. When you email the reporters/bloggers, include a press release, an electronic press kit (including images, press release, a brief about the project, and a private streaming link), etc.

7) Create content to promote on your social media, including behind the scenes videos, interviews, music videos, photos, lyric videos, etc.
  PRO-TIP: Upload your album to SoundCloud as a private playlist or use Disco. Many bloggers, journalists, talent buyers, and DJs will ask for a SoundCloud link to hear your music, particularly if you're trying to line up premieres for your songs. Of course you don't want your music to be available to the public until the release date. So upload your album to SoundCloud, set the playlist to private, and share the private link with those music industry contacts ahead of your list. You can even use services like Submithub to do so.

8) Create a comprehensive press page/EPK on your website. If you want people to review your album, play your songs on the radio, or book you for quality shows and festivals, you'll need to have a simple place where they can get all the info: a press page! It's basically an EPK (electronic press kit) that you host on your own website.

9) You own the copyright to your music the minute it's set down in a fixed format (sheet music, scribbled on a napkin, recorded, etc.). It's important to REGISTER that copyright, though, in order to fully protect yourself in the case of infringement. You can do this via the

Library of Congress' online portal. It was fairly painless and didn't take any longer than 30 minutes. Plus, there's an easy way to simultaneously protect your compositions AND sound recordings with a single form.

After your release goes live, you should:

- Create a smart URL which pivots from all retailers (so you can use one, uniformed link for all of your promo). There's a lot of free websites that allow you to do that.
- Book an album release show/tour.
- Pitch your project to a wide list of blogs & outlets.
- Go guerrilla warfare on them and pitch your Spotify links to as many genre-appropriate blogs at these free sites like IndieMono, Daily Playlists, and Soundplate.
- Consider doing digital advertising on Facebook, Instagram, and Spotify. 2 weeks is the average time that it takes Spotify to "quickly surface new, popular songs", as compared with three (3) entire months for the usual FM radio stations.
- Create metadata MP3s of your tracks to pitch to music directors & radio hosts. When pitching these folks, you should have a Dropbox or Google Drive folder with the most HQ (and fully labeled) MP3s of your songs so that if the DJ likes them, they can easily download and add them to their queues. Do not ever send an attachment of an MP3 to any blogger or DJ. It will go to spam and will not be heard.