A Deep Dive Into The Best and Worst Streaming Platforms for Indie Artists

** A Strategic Guide for ISSA Members **



We've spent the past month doing deep dive research on streaming platforms. Although this is a bit lengthy, it's a must read for anyone who streams or plans to stream their music. This report is your up-to-date playbook.

The landscape for independent artists has fundamentally shifted. Two distinct camps have emerged: the dominant mainstream platforms where earning a living remains incredibly difficult, and a dynamic new wave of ethical, artist-first alternatives designed to fix those very problems. The past month alone has brought major changes—from Spotify's new royalty barrier to the public launch of a cooperative-owned alternative.

The Critical Headlines You Need to Know

- **Spotify's 1,000-Stream Rule Is Now Enforced.** Tracks must hit 1,000 streams within 12 months to earn anything. Zero royalties below that threshold.
- **Spotify Sunsetting Its Basic Subscription.** This could further reduce mechanical royalties for songwriters.
- **AI Transparency Is Now Mandatory Across Most Platforms.** DistroKid, Apple Music, and others now require AI disclosure.
- **Tidal's Direct Upload Generates $0 in Streaming Royalties.** Income is only possible via editorial "Spotlight" awards.
- **TikTok Pivots to View-Based Payouts.** Viral moments may finally generate revenue.
- **Subvert Has Launched Publicly.** A cooperative, 0-fee marketplace with over 20,000 artist members.
- **Bandcamp Fridays Have Returned for 2026.** Eight scheduled zero-fee days, starting with $3.6 million raised in February alone.
- **SoundCloud Doubles Down on Fan-Powered Royalties.** 100% of royalties now go to artists, with a new "follower exclusive" feature.

Subvert - Core Facts (As of May 2026)

- **Public launch occurred in May 2026**, with over **20,000 co-op members** at launch.
- **February 2026** saw all artist-members able to create pages and upload releases.
- **April 2026** exceeded 20,000 members; **May 2026** marked the public opening.
- **100% of founding ownership** is reserved for the community—artists, labels, and workers.
- **0% platform fees**: When a fan buys music, the full purchase price goes to the artist.
- *Send an email to issasongwriters.todd@gmail.com with the word "Subvert" for a free Summit Raffle Ticket.*
- **AI-generated content is explicitly banned** from the platform.
- **One member, one vote**—no single corporate entity can force a sale.
- Notable label members include **Warp Records** and **Polyvinyl Record Co.** .

Why It Matters for ISSA Members

Subvert isn't trying to replace Spotify—it's solving a different problem: **ownership and control**. For songwriters who want to sell music directly to fans without losing a percentage to platform fees, who want a say in how the platform evolves, and who want to ensure their work isn't used to train AI models without consent, Subvert is arguably the most important platform launch in years.

🚨 The Distribution Question (Briefly)

While we'll cover distribution platforms in depth next month, here's the bottom line: the relationship between streaming platforms and distributors has become equally complex. **DistroKid** now requires AI disclosure upon upload and charges hidden fees for "legacy" takedowns. **CD Baby** launched "Stages Selects," a development program with marketing and financial support for 10 artists. **TuneCore** announced a royalty advance program. The key takeaway: choose your distributor as carefully as your streaming platforms.

🔍 Deep Dive: Why Subvert Deserves Your Attention

Is Subvert is something ISSA members should be looking into? The short answer: **yes, emphatically**. Subvert is not just another platform; it's a structural alternative to the entire corporate model.

What Is Subvert?

Subvert is a **cooperatively owned**, community-governed marketplace built as a direct response to Bandcamp's corporate acquisitions. It's structured to prevent "enshittification"—the process where platforms degrade once investors demand returns.



Discovery & Community Engines

SoundCloud is now more equitable than ever. Its **Fan-Powered Royalties (FPR)** model ensures that a fan's subscription money goes only to the artists they actually listen to, rather than a top-heavy pool. In January 2026, SoundCloud increased artist royalties to **100%**, up from 80%. Independent artists using the FPR model have seen a **35% revenue increase**. The platform also launched **Follower Exclusive Releases**, allowing artists to drop music only to their followers—a powerful superfan tool.

Audiomack remains a global powerhouse for hip-hop, Afrobeats, and EDM, particularly strong in developing markets.

Emerging Ethical & Decentralized Platforms

Vocana (indie-only, user-centric payment model) is building momentum with a planned 2026 public launch. **Audius** offers near-instant crypto payouts and automated royalty splits.

⚠️ The Worst Streaming Platforms for Indie Artists

Major Platforms With Unfair Economics

Spotify remains the most criticized, with a per-stream payout of just 0.003–**0.005**.
Its **1,000-stream minimum within a 12-month period** has had a devastating impact on emerging artists: tracks below that threshold earn **zero**. One report notes that **88% of tracks on Spotify generated no revenue** in the past year. Spotify has also faced backlash for unilaterally adding audiobooks to subscriptions to qualify for lower mechanical royalty rates for songwriters.

YouTube continues to be called "by far the worst offender" for fair pay, with standard payouts of just 0.0007–0.002 per stream.

Platforms With Complex or Opaque Models

TikTok remains a powerful discovery engine, but its complex licensing deals and struggles to ensure fair compensation for songwriters persist. The platform is now shifting to a **view-based payout model**, which could turn viral moments into actual revenue—but early results are unclear.

💎 The Best Streaming Platforms for Indie Artists

Highest Payouts & Fair Economics

Tidal remains the fair-pay leader, paying 0.010–**0.013 per stream**—roughly triple the industry average. Its new **direct upload feature** allows indie artists to bypass distributors, though uploaded tracks earn 0 *in streaming royalties and are instead eligible for a* **1,000 "Spotlight" award** if selected for editorial playlists. More promising is Tidal's **direct-to-fan sales** feature, where artists keep **90%** of download revenue—a direct Bandcamp competitor.

Apple Music delivers a steady 0.007–**0.010 per stream**, with most indies landing around $0.008. Its **no free tier** means every listener pays, and its human curators offer prestige that algorithms can't match. Apple has also rolled out **AI transparency tags**, prioritizing human-made music in its playlists.

Amazon Music remains a dependable mid-range earner at 0.004–**0.008 per stream**, though its lack of indie-specific features keeps it a secondary consideration.

Qobuz (high-fidelity audio) has quietly emerged with the highest per-stream rate at **$0.01873**, though its user base remains niche.

Direct-to-Fan Models: The Gold Standard

Bandcamp remains the undisputed champion. Artists keep an average of **82%** of revenue, a figure that jumps to **100%** on Bandcamp Fridays. In 2026, **eight Bandcamp Fridays** have been confirmed, starting with a February event that raised $3.6 *million for independent artists. Total payouts to artists through Bandcamp have now reached $***1.72 billion**. Bandcamp has also banned AI-generated music, reinforcing its artist-first stance.

Indie Rooftop offers an incredible **90% net revenue share** based on viewership. It functions as a streaming platform and original docu-series, showcasing indie musicians through rooftop performances and interviews. Its shoppable video ads allow direct merch sales, and it offers fan retargeting via email and text—a powerful combo of storytelling and revenue.