

Welcome to the Rock Dog Music Newsletter

If you're reading this, you've been part of the ISSA Summit journey, the Rick Spins Radio Show community, or you've found us through the indie music grapevine. However you got here—welcome!

You'll notice a new name on the masthead. The banner has changed, but the mission hasn't. Jill and I are still here, still passionate, and still committed to helping indie artists navigate this wild industry.

And this month, we finally get to tell you what we've been working on.

Scroll to the end of this newsletter for the full announcement. We think you're going to like what you see.

Now, let's talk about something a lot of you have been struggling with lately…

Booking Venues – 101

"Why aren't venues getting back to me?"

I've seen it all over social media. Bands complaining they're being ghosted. Emails going unanswered. Calls not returned. And yet, in the same breath, I see posts of those same musicians sitting in a park or in their homes, laptop open, scrolling through Facebook, waiting for the phone to ring.

Here's the hard truth: **the phone isn't going to ring if you're not out there knocking on doors.**

The economy is tough. Venues are being cautious. Budgets are tight. But that doesn't mean opportunities don't exist—it means you have to work *harder* and *smarter* to find them.

Over the coming months, we're going to break down the art and science of booking gigs into a series of detailed articles. But for today, I want to give you the big picture—a ranked list of strategies from least effective to most effective.



What Doesn't Work (Or Doesn't Work Well)

- **Cold emails with no follow-up.** Easy to ignore. Easy to delete.
- **Posting on social media hoping venues find you.** Venues are busy. They're not scrolling looking for you.
- **Having non-regular band friends vouch for you.** If they don't have a relationship with the venue, their word means little.
- **Sending a generic postcard or mailer.** It gets thrown away.

What Works Better

- **Do your homework.** Check out venue flyers. Who's played there? What's their vibe? Are you a good fit? Don't book a gig just to book a gig—if you're a country dance cover band playing an outlaw country venue, it won't end well.
- **Know your competition.** What do they charge? Where do they play? And here's the kicker—make them your *friends*. The indie music community is stronger when we lift each other up. Referrals from fellow musicians are gold.
- **Watch your social media (not just your band page, but your personal pages as well).** Venues *will* check your pages. Controversial content, badmouthing past venues, or unprofessional behavior is a red flag. Don't burn bridges.

What Works Even Better

- **Consistent email follow-up.** Break the ice. Be persistent but not spammy. Become a familiar name.
- **Handwritten notes.** On a pre-made card, in an envelope, with a QR code to your EPK. Postcards get tossed. Handwritten envelopes get opened.
- **Phone calls.** It's harder to say no to a human voice than to delete an email. Pick up the phone.

What Works Best

- **Having regulars at the venue ask when you're coming back.** If your fans are their customers, venue owners listen.
- **Walking in and meeting the owner or manager face-to-face.** This is the single most effective thing you can do. You're real. You're memorable. You're hard to ghost. Stop driving past that venue saying "we should play there" and *walk in*.
- **Asking for the rebook immediately after a great show.** If you packed the place and they made money, ask for a date before you leave the building.

One More Thing

Running a band is a business. Treat it like one.

Think about the businesses you support. Why do you go back? What did they do to earn your loyalty? Apply that same logic to your music career.

Show up. Be professional. Be persistent. Be someone they *want* to work with.

And stop waiting for the phone to ring.

Coming Next Month

This is just the tip of the iceberg. In future issues, we'll dive deep into each of these strategies—how to craft the perfect EPK, what to say when you walk into a venue, how to follow up without being annoying, and much more.

We're just getting started.

Rock Dog Music Foundation Website Is Now Live!



We are excited to announce that the **Rock Dog Music Foundation website is officially live!** Our new online home brings together everything we've been building — programs, resources, radio, performance opportunities, and nonprofit education for independent musicians.

You can now explore:

- The **Artist Resource Hub**
- The **Rock Dog Music Summit**
- **Rock Dog Radio**
- **Performance Platforms**
- Our **Monthly Artist Newsletter**
- Leadership, mission, and nonprofit information
- And much more

Visit the website here:

www.rockdogartists.org

This is just Phase 1 — many features are already in development and marked "Coming Soon." We're building this platform to grow with our artists and our community.

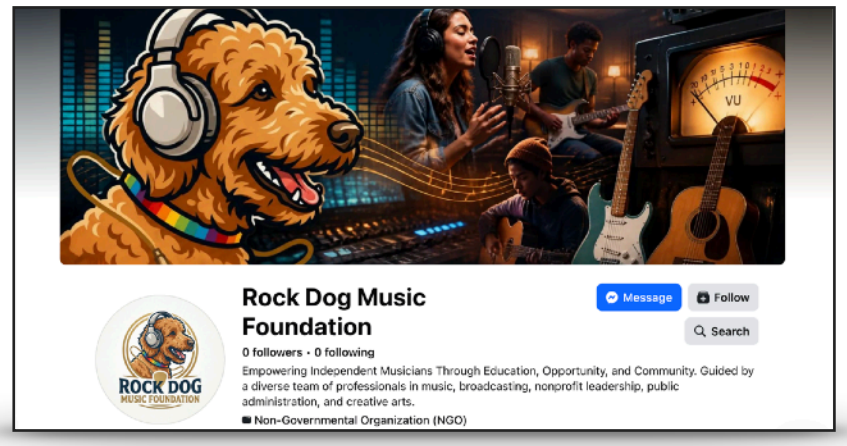
Follow Rock Dog on Facebook

We've also launched our official Facebook page where we'll share updates, opportunities, artist features, radio announcements, and Summit news.

Follow us here:

https://www.facebook.com/RockDogMusic

Be sure to like and follow so you don't miss anything!



Thank You for Being Part of the Rock Dog Community

Your support helps us empower independent musicians through education, opportunity, and community. We're just getting started — and we're excited to grow this foundation with you.



The FYC Trap: Be Careful Who You Send Your Grammy Campaign To

I received two "For Your Consideration" (FYC) emails this week. One was from a friend—a Recording Academy member and producer—promoting an album he engineered. The other was from someone I don't know at all, promoting a New Age composer I'd never heard of.

Here's the thing: **I'm not a Recording Academy member.** I'm not a voting member. I'm not affiliated with the Academy in any way beyond being a musician. So why am I on these mailing lists?

Because FYC campaigns have become a cottage industry of mass email blasts—and a lot of them are breaking the rules.

What the Rules Actually Say

The Recording Academy has strict guidelines about FYC communications. They're not just suggestions—violating them can get an artist's submission disqualified and a member's membership suspended or terminated.

Here are the key rules you need to know:

1. The Academy does not release member contact information.

This is stated plainly in their guidelines: "The Recording Academy does not release the contact information of its members, therefore you should exercise caution if doing business with any vendor claiming that the vendor has accurate contact lists of Academy members."

If someone is selling you a "Grammy voter mailing list," they're either lying or they've obtained that information improperly. Either way, you don't want to be involved.

2. FYC communications must include an opt-out option.

Any FYC email, mailing, or communication is prohibited unless it includes an opt-out option. If you're receiving FYC emails with no way to unsubscribe, that's a violation.

3. FYC communications cannot include personal pleas.

The rules explicitly prohibit "personal signatures, personal regards or personal pleas to listen to the eligible recordings." So that heartfelt note asking you to "please consider my album" is actually against the rules.

4. FYC communications cannot include chart numbers, streams, or sales figures.

This was added in 2021. The Academy wants voters to focus on artistic merit, not commercial success.

5. FYC events cannot include gifts, meals, or alcohol.

Anything that could be inferred as "a value in exchange for vote consideration" is prohibited.

The Mass Email Problem

Here's where it gets tricky for independent artists.

A well-intentioned artist—or their publicist—might think, "I'll just buy a list of Grammy voters and send them my music. That's how this works, right?"

Wrong. And dangerous.

If you're sending FYC materials to people who aren't Recording Academy members, you're wasting your money and potentially violating the Academy's rules. If you're buying a list that claims to be Grammy voters, you're almost certainly being scammed—because the Academy doesn't sell or release that information.

The emails I received are a perfect illustration. The first one was from a friend who is a member, which is legitimate. The second was from a stranger promoting an artist I've never heard of—and that's almost certainly a mass mailing to a purchased or scraped list.

What You Should Do Instead

If you're an independent artist hoping for Grammy consideration, here's how to approach it ethically and effectively:

1. Only send FYC materials to actual members you know.

The rules restrict members to "promoting only their own recordings." There's no lobbying on behalf of other members. So if you're sending on behalf of someone else, that's a violation.

2. Work with a legitimate publicist who understands the rules.

A good publicist will know the difference between legitimate FYC outreach and spam. They'll have relationships with actual voters—not a scraped email list.

3. Use the Academy's free listing system.

During the first-round voting period, the Academy provides a free listing system for eligible recordings. This is the sanctioned way to get your music in front of voters.

4. Never buy a "Grammy voter list."

If someone offers to sell you access to Academy members, walk away. You're either being scammed, or you're participating in something that could get you disqualified.

5. If you receive FYC emails and you're not a member, report them.

The Academy takes these violations seriously. If you're getting mass FYC emails and you're not a voting member, forward them to the Academy. You're helping protect the integrity of the process.

The Bottom Line

FYC campaigns are a legitimate part of the Grammy process—but they have rules for a reason. The Academy wants voters to make decisions based on artistic merit, not marketing budgets or mailing lists.

If you're an independent artist dreaming of a Grammy nomination, don't fall for the shortcut. Build real relationships. Work with people who know the rules. And if someone offers to sell you a list of Grammy voters, remember: **the Academy doesn't release that information, and anyone who claims to have it is not someone you want to do business with.**

Every month we receive questions about various subject from fellow artists. We have decided to share these questions and our answers as you might be asking the same questions!



The Advice Trap: How to Tell If Someone Is Helping You or Selling You

Two things landed in my inbox this week that I want to talk about together, because they're really the same story wearing different outfits.

The first was a question from an artist who was told by a PR person to pull their music from Spotify and move everything to Subvert.

The second was a lengthy email from a *"Record Company"* (music marketer) explaining why playlist placements, blog features, and radio play are a waste of money—and why you should focus on "guerrilla marketing" instead. (Conveniently, he also had a free 90-minute workshop to sell you on how to do that.)

On the surface, these two pieces of advice seem completely unrelated. One says leave streaming. The other says streaming promotion is a waste. But dig a little deeper and you'll find the same pattern: **someone with something to sell is telling you that everyone else is wrong.**

Let's break both of them down.

The Spotify Question

Should you pull your music from Spotify and move it to Subvert?

The short answer is no—and also, Subvert is worth exploring.

Subvert is a cooperative-owned music marketplace that launched publicly in May 2026. It's not a streaming service—it's a direct-to-fan marketplace, similar to Bandcamp but with a co-op structure that gives artists ownership and a voice. Artists and labels keep 100% of their sale proceeds after payment processing fees. It bans AI-generated content. And critically, it has **no exclusivity requirement**—you can sell on Subvert and keep your music on Spotify at the same time.

Spotify, for all its problems, is still where the listeners are. As of 2026, artists building primarily on Spotify capture 60–75% of their total streaming revenue from the platform. Leaving it entirely means walking away from the biggest source of streaming income most indie artists have.

The PR person who told your reader to pull their music wasn't necessarily wrong about Spotify's issues—the platform has faced lawsuits over its royalty thresholds and stream-filtering policies. But "leave Spotify" is a drastic solution that only makes sense if you have a massive, loyal fanbase that will follow you elsewhere. Most artists don't.

The better move: Keep Spotify as your discovery layer. Add Subvert as your direct-to-fan layer. Use Bandcamp if you already have an audience there. Diversify.

The Playlist Question

Now let's talk about the Record company email.

His core argument is actually correct. Building a sustainable career requires re-engaging your audience over and over. Research supports this—practitioners estimate it takes six to twelve touchpoints before someone commits to a deeper relationship with an artist. And he's right that major labels win through brute-force repetition, not through a handful of playlist placements. The average indie artist who lands a few playlists and a blog feature or two isn't creating the blanket exposure needed to turn a casual listener into a superfan.

He's also right that playlist pitching services are often predatory. Platforms like Amuse have warned that guaranteed streams and paid playlist-placement services may rely on illegitimate practices that can lead to withheld royalties or catalogue removal. Some services charge artists hundreds of dollars without showing exactly which playlists they're pitching to, and others quietly rely on bot-driven traffic.

But here's the thing: **he's selling you something too.**

The entire email is structured to make you feel like everyone else is lying to you—and that he's the only one telling the truth. That's a classic marketing playbook. The "free workshop" is a lead magnet. The "don't trust other marketers" framing is designed to make you trust him instead. He's not exempt from the skepticism he's asking you to apply to others.

How to Evaluate Advice (From Anyone)

Here's the framework I'd suggest for evaluating any advice you receive as an independent artist:

1. Ask what they're selling. This doesn't make their advice wrong—but it does mean you should look at it through that lens. The record company guy sells guerrilla marketing courses. The PR person who said "leave Spotify" may have been positioning Subvert as the alternative she could help you navigate. Everyone has an angle. That's not inherently bad, but you should know what it is.

2. Look for evidence beyond anecdotes. "I've seen this work" is not the same as "this is how it works for most artists." Ask for data, case studies, or at least a clear explanation of why their approach would work for someone in your specific situation.

3. Be wary of all-or-nothing advice. "Leave Spotify." "Never pay for playlists." "Only do guerrilla marketing." The music industry doesn't work in absolutes. The artists who thrive are the ones who use multiple tools—streaming for reach, marketplaces for revenue, social media for connection, live shows for community—and adapt based on what's working.

4. Check the incentives. If someone tells you to abandon a platform while simultaneously promoting a different platform they're affiliated with, that's worth noting. If someone tells you paid promotion doesn't work while selling you a course on unpaid promotion, that's also worth noting.

5. Trust your own data. Your streaming numbers, your email list, your merch sales, your ticket sales—these are the only metrics that matter for your career. No one else's advice should override what your own audience is telling you through their behavior.

The Bottom Line

Neither the record company guy nor the "leave Spotify" PR person is necessarily wrong about the problems they're describing. Playlist pitching *is* often a scam. Spotify *does* have serious issues with how it pays artists. Major label strategies *don't* translate to indie budgets.

But the solution isn't to replace one piece of advice with another. It's to build your own framework for evaluating advice—and to remember that anyone who tells you they have the one true answer is probably selling something.

Keep your music on Spotify for reach. Explore Subvert for direct sales. Focus your marketing budget on re-engaging your existing audience rather than chasing one-time exposure. And when someone tells you that everyone else is wrong except them, ask yourself what they're selling.

Have a question for us? Send it in. We're here to help indie artists navigate this industry—without the misinformation and without the exploitation. Email Todd todd@rockdogartists.org

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YOUR STREAM, YOUR VOICE: THE CLOCK IS TICKING – ONE MONTH TO ELECTION DAY

New to the Rock Dog Newsletter? Here's the short version: For months, we've been tracking a handful of bills in Congress that could fundamentally change how musicians get paid—for radio play, for streaming, and for protection against AI. The American Music Fairness Act (AMFA) would finally force AM/FM radio to pay performers. The Living Wage for Musicians Act (LWMA) would create a penny-per-stream royalty. The NO FAKES Act would protect your voice and likeness from AI deepfakes. And the Protect Working Musicians Act (PWMA) would let independent artists collectively negotiate with streaming platforms. These bills matter. And right now, they're stuck.

Where Things Stand: September 2026

Let's be honest—not much has moved on Capitol Hill since our last update. But there *are* some important developments worth knowing.

American Music Fairness Act (AMFA): The bill is "still alive" in the 119th Congress, but it remains stalled in committee. The good news? The bill includes strong protections for small broadcasters—stations earning under $100,000 annually would pay just $10 per year. But the radio industry's lobbying machine continues to block progress.

Living Wage for Musicians Act (LWMA): Rep. Rashida Tlaib reintroduced the bill on **September 29**, with the United Musicians and Allied Workers (UMAW) union drumming up support. This is the "second push" we told you about—a critical moment to show lawmakers this issue isn't going away. The bill would create a new streaming royalty structure designed to pay artists more equitably.

NO FAKES Act: This AI-protection bill passed the Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously back in June, but it still hasn't received a full Senate vote. The clock is running out on this Congress.

Protect Working Musicians Act (PWMA): Introduced in June, this bill remains in the early stages. Rep. Deborah Ross herself acknowledged it's unlikely to pass this year, but she's hopeful it could gain momentum if Democrats take the House in November.

The $300 Million Threat: Remember that European royalty crisis we told you about? It's still unresolved. More than a dozen U.S. music organizations—including the Recording Academy, SoundExchange, and A2IM—are urging the U.S. Trade Representative to fight an EU proposal that would strip nearly **$300 million in annual royalties** from American artists. This is why AMFA matters: if the U.S. doesn't pay foreign performers, Europe won't pay us.

The States and the Courts: Other Fronts

While Congress stalls, other battles are being fought. An independent musician in Connecticut has sued Spotify, arguing that its 1,000-stream threshold (which denies

royalties to tracks below that mark) is an "unfair and deceptive practice" under state law. This is significant: if artists can win fair pay through state courts, it puts pressure on Congress to act nationally.

One Month. 435 House Seats. 33 Senate Seats.

In just over a month, every single member of the House of Representatives and 33 senators will face the voters. **This is the most powerful leverage you will have all year.**

Right now, your representatives and senators are back in their districts. They're attending town halls. They're shaking hands. They're asking for your vote. And they are *listening* in a way they won't be in November.

Here's what you can do before Election Day:

1. **Call your Representative and Senators.** Tell them: *"I am a musician and a voter in your district. I want you to push for a vote on the American Music Fairness Act and the Living Wage for Musicians Act before this Congress ends. And I want you to support the NO FAKES Act and the Protect Working Musicians Act."*
2. **Ask the tough questions at town halls.** *"Where do you stand on fair pay for musicians? Will you fight for American artists who are losing $300 million in European royalties?"*
3. **Share this with fellow artists.** Forward this newsletter. Post on social media using **#RockDogFairPay**. Tell your bandmates. Tell your students. The more voices, the harder we are to ignore.
4. **Email me your story.** Did you call? Did you attend a town hall? Did you write an op-ed? I want to hear it. Send your story to **issasongwriters.todd@gmail.com** and I'll feature the best ones in next month's newsletter.

The Bottom Line

The bills we've been tracking are stalled—but they're not dead. The reintroduction of the LWMA this week proves that the fight is still alive. And with Election Day just one month away, we have a rare window to make fair pay a campaign issue.

Congress may be gridlocked. But you and every musician you know have a vote.

Artist Spotlight: Tom Mobry – A Minnesota Storyteller Who Found His Voice at 66



There's a certain kind of magic that happens when an artist stops waiting for permission and simply steps onto the stage. For Tom Mobry, that moment came at the age of 66—and it changed everything.

Tom is an Americana singer-songwriter born and raised in Minnesota, drawing inspiration from life in the Midwest and blending folk traditions with honest, emotionally driven lyrics. As his friend AJ Scheiber once put it: *"Tom Mobry is what John Prine would have sounded like if he came from Savage, Minnesota."* That's high praise, and Tom has spent the last few years proving it's well-earned.

A Lifelong Love Affair with Song

Tom's musical journey began in 1971 when he first heard John Prine. "I asked my friend if he would teach me so I could play 'Paradise,'" he recalls. That was the spark. For years, Tom played guitar and wrote songs for his own enjoyment and for his neighbors, building a repertoire of Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and John Prine tunes—about four hours' worth, all from memory.

But life had other plans. A series of mini strokes robbed him of much of that musical memory, and he didn't play for a couple of years. "I decided I was going to give my songs to a local artist in the area, and he encouraged me to get out and perform my songs," Tom shares. That encouragement changed everything.

The First Step—and the Trainwreck That Fueled a Fire

In August of 2022, at the age of 66, Tom stepped onto a stage for the very first time. "It was a trainwreck," he says with a laugh. "But it drove me to really try to do better." He started going to open mics, was soon asked to do songwriter rounds, and eventually began performing solo gigs around the Twin Cities area.



A couple of years ago, he was given the chance to go into a recording studio with a full band and record one song—his first time ever playing with a band. The result was **"Fly Tonight,"** which has been featured on the Rick Spins Show and on local radio stations. The greatest reward came when a stranger approached him at an outdoor festival and asked if he wrote that song because he remembered hearing it on the radio. "That was everything," Tom says.

The Buzz Around Tom Mobry

Tom is now a rising name among Minnesota folk rock artists, known for rich acoustic tones and introspective lyrics that blend storytelling and soul in every performance. His style leans heavily on Americana, folk, rock, and old western country, creating a sound that feels both nostalgic and new. His songs weave together a tapestry of emotions, nostalgia, and vivid tales of the human experience.

In March of 2026, Tom released his first CD. He is currently in the studio working on a new album slated for release in mid-2027. This year, he also started his first band —another milestone in a journey that keeps expanding. He's currently working on learning slide guitar and ukulele, always pushing himself to grow.

A Community Built on Paying It Forward

Tom believes deeply in supporting other artists. Early on, Mark Ross gave him the opportunity to play in a songwriter's round in Northfield, Minnesota, which connected him to a community of songwriters. "With his encouragement, it drove me to be a better and more complete songwriter," Tom says.

In turn, Tom now hosts a **Songwriters Showcase** at two local brew halls every other Tuesday, where eight songwriters share their original songs and the stories behind them in a Nashville Rounds style of show. "These are artists that deserve to be heard and grow their audience," he says. "Once in a while we get some artists that are well known around the country and just like to play their songs for an appreciative audience."

The Serendipity of a Cigar Box Guitar

Tom's path has been full of unexpected connections. A couple of years ago, he met Dave Plekkenpol of Stogie Joe's Cigar Box Guitars at an art festival. Dave encouraged him to try one of his guitars—and as Tom was strapping it on, he noticed a picture of Samantha Grimes. "Hey! I know Sam! She and I have played several shows together!" That chance encounter started a friendship, and yes, Tom bought one of Dave's guitars. He's still trying to learn to play it well enough to take it out on stage.

What's Next for Tom



Tom's long-term goals are clear: to become a full-time musician and leave his day job behind. He also hopes to submit music for consideration in the coming years. He belongs to ISSA, the Minnesota Association of Songwriters (MAS), the Midwest Country Music Organization, the Singer-Songwriter Songwriting Challenge group on Facebook (where many of his songs come from weekly writing prompts), and The Carver County Arts Consortium.

"I write songs from the heart," Tom says. "Sometimes humorous, sometimes heartbreaking. And I haven't written my best song yet."

Stay Connected

Find Tom's music and upcoming shows at tommobrymusic.com. Keep an eye out for his new album in 2027—and if you're in the Twin Cities area, stop by one of his Songwriters Showcases and hear the next generation of Minnesota songwriters in the round.

Tom Mobry – a voice that found its stage at 66, a heart that writes from the Midwest, and a story that proves it's never too late to start. We're proud to shine this month's spotlight on him.



Music Industry News

What Happened In The Past 30 Days

September 2026 was one of the biggest months in music industry news this year. AI companies and major labels continued their high-stakes chess match, a landmark lawsuit landed squarely on the most widely used DIY distributor, and the road to the 2027 Grammys officially opened. Here's what you need to know.

Universal Music Group Sues DistroKid Over "AI Slop"

The headline: On September 15, Universal Music Group filed a scathing 52-page lawsuit against DistroKid in Delaware federal court, accusing the distributor of "deceptive trade practices and blatant copyright infringement."

The core allegation: UMG claims DistroKid—which distributes roughly 40% of all new music worldwide for more than 4 million artists—has fueled its growth by flooding streaming platforms with "mass AI-generated, SEO-optimized, and copyright-infringing slop" that is deceptively passed off as music created by real humans.

The numbers behind the lawsuit:

- DistroKid delivered nearly **12 million tracks** to a single major streaming service over six months—more than 50% of everything that service received
- One account called "Lofi Chill" released **4,562 tracks** in a single year—an average of 380 per month. UMG calls it "a pace no human musician could achieve"
- Technical analysis found that **over 98%** of one catalog was raw output from Suno

What DistroKid says: The company disputed the allegations, stating it takes "copyright protection, fraud prevention and the integrity of the music ecosystem seriously."

Important context: UMG's lawsuit is **not** about AI music that is clearly disclosed as AI. It's about AI-generated tracks being deceptively passed off as human-created music—and about copyright-infringing uploads. The distinction matters.

What this means for you: If you're a legitimate independent artist using DistroKid, you have not done anything wrong. But this lawsuit signals a major shift: distributors will soon face much stricter requirements for verifying who is uploading and what they're uploading. Expect stricter identity checks and AI detection filters on all DIY distribution platforms in the coming months.

What to watch: This lawsuit comes just two months after CVC Capital Partners agreed to acquire a majority stake in DistroKid for $2 billion. UMG essentially argues that DistroKid's valuation was built on enabling this pipeline.

UMG Partners with ElevenLabs on Licensed AI Music Platform

The headline: On September 10, Universal Music Group announced a multi-year strategic agreement with ElevenLabs, an AI audio company, to launch a licensed AI-powered music creation platform.

What the platform will do: Fans will be able to create remixes, mashups, and new interpretations of tracks from participating artists. It's ElevenLabs' first deal with a major label.

UMG's positioning: Sir Lucian Grainge, UMG's Chairman and CEO, said the partnership reflects "responsible AI" that puts "artists, songwriters, and fans at the center" and can "unlock new revenue opportunities for the creative community."

What this means for you: The same label suing Suno and DistroKid is also investing in licensed AI. The industry isn't anti-AI—it's anti-**unlicensed** AI. The majors are building a parallel ecosystem where AI is controlled, licensed, and monetized on their terms.

Believe and Suno Announce Strategic Partnership

The headline: On September 8, Believe—parent company of TuneCore—announced a strategic partnership with Suno covering participating repertoire from Believe and TuneCore artists.

The details: Artists and labels can **opt in** to have their music included in Suno's new industry-partner models. Those who participate will be compensated and their rights protected. Notably, this reverses Believe's April 2026 decision to block Suno distribution entirely.

What it means: Another major independent distribution network is now working with Suno. The opt-in framework is being positioned as a way to give artists "meaningful choice" over AI participation.

Suno Hit with Second Major Lawsuit

The headline: UMG and Sony filed a second copyright lawsuit against Suno, this time alleging the company copied **60,202 recordings** without permission. The first lawsuit covered a smaller catalog; this expanded case reflects what the labels discovered after gaining access to more of Suno's training data.

Also: Suno's new v6 AI models have faced significant user backlash, with critics saying the updated system produces "muffled, compressed and less convincing music."

Instagram Introduces AI Profile Labels

The headline: Instagram is introducing a new label to help users identify profiles built around AI-generated people.

What this means for artists: Accounts identified as unlabelled AI profiles could **lose recommendation eligibility** across Reels, Explore, and suggested content—limiting their reach significantly. Creators who use AI tools for editing or production **without** presenting an AI-generated identity will not need the label.

The takeaway: The platform-by-platform crackdown on undisclosed AI continues. Transparency is becoming mandatory everywhere.

Spotify Launches "Fresh Finds Forward"

The headline: Spotify launched a new 12-month program offering support to around **10,000 emerging independent artists each year**.

What it includes: Studio time, premium creative tools, industry events, wellness support, and access to selected Spotify opportunities. Artists featured on eligible Fresh Finds playlists from January 1, 2026, onward can be invited through Spotify for Artists.

What this means for you: This is a genuine opportunity for indie artists. If you're on a Fresh Finds playlist, watch your Spotify for Artists inbox.

GRAMMY® Season Is Here: First Round Voting Opens October 12

The headline: The 69th Annual GRAMMY® Awards eligibility period closed on August 28, 2026. First-round voting runs from **October 12 to October 22** , with nominations announced on **November 16**. The ceremony is scheduled for **February 7, 2027**.

What this means for you: If you released music between August 31, 2025, and August 28, 2026, you may be eligible for consideration. Now is the time to make sure your music is registered with the Recording Academy and that your FYC (For Your Consideration) materials are ready.

Key dates:

Milestone	Date
First Round Voting	October 12–22, 2026
Nominations Announced	November 16, 2026
Final Round Voting	December 10, 2026 – January 7, 2027
GRAMMY® Ceremony	February 7, 2027

DistroKid Customer Service Woes: What Artists Are Saying

From Top Music Attorney: In a recent episode, Krystle Delgado and Briana Martinez discussed growing concerns surrounding DistroKid—including unresponsive customer service, withheld royalties, unexplained takedowns, and other issues affecting music creators. With DistroKid now under new ownership (CVC Capital Partners), the question many artists are asking is: **what has changed, and what can you do when your distributor won't help?**

The situation: Artists have reported:

- Delayed releases
- Unexplained takedowns
- Withheld payments
- Difficulty reaching customer support

What to do if you're affected:

1. **Document everything.** Keep records of all correspondence, release dates, and royalty statements.
2. **Escalate publicly if necessary.** Social media pressure sometimes works when customer service doesn't.
3. **Know your options.** You can switch distributors—but be aware of transfer fees and the process for moving your catalog.
4. **Read your agreement.** Understand what rights you've granted and what remedies are available.

From Top Music Attorney: Krystle Delgado's Latest Episodes

Krystle Delgado covered several critical topics this month:

"Spotify Finally Responded to the AI Problem... Sort Of" – Delgado analyzed Spotify's new AI Persona badge, noting that while it's a meaningful step, there may be a significant loophole that undermines the entire solution.

"The AI Backlash Is Getting Louder" – Delgado explored why AI music is getting a colder reception than Silicon Valley and the industry would like, including consumer pushback, uncomfortable court questions, and the gap between the sales pitch and reality.

DistroKid Deep Dive – Delgado and Briana Martinez discussed what artists can do when their distributor won't help, and what the new ownership means for the platform's future.

The Bottom Line

September was a month of consolidation—and escalation. UMG sued DistroKid over AI slop while simultaneously partnering with ElevenLabs on licensed AI. Suno faced a second major lawsuit while inking deals with Believe and BMG. Instagram and Spotify ramped up AI labeling. And Grammy season kicked off.

Here's what you should do this month:

1. **If you're on DistroKid,** make sure your releases are properly documented and your royalties are flowing. If you're experiencing issues, start documenting everything.
2. **If you're an indie artist on a Fresh Finds playlist,** watch your Spotify for Artists inbox for a Fresh Finds Forward invitation.
3. **If you released music in the past year,** check your Grammy eligibility and start preparing FYC materials.
4. **Keep making real music.** The AI backlash is real, the platforms are taking sides, and your humanity is your competitive advantage.



The Health Insurance Question: What Indie Artists Need to Know Right Now

If you're an independent musician, you already know the drill: no employer-sponsored benefits, no HR department, no one handing you a benefits packet on your first day. You're the label, the manager, the booking agent—and yes, the one who has to figure out health insurance.

Recently, BMI announced a new service called **BMI Health Connect**, a partnership with **Gallagher Alternative Health Solutions**, an insurance brokerage firm. The service is free to BMI affiliates and connects songwriters and composers with licensed insurance advisors who can help them compare ACA exchange plans, private off-exchange plans, Medicare, and supplemental options like dental and vision.

Here's the part you should know: **BMI and Gallagher may receive commissions if you purchase a plan through their guidance**, though BMI states this doesn't affect your premium pricing. That doesn't make the service inherently bad—brokers get paid by insurance companies all the time—but it's important to understand the model. A broker's job is to sell insurance. Their recommendations may be perfectly sound and genuinely helpful, but they're not operating as an unbiased consumer advocate.

So what's an indie artist to do?

You Have Options (And You Always Did)

The truth is, **you can absolutely find health insurance on your own without a broker or agent.** Here's how to start:

1. Start with Healthcare.gov (or your state exchange)

The Affordable Care Act marketplace is the primary route for self-employed individuals, including musicians and freelancers. You can browse plans during open enrollment (typically November 1 through January 15 for coverage starting January 1) and see subsidies you may qualify for based on your income. In 2026, a single person earning between roughly $15,650 and $62,600 may qualify for premium tax credits that cap a benchmark Silver plan at 8.5% of your income.

2. Know the real numbers

Healthcare costs are climbing. In 2026, ACA marketplace insurers raised rates by an average of around 20%, with some states seeing increases of 26% or more. The average gross monthly premium for a Bronze plan is around $456, and a benchmark Silver plan averages $625 before subsidies. If you're earning $60,000 net, you might realistically budget $5,000–$7,000 annually for healthcare—and that's without a major medical event.

3. Look into industry-specific resources

Several organizations exist specifically to help musicians navigate this maze:

- **Music Health Alliance** provides a "concierge" service to help music professionals access healthcare resources, and it's available to all musicians, not just signed artists.
- **The Entertainment Community Fund** offers health insurance counseling nationwide and assists with ACA enrollment.
- **A2IM Artist Pro** (American Association of Independent Music) offers healthcare plans with premiums as low as $80 per month for a $99 annual membership.
- **Nonprofits like HAAM (Health Alliance for Austin Musicians)** subsidize monthly premiums for local musicians who purchase ACA marketplace plans—a model that's spreading to other cities.
- **SAG-AFTRA** health plans are available to artists signed to major labels, with premiums ranging from $125 for individuals to $750 for families of four.

The Bottom Line

BMI Health Connect isn't a scam, and it isn't a magic bullet. It's a free advisory service from a brokerage firm—which means it's worth exploring, but it's also worth approaching with clear eyes. **You are not required to use a broker to find health insurance.** You can go directly to Healthcare.gov, call your state exchange, or reach out to a nonprofit like Music Health Alliance that exists specifically to help people like you.

The most important thing is that you **don't go without coverage** and you **don't overpay out of confusion**. The information is out there. Take your time. Ask questions. Compare plans. And remember: you're not alone in this.

Editor's Note: *A quick word on transparency. The Rock Dog Music Foundation is not affiliated with the Tantalis Music Awards, nor are we affiliated with any other organization or association. We are an independent platform committed to supporting indie musicians and their music. We welcome and will continue to highlight all legitimate causes, opportunities, and initiatives brought to our attention that serve to help, enhance, or further the independent music community. If you have something you'd like us to consider, reach out. We're listening.*

The Tantalis Music Awards: Where Music Is Judged for Artistry, Not Algorithms

A Different Kind of Awards Show

If you've been in the independent music world for any length of time, you've probably felt it: the frustration of watching awards and recognition go to whoever has the biggest following, the loudest promotional machine, or the most viral moment. Talent often takes a back seat to visibility.

The Tantalis Music Awards is trying to change that.

This new international awards platform has just opened its inaugural awards cycle, and its guiding philosophy is refreshingly simple: **"Music judged for artistry, not algorithms."**

That's not just a tagline. It's a structural commitment. Tantalis was built from the ground up to recognize exceptional artistic work through structured human evaluation—placing the music itself at the very center of the process.

How It Works: Blind Judging and Human Ears

Here's what sets Tantalis apart from most awards programs you've encountered:



Blind Evaluation. Every eligible submission enters a structured assessment process. Judges evaluate the work without access to artist popularity metrics, follower counts, streaming statistics, label affiliation, or commercial performance data. They don't know who made the music. They're just hearing the music.

Human-Led Assessment. The evaluation is conducted by human judges using category-specific criteria and transparent scoring structures. This isn't an algorithm scanning for engagement patterns. It's people—listening, considering, and assessing artistic merit.

No Public Voting. Tantalis does not use public voting, audience polling, streaming performance, chart statistics, or social media engagement to determine recognition. There is no popularity weighting. The playing field is level.

Open to All. Artists are not required to have an established industry profile to participate. Tantalis is open internationally, regardless of your commercial profile, label affiliation, audience size, industry status, or geographic location. If your music has merit, it can be recognized.

Category Allocation. Rather than asking artists to self-select which award they think they should compete for, Tantalis allocates each eligible work to the categories where it can be most meaningfully assessed. A single work may be considered across multiple areas of recognition.

What They're Looking For

Tantalis says its purpose is to recognize qualities that are difficult to capture through numbers—things like:

- **Originality**
- **Artistic identity**
- **Emotional authenticity**
- **Creative ambition**
- **Craftsmanship**
- **Cultural resonance**

These are the hallmarks of meaningful art, and they're exactly the qualities that often get lost in the shuffle of algorithmic discovery.

Human Creativity at the Center

In an era where AI-generated content is becoming increasingly common, Tantalis has taken a clear position: human authorship matters.

The organization's eligibility framework recognizes human-created artistic work and requires disclosure of relevant AI-assisted tools. Generative AI cannot replace the core human creative authorship of submitted work, though certain assistive technologies may remain eligible where they do not replace primary human creativity.

This is a thoughtful approach—one that embraces innovation while protecting the integrity of human artistic expression.

Recognition Beyond the Winner

One of the most refreshing aspects of Tantalis is its emphasis on recognition beyond simply naming a winner.

Each category recognizes **finalists** alongside a winner. Tantalis Finalist status is intended to represent meaningful artistic recognition in its own right—not just a consolation prize. And at the top of the awards structure sits **The Tantalis Distinction**, described as the organization's highest artistic honor.

This approach acknowledges something the industry often forgets: being recognized as among the best in your category is an achievement worth celebrating.

Tantalis Discovery: Year-Round Support for Independent Artists

Beyond the awards themselves, Tantalis has launched **Tantalis Discovery**—a year-round editorial program designed to showcase independent artists and new music from around the world.

Selected artists may receive:

- Editorial features
- Website profiles
- Social media exposure
- Playlist opportunities
- Other promotional coverage across Tantalis platforms

Importantly, Discovery is positioned as an editorial program rather than another competition or ranking. It's about exposure and support, not another leaderboard to climb.

Submissions Are Open Now

If this sounds like something you or an artist you know should be part of, here are the key details:

Eligibility Window: Works must have received their first public release between **1 July 2025 and 31 December 2026**.

Submission Limit: Artists can submit up to **three eligible works**.

Full Information: Visit **tantalismusic.com** for complete details on awards, categories, eligibility, judging process, and submissions.

Why This Matters

The music industry has always had a complicated relationship with merit. Too often, the artists who rise to the top are the ones with the best marketing, the biggest budgets, or the most fortunate timing—not necessarily the ones making the most compelling art.

Tantalis is attempting to build something different: an awards platform where the music itself is the only thing that matters. No follower counts. No streaming stats. No popularity contests.

Just the work.

For independent artists who have felt overlooked by systems that prioritize metrics over meaning, this is worth paying attention to.

The Tantalis Music Awards is currently accepting submissions for its inaugural cycle. Whether you're an artist considering entry or simply someone who cares about the future of independent music, I encourage you to learn more at **tantalismusic.com**.

Final Thoughts

I'll be watching the Tantalis Music Awards with interest. The team behind it are members of the International Singer Songwriters Association (ISSA) community, and they've built this platform with a genuine commitment to artistic merit. That's a mission worth supporting.



Quick Links:

- **Website:** tantalismusic.com
- **Facebook:** facebook.com/TantalisMusic
- **Contact:** support@tantalismusic.com

The Rick Spins Show

Hosted by legendary radio personality Rick Landstrom, The Rick Spins Show is a unique opportunity available exclusively on ISSA Radio. Rick hosts two live shows every week:

- **Monday at 8 PM Eastern:** *Fun In The Front Show* – "Making Mondays Great Again"
- **Thursday at 8 PM Eastern:** *Thursday Throwdown!* – A fun night of great music with a twist!



Submit Your Music

Want to be featured? You ***don't*** have to be an ISSA member. Just send your properly meta-tagged files to **issaradio.rick@gmail.com**.

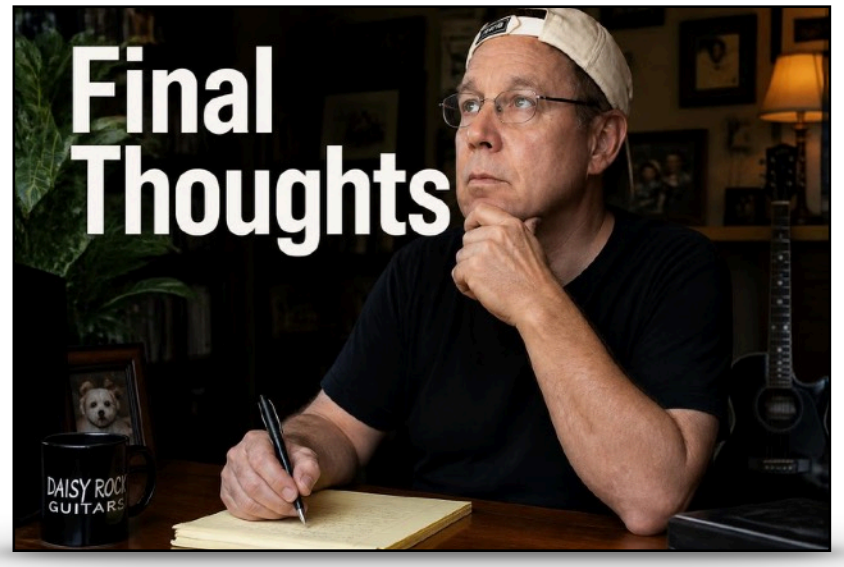


Some instruments are manufactured. Others are **built**.

Stogie Joe Cigar Box Guitars falls firmly in the second category. Each guitar is handcrafted with care, using quality components and a level of attention to detail you simply don't find in mass-produced instruments. The result is a guitar with a voice all its own—warm, gritty, and unmistakably authentic—along with a look that turns heads the moment you walk on stage.

But Stogie Joe is more than a builder. He's a **supporter of independent music**, and we want to take a moment to say thank you.

Stogie Joe has been a generous backer of **The Rick Spins Show**, helping keep indie artists in the spotlight. That kind of support doesn't happen often enough in this industry. When someone steps up for indie artists the way Stogie Joe has, they deserve a shout-out. Visit him online: www.stogiejoeguitars.com



Introducing the Rock Dog Music Foundation

Well, here we are.

The first issue of the Rock Dog Music Newsletter is officially in the books. And with it comes the moment Jill and I have been waiting months to share with you.

For those who've been following along since the ISSA Summit days, you know we stepped away from organizing the Summit. What you may not know is *why*. It wasn't burnout. It wasn't frustration. It was because we felt called to build something new—something that could reach even more artists, in even more ways, without the barriers that too often keep independent musicians from getting the help they need.

Today, we're proud to introduce you to that something.

Meet the Rock Dog Music Foundation

Our mission is simple but ambitious:

To empower independent musicians by providing accessible, high-quality educational conferences and performance opportunities that foster artistic growth, professional development, and meaningful community connection.
And our vision?

A world where independent musicians have the knowledge, support, and platforms they need to thrive—creatively, professionally, and personally—without exploitation or financial barriers.

That's the dream. That's what we're building. And we're doing it with a set of values that guide every decision we make:

Accessibility • Integrity • Education • Community • Artist Empowerment • Transparency • Creativity • Collaboration

Who Is This For?

Every indie artist. Whether you're just starting out or you've been gigging for decades. Whether you're a solo singer-songwriter, a band member, a producer, or a side player. Whether you're a member of ISSA, another association, or no association at all.

Rock Dog Music Foundation is not a membership organization. There's nothing to sign up for. No dues to pay. No exclusive club to join. If you're an indie artist who wants to grow, we're here for you.

We're also not in competition with any association—ISSA included. In fact, we believe in partnership. We believe in collaboration. We believe that when organizations work together instead of against each other, artists win. That's why we're actively building relationships with music industry professionals, local arts organizations, national arts networks, radio hosts, instrument manufacturers, producers, community foundations, and educational institutions.

The indie music community is big enough for all of us. And it's stronger when we lift each other up.

What We're Building

We have several initiatives in the works. Some are further along than others, and we'll be rolling them out over the coming months. Here's a preview:

- **Rock Dog Music Conference(s)** – We're in the planning stages of live events designed to educate, connect, and inspire indie artists at every level.
- **Monthly Newsletter** – You're reading Issue #1 right now. This will continue every month, packed with industry news, practical advice, and resources to help you move your career forward.
- **Performance Platforms** – We're exploring ways to create performance opportunities that give artists a stage without the exploitation too often baked into the industry. More details to come.

- **Artist Resource Hub** – Our website features a growing library of tools, guides, and information to help you navigate the business side of music. It's live now at **www.rockdogartists.org**
- **Organizational Structure** – We've assembled a team of music industry professionals—each with their own area of expertise—to guide our work and help the artists we serve. We're not announcing names just yet, but trust us when we say: these are industry heavyweights who believe in this mission as much as we do.

What's Next

You can reach us at:

- **General questions & info:** info@rockdogartists.org
- **Todd directly:** todd@rockdogartists.org

And be sure to check the bottom of this newsletter for links to our social media pages—we'll be adding those in the coming days, so give us a follow and stay connected.

This Is Just the Beginning

To everyone who's been along for this journey since the Summit days—thank you. Your belief in us made this possible.

To those just joining us now—welcome. You're getting in on the ground floor of something special.

And to everyone in between—we can't wait to see what we build together.

This isn't goodbye. It's not even a new chapter. It's a whole new book.

Let's write it together.

Onward and upward.

— **Todd**

(and Jill, too!)

Please like and follow our Facebook page — https://www.facebook.com/RockDogMusic