

How to Detect (And Avoid) Music Scams

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If you're an artist, and you've spent at least five minutes looking for ways to advance your career, chances are you have already encountered a wide variety of music services displayed to you through ads. They're highly prevalent on any website related to music, on Google searches, in Gmail (if any of your emails are music-related), on YouTube, and in physical sources like print magazines or classified ads.

Isn't it **great** that in an industry that is seeing the entry of tens of thousands of new musicians every year, there are *so many* nice businesses out there looking to help them?

YEAH, RIGHT!

The truth is, there are plenty of **sleazy individuals** and business entities that have been observing the decline of the traditional recording industry. They have noticed all the new artists cropping up, looking for fame and fortune. They smile when they see the common portrayal of artists on MTV and VH1 as rich, living extravagant and glamorous lifestyles, getting huge "record deals", and so on - even though that image is **extremely distorted**. All of this has created a prime market for services and products targeted towards musicians who want to make it big, and unfortunately for us, **the majority of these are scams**.

So, what are you supposed to do? Ignore any seemingly-pleasant emails from important-sounding people that are "interested in your music"? Definitely not. While illegitimate organizations looking to take advantage of artists are prevalent, there are still honest people in the business, and some of them really might be interested in you, personally. Since that's the case, if you're interested in maximizing your opportunities and minimizing the time and money spent on potentially useless services, **it's important to learn how to detect and avoid scams**.

As you read all of the points below, do keep in mind that just because some factors may warrant more caution, you should always **evaluate opportunities thoroughly**. An offer might have one or two red flags, but in actuality is completely earnest and worthwhile. Be smart, think like a businessperson, and above all, be objective. The dream of a killer deal can cloud your judgment, as can senseless paranoia of anyone commenting on your music. Try to **set aside your personal feelings**, and consider all of the factors below.

DEAR [ARTIST]...

If you are contacted personally by someone with regards to your music, the first thing you need to pay attention to is how the email is written. This can be applied to snail mail or even phone calls, as well. Don't be swayed just because the solicitor knows your name or your MySpace. **Anyone can find that info.** Take note of the general style of their "pitch". Are they only speaking about your music in general terms? Are they not referencing specific songs, or if they are, are they being so vague that they could really be describing any song? These should all send up red flags. **Real professionals** that like your music enough to contact you about it should be able to say more than "your music is great."

If you poke around online, you may even find other artists or musicians receiving the same letter(s) you did. This is commonplace, and another sign that whoever is contacting you just wants your money, and doesn't care about your music. If you suspect something is up, be cold and ruthless when you email or call up the company. Demand to be told all the facts. Grill the "talent scout" on why YOUR music was picked. Honest businesses can stand up to the pressure because they have **nothing to hide** - scam companies will falter, fumble, become overly defensive, and give wishy-washy answers.

REFERENCES?

Most legitimate music services have plenty of satisfied clients and customers. It should NOT be hard to find real people who have benefited from a service you are looking into. Don't just take the word of a company at face value if something seems fishy. Look up and **personally contact** any artists who are listed in a testimonials section to ask what the full story is. Ask the company for specific references. Don't be surprised the "happy customers" don't respond - they might not even be real - or if the company refuses to give you references. Look at organizations such as [CD Baby](#), [Taxi](#), or Ariel Publicity - there is no shortage of people shouting praise for these companies, because they are 100% legit!

If someone tells you that they don't have references or testimonials because their business is "new" ... **keep walking.** Do you really want to invest your time, money, and emotional energy in a company that is untested and unproven, especially considering how volatile this industry is?

SHOW (THEM) THE MONEY

"We'd love to represent you and place your music in five films right now! Just pay us \$300 and we'll get right on that." Yes, a similar pitch really is used by lots of sleazy businesses. You should always ask "how much does this cost?" anytime someone pitches something to you, or asks for your music. Be VERY wary of anyone promising or **guaranteeing your success, in exchange for money.** The music industry is not an industry of "guarantees", and if any organization is opening up its services to the general public, they can't possibly guarantee success for everyone... but they will tell people that they can.

If someone is looking for money in order to put your music on a compilation, or place your music in a film, hang up the phone or delete the email. You should never have to PAY money for someone to **use** your music. They might try to obfuscate the facts by talking about royalties, or that you're just "covering production costs"... **and it's all total bull!** Real publishers and agents that can actually do something profitable with your music will not need you to pay anything. They will be getting their cut from the success of the music.

Taxi is an example of a legitimate company in a sea of competitors that are scams. With Taxi, you pay a yearly fee for access to opportunities that you very likely would not have access to anywhere else. Your music is then thoroughly screened when it is submitted - **only the highest caliber material** is passed along ('forwarded'). The screeners, who are all industry professionals, then give you feedback on your track, something that is very useful if you have been rejected!

Taxi never promises success. Even their ads emphasize that your music must be high-quality, and that you must be a serious musician in order for your money to be well-spent. They offer a money-back guarantee, too.

FILTERS & EXCLUSIVITY

Derek Sivers of CD Baby has [written on this topic](#) before, but it is worth repeating. Exclusivity is a very good thing. Let's look at publishers, for example. If a label evaluates 1000 demos in a year, and only selects 5 artists to be added to their roster, then the label will be inclined to spend their resources in promoting and cultivating those artists. There is a vested interest in those artists on the part of the label. The artists' success means the label's success, so the label is going to **work hard** on behalf of anyone they've signed!

On the other end of the spectrum, we have scam labels, publishers, and "music groups". Their strategy is to tell all 1000 people who submitted demos that their music is excellent. All the artists have to do is pay the organization for the privilege of being added! Now, what motivation does the scam organization have to promote all those artists? Sure, they might focus on the same 0.5% of quality musicians that the REAL label did - and that's being highly optimistic - but why would they care about anyone else? **They wouldn't.** The scam is done. The sleazy company already has the money of those 995 musicians.

CONTESTS AND COMPETITIONS

This is a popular category for scams because it's just so appealing. For a low fee, you can enter your music into a contest and win something amazing. Sure, there are honest competitions out there, such as the International Songwriting Competition and John Lennon Songwriting Contest, but there are just as

many (if not more) bunk ones. If you are invited to a contest, or you've heard of one and are interested in submitting, you must find out the following...

- * **How long has the contest been around?** The longer, the better.
- * **Who were the previous winners?** Can they be contacted to verify they received their prize?
See the "References?" section, above.
- * **Exactly how is the contest being judged?** Is it a popular vote, are there judges? Who are the judges? Legit competitions tend to attract and make use of established artists and industry pros, and do not vaguely allude to a "panel of experts" or something similar.
- * **Who is sponsoring the contest?** Real competitions should be backed by prominent music-related organizations and manufacturers. Contact the sponsors and ask them for more info, too!
- * **Do you lose any rights to your music if you submit?** You'd be surprised at some of the legalese in contests even with major TV network names attached! In several cases, I've seen contests where all entrants automatically forfeit all rights to their music - the people running the contest could use the music however they wanted and not owe the artists a dime. Read the terms of any competition very carefully, or you might regret it.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

If you're writing original music, you want to make sure that it is protected and reduce the chance that someone will steal it and call it their own. By default, as soon as you complete a new, unique creative work, it is **copyrighted** and protected by the government, but if someone were to infringe on your work you would be unable to bring suit against them unless the work were actually registered with the government.

Luckily, it's not too complicated to do this. At the U.S. Copyright Office website, you can find the forms you need to register copyrights for songs and sound recordings with the federal government. There's a fee involved, but with the right form you can register multiple works at once for no extra cost. Another step you can take is becoming a member of a performing rights organization like [ASCAP](#) or [BMI](#). These entities collect royalties on behalf of their members (composers, writers, publishers) and generally look out for them in a number of ways.

By becoming a member of a PRO and registering your works with them (note that this is not the same as copyright registration) you are **further protecting** your music.