

YOUR MUSIC IS WORTH MONEY. DO YOU KNOW WHO ACTUALLY OWNS IT?

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Ifeoluwa is an associate at Zaeda Oracle Solicitors who spends most of her time explaining contracts to musicians so they actually understand them. This is that, in writing.

Building a practice at the intersection of law and culture — and why Africa's fastest-growing economic sector still has no clear pathway into it.

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COPYRIGHT, DEMYSTIFIED

Copyright is the legal right that lets you control how your creative work is used. If you own the copyright in a song, you and only you decide who can copy it, perform it, broadcast it, put it online, remix it, or let someone else do any of these things. That word “exclusive” is the whole point of copyright — it’s yours to control.

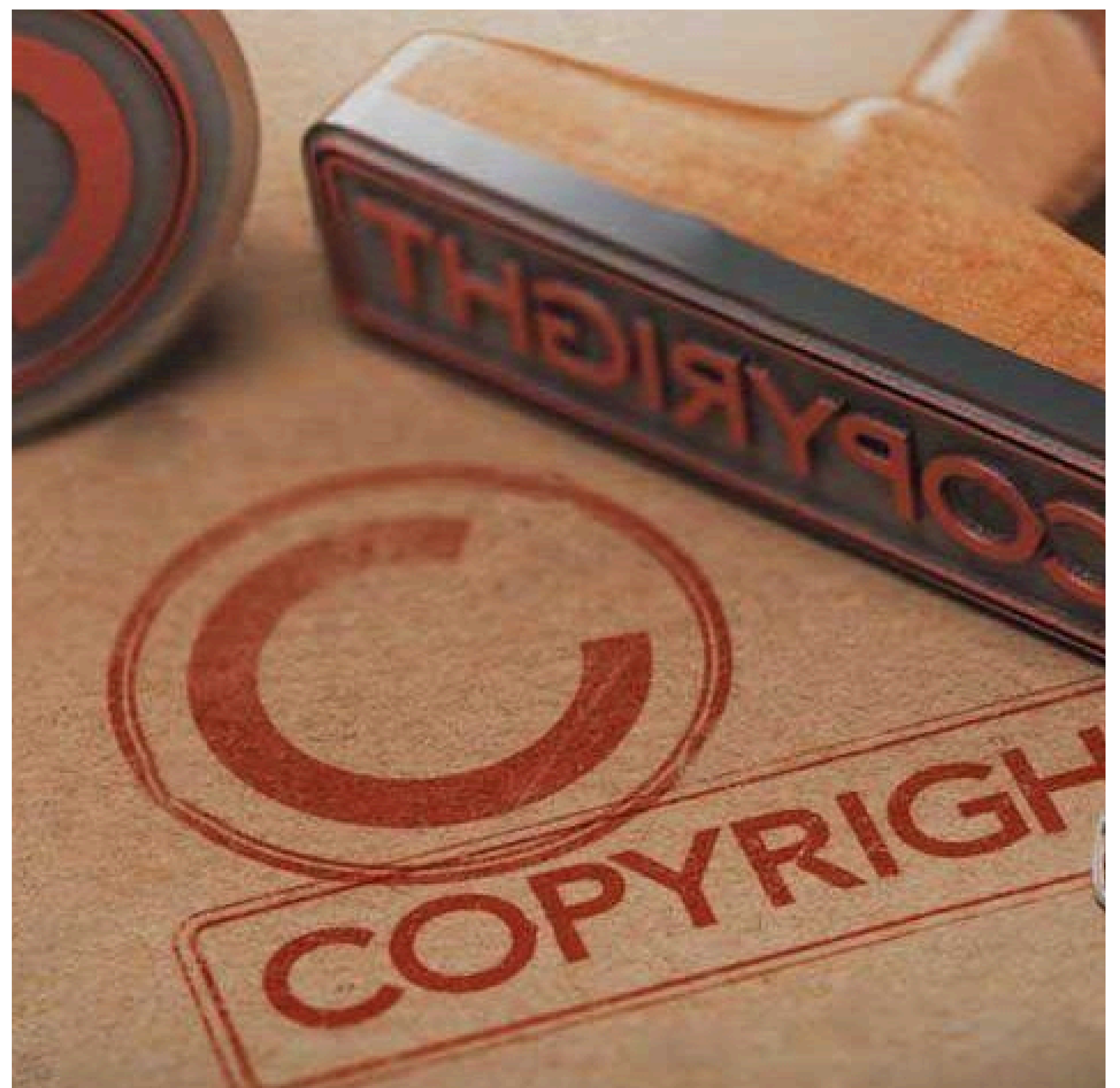
Copyright actually bundles together two different kinds of rights, and the difference matters.

THE RIGHTS THAT PAY YOU

These are called economic rights, and they’re exactly what they sound like — the rights that generate money. They cover reproducing your work, performing it publicly, broadcasting it, adapting it (remixes, samples, covers), and distributing it. Every time a label, a streaming platform, or a TV station pays to use your music, they’re paying for one of these rights.

THE RIGHTS THAT PROTECT YOUR NAME

These are your moral rights, and they’re personal to you in a way money isn’t. They include the right to be credited as the creator of your work, and the right to object if someone changes your work in a way that damages your reputation or twists your artistic intent. Here’s the part most people don’t know: even if you sell every economic right you have, your moral rights generally stay with you. You can give away the money. You can’t give away your name on the work.





THE SONG AND THE SOUND: TWO COPYRIGHTS HIDING IN ONE TRACK

This is the single most important idea in this entire article, and it's the one that trips up the most artists. Every song that has ever existed carries not one copyright, but two — completely separate, independently owned, independently licensed, independently sold.

COPYRIGHT #1: THE COMPOSITION

The composition is the song itself — the abstract creative idea. The lyrics, the melody, the chord progression, the distinctive arrangement. It exists the moment you create it, even before you record a single note. Write the lyrics in your notes app and hum the melody to yourself in the shower — the composition already exists and is already protected. The moment you write it down or record it's fixed, and fixed is all copyright needs.

The composition is owned by whoever wrote it — the composers and lyricists who actually created it.



COPYRIGHT #2: THE MASTER

The master recording (or simply “the master”) is a completely different copyright. It protects the specific recorded version — every drum hit, every vocal take, every reverb tail, the exact way that one ad-lib sits in the mix. It's the copyright in the audio file itself, not the idea behind it.

Here's what makes this powerful to understand: the same composition can have hundreds of different masters. Every time a different artist covers a song, they create a brand new master — a new copyright, owned separately, even though the underlying composition stays the same.

REMEMBER THIS ONE LINE

The composition belongs to whoever wrote it. The master belongs to whoever paid for the recording. Those are very often two different people.

HOW YOU GET COPYRIGHT WITHOUT EVEN TRYING

IT HAPPENS AUTOMATICALLY — NO PAPERWORK REQUIRED

Here's something genuinely freeing: in Nigeria, Zambia, and most of the world, copyright exists the moment you create and fix an original work. No registration. No fee. No form. Create it, fix it, and it's protected.

In Nigeria, the Copyright Act 2022 governs this. A musical work is protected for the life of the author plus 70 years. A sound recording is protected for 50 years from first publication. In Zambia, the Copyright and Performance Rights Act 1994 follows the same Berne Convention principle — automatic protection on creation. A musical work is protected for life plus 50 years, and a sound recording for 50 years from the date it was fixed.

IF IT'S AUTOMATIC, WHY REGISTER ANYWAY?

Because automatic protection and practical protection are two different things. Three reasons registration is still worth doing:

- 1. Evidence.** Disputes over who made what and when happen constantly. Registration gives you official, dated proof. Without it, you're relying on WhatsApp messages and studio receipts to make your case.
- 2. Enforcement.** In many places, registration is required — or at least strongly expected — before you can sue for infringement. Even where it's optional, a registration certificate carries real weight in court.
- 3. Getting paid.** Collecting societies and digital distributors often need your work registered in their systems before they can collect and pay out royalties on it. Your music could already be earning money you simply can't access yet.



WHO ACTUALLY OWNS THE MUSIC?

The starting rule is simple: whoever creates a work owns it first. But “creates” needs unpacking. A producer who builds a beat has created something original. A session musician who improvises a guitar line has too. A songwriter who writes the hook has too. Whether each of them ends up holding copyright depends on exactly what they contributed and what was agreed (or not agreed) between everyone in the room.

COMPANIES CAN OWN MUSIC TOO

Copyright isn't only held by people. Labels, publishers, and production companies regularly own copyright in music — either because an artist signed it over to them (assignment), or because the company commissioned the work in the first place (work-for-hire).

WHEN MORE THAN ONE PERSON OWNS THE WORK

When two or more people genuinely collaborate, intending to merge their contributions into one inseparable work, they become joint owners. Joint ownership comes with real legal consequences: in many places, each joint owner can exploit the work independently, but must account to the others for their share of whatever it earns.

SPLITTING THE PEN: WHO OWNS THE COMPOSITION

WHEN YOU WROTE IT ALONE

If every word, every melody, and every idea is yours — you're the sole author and sole owner.

Simplest scenario there is. No one to split publishing with, no one else's permission needed for how the song gets used.

WHEN YOU WROTE IT TOGETHER

Most songs aren't written alone. A songwriter brings the lyrics, a producer shapes the melody, a featured artist drops a hook — and now everyone who added original creative material is a co-author, sharing the composition copyright.

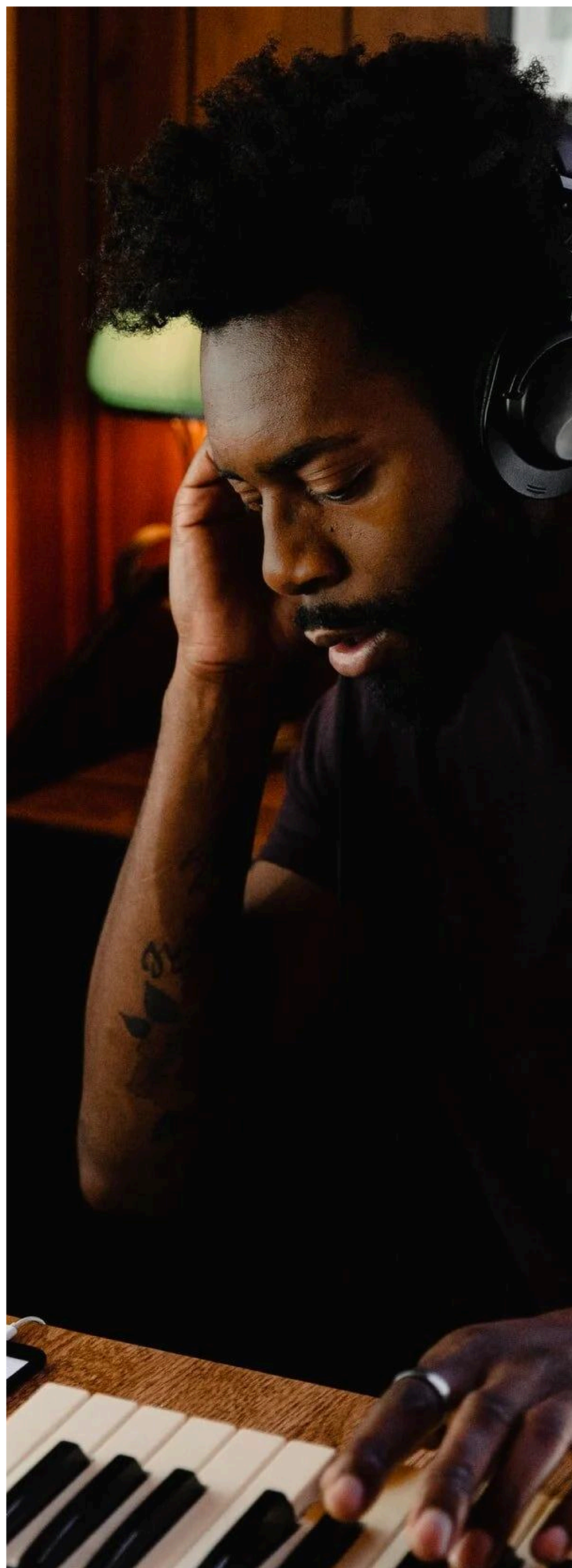
The legal default in most places is an equal split — three writers, one-third each. But real creative collaboration is rarely that tidy. Does the person who suggested one lyric deserve the same share as the person who wrote the entire melody? Only the people in the room can answer that — and the answer needs to be written down before the song drops, not argued about after it's a hit.

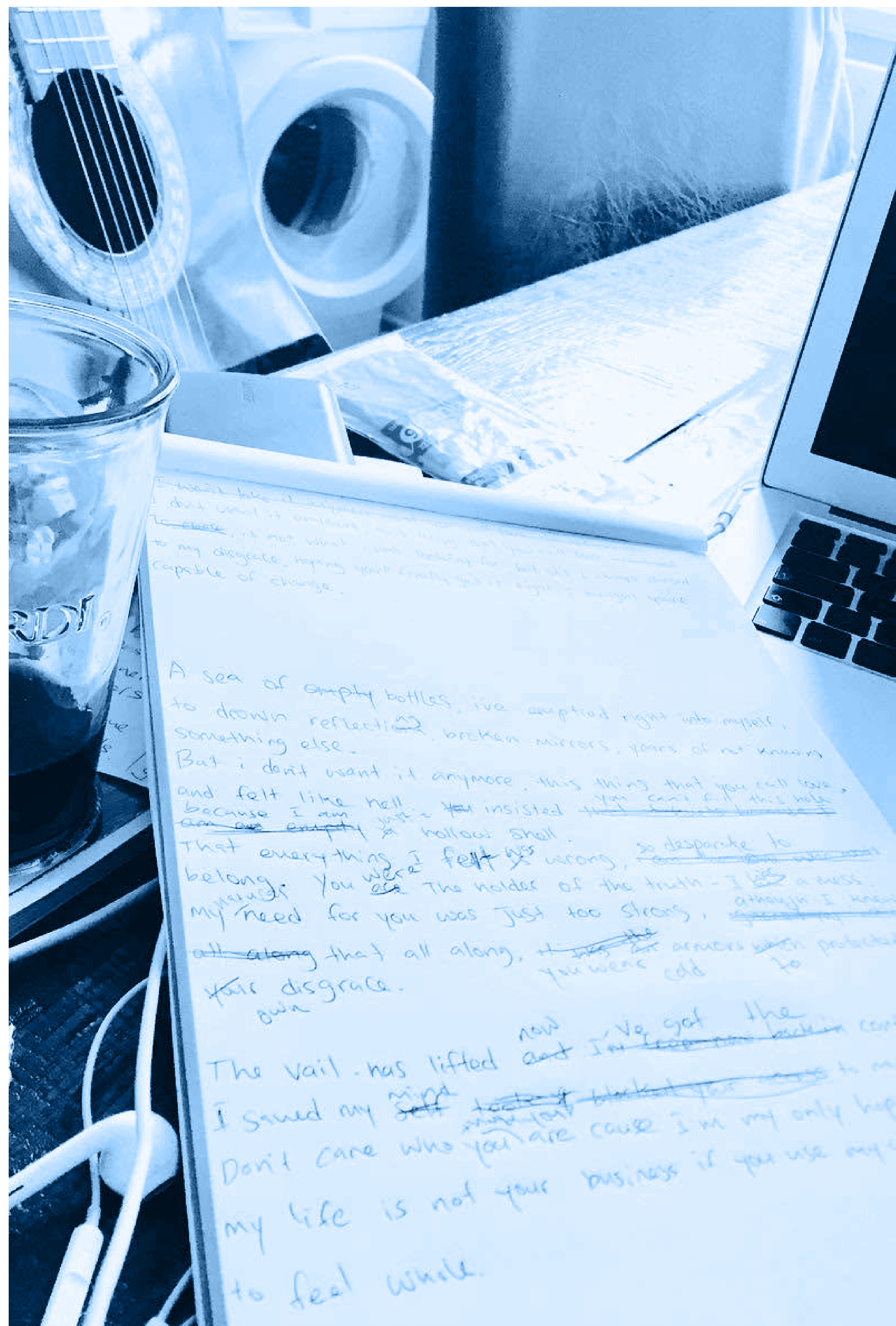
THE ONE-PAGE DOCUMENT THAT SAVES FRIENDSHIPS

A split sheet is exactly what it sounds like: a simple document recording who wrote what percentage of a song, signed by every writer before release. It doesn't need to be complicated — one page is enough — but it might be the single most valuable piece of paper in a musician's career.

A good split sheet records: every writer's name, their CMO and IPI numbers, their publishing affiliation if they have one, their percentage share of the lyrics and the melody (these can differ), the date, and the song title. Everyone signs. Everyone keeps a copy.

Without a split sheet, ownership disputes are almost impossible to resolve cleanly. Memories differ. Friendships end. What felt like a casual studio session becomes a legal headache three years later when the song is actually making money.





WHO'S COLLECTING YOUR MONEY?

Collective management organisations, or CMOs, exist to collect royalties on your behalf when your music is played publicly — radio, streaming, live venues, TV. You can't realistically track every play of your song yourself. CMOs do it at scale, so you don't have to.

In Nigeria, MCSN (Musical Copyright Society Nigeria) is currently the CMO approved by the Nigerian Copyright Commission to license and collect on behalf of musical rights holders. In Zambia, that role is held by ZAMCOPS, though its enforcement capacity has historically lagged behind some of the continent's larger music markets. Elsewhere on the continent: SAMRO in South Africa, MCSK in Kenya, and GHAMRO in Ghana all perform the same function for their respective territories.

If you're not registered with the CMO in your country, you may be leaving money on the table that's already yours.

THE CODES BEHIND YOUR ROYALTIES

Two codes matter more than most artists realise. The ISRC (International Standard Recording Code) identifies your specific recording across every digital platform — every track you release should have one. The ISWC (International Standard Musical Work Code) identifies the underlying composition, and it's how publishers and CMOs match a recording back to the song so royalties land in the right hands.

THE PAPERWORK THAT DECIDES IF YOU GET PAID

Metadata is the information attached to your music file — title, artist, composer credits, ISRC, album, release year, publishing details. It sounds boring. It is the single biggest reason artists go unpaid. A song with a missing composer credit won't generate performance royalties for the right person. A recording with no ISRC code might not get tracked properly at all. Getting your metadata right is not an afterthought — it's how the money finds you.



WHO OWNS THE MASTER?

THE INDEPENDENT ROUTE

If you fund your own recording — studio time, producer, mixing, mastering, all of it — and you haven't signed anything saying otherwise, you own the master. This is the independent artist model.

It gives you the most control, and if the song takes off, the most long-term financial upside.

THE LABEL ROUTE

The traditional deal works differently: the label pays for the recording, which means the label owns the master. They license it to distributors, collect the streaming revenue, and pay you a royalty — usually a percentage of revenue after they've recouped what they spent on you.

SOMEONE STOLE YOUR SONG. NOW WHAT?

Infringement happens when someone reproduces, distributes, performs, broadcasts, adapts, or uploads your work without your permission and without a legal excuse to do so. When it happens, the law gives you real options.

In Nigeria, the Copyright Act 2022 provides both civil and criminal remedies. Across most jurisdictions, your options typically include:

- **Takedown notices** — most platforms let you flag and remove infringing content quickly through their own copyright policy, no court required
- **Damages** — suing for the financial harm the infringement caused you, with courts sometimes awarding more where the infringement was deliberate
- **Injunctions** — a court order forcing the infringer to stop, particularly useful when the infringing use is still ongoing
- **Account of profits** — instead of damages, claiming the profits the infringer actually made off your work
- **Settlement** — many disputes end with a negotiated payment rather than a courtroom



YOUR 6-STEP SHIELD: A COPYRIGHT PROTECTION PLAN

- **Fix your work** in a recorded or written form. Copyright protects what's actually expressed — not ideas floating in your head.
- **Consider voluntary registration** with your national IP office, even though it isn't required.
- **Sign a split sheet and a clear agreement** for every collaborative project — before release, not after.
- **Keep records as you create:** dated project files, session notes, co-writer agreements.
- **Register with your CMO** — MCSN if you're in Nigeria, ZAMCOPS if you're in Zambia, or the equivalent body in your country.
- **If someone uses your work** without permission, document everything immediately and act — don't sit on it.

THE PAPERWORK THAT DECIDES IF YOU GET PAID

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