

WRITING MEDIA MUSIC AS A BUSINESS:

By David Stoll

Writing and producing music for the media is a creative adventure, but it is also a business. If you are paid for your work, you will be able to afford to spend time both working on the music and working on getting the jobs. A few simple guidelines will help you run the business efficiently, and I recommend that you resolve to be systematic right from the start: it can be very difficult to sort things out later. These notes are being kept deliberately simple in order to cover a large topic briefly, and I recommend that you look further into those aspects which are relevant to you.

OFF-THE-PEG OR MADE-TO-MEASURE – Media music, when written with the purpose of sync to a programme, film or game, comes in two types. You may be commissioned (or be pitching for) a specific brief, or you may be providing a set of pieces which can later be sold for use as background music.

In the first case, you will need to negotiate with the producers as to what they require and how you will be paid for the work. In this case, they are the boss and your artistic talents must be used to giving them what they want. It is important to be clear from the start if the music is to be specific to the cut film, or if the film will be fine edited to the music. You are likely to have to provide a few ideas for them to choose from. Try to consider how long it will take you to do the job and whether you will need to spend any money on research, sample libraries or anything else when agreeing a fee. You also need to know who will pay for the recordings. Retain your copyright if at all possible, or work with a publisher.

In the second case (library music), you are unlikely to be paid for composing, or given studio and musician time. You will be asked to provide a number of tracks in a specified format which the library will promote so that you may be paid from royalties. Most often, you will be asked for various versions of the tracks at different durations and with different mix possibilities. You usually need your own studio equipment. Try to come up with some unusual new ideas when approaching a new library, but remember that they will want the music to remain very much in the background and not be too obtrusive – this is not just a matter of volume but also style.

OWNERSHIP – Until you sign it away, ownership of the music and of the recording belongs to you; that is, unless someone else has paid you to do it (not just asked you), in which case you should come to an agreement first. You do not need to do anything to 'copyright' a track. That is automatic as soon as you write it down or record it. But you may want to keep some proof of when you came up with it. Remember that any musicians whom you employ also have rights in a recording.

ROYALTIES – If music is performed or recorded by other musicians, or released as a track or copied onto a film, the owner (the 'author') is due a payment. This payment can range from a fraction of a penny for a large number of streamings, to a large sum of money for the theme tune for a television series.

The money will come to you in different ways. If the music is published, the publisher will pay you a share for various types of usage. But all performance royalties will come directly to you, even if the music is published. So, at the very least, you should investigate joining the Performing Right Society which will help protect your work and collect your earnings.

Advances on publisher royalties are still occasionally made, but this is less usual, especially for composers who are new to the business.

CONTRACTS – If you are working with or through a publisher, record company, agent or manager, you should have a contract which specifies their roles and responsibilities and what they will be receiving from your work. You are not a lawyer, so it is quite acceptable to ask for the details to be explained to you carefully. Only sign if you are sure that you are happy and trust the other party.

WRITING TOGETHER – If you have a writing partner, both of you need to agree all the details of how your music is to be used and paid for – and credited. It is worth having a written agreement between you before you start to try and sell anything.

GETTING THE GIG – Push at open doors. You will not be asked to score a Hollywood film as your first commission. Contact companies which regularly feature the sort of music which you write. Speak to friends who make films or direct plays. Produce a showreel of short, unusual and attractive musical ideas; don't show that you can write like everyone else, but that you have your own voice.

It is worth noting that, nowadays, any demo you might be asked for needs to be of nearly the same recorded quality as the final master. People no longer accept a 'piano version', let alone a written score.

KEEPING ACCOUNTS – Make a note of everything you spend in order to do a job, and keep the receipts. (Don't forget studio expenses like equipment and electricity, and away expenses like travel.) These expenses will be deducted from your earnings when the tax you have to pay is calculated. Make a note of everything you earn and keep careful records. If things go well, you will need to make a tax return and possibly even a VAT return.

REMEMBER – Make back-up copies regularly, including of all the work files. You may be asked to provide different versions later.

Keep an up-to-date showreel of short examples of your best work.
Have a written agreement with everyone connected with the project.

*You are producing music because that is what you **want** to do with your time.
But if you are careful to be paid for it, then it is also what you will **be able** to do with your time.*