What Is an Artificial Stream? Understanding Spotify's Crackdown and How to Protect Your Music

Last month, we addressed the growing crisis of independent artists having their music removed from Spotify after being flagged for "artificial streams." The response was overwhelming—and one question came up repeatedly: "What exactly does Spotify consider an artificial stream?"

It's a fair question. The term gets thrown around a lot, but the definition isn't always clear. And with more DSSA members than ever receiving these alerts, understanding what constitutes artificial streaming—and how to avoid it—has never been more important.

What Spotify Says: The Official Definition

Spotify's definition is actually quite straightforward:

"An artificial stream is a stream that doesn't reflect genuine user listening intent, including any instance of attempting to manipulate streaming services like Spotify by using automated processes (like bots or scripts)."

In plain English: **If a stream doesn't come from a real person genuinely choosing to listen to your music, it's artificial.**

Spotify invests heavily in detecting, preventing, and removing the royalty impact of artificial streams. While the company claims artificial streaming accounts for less than 1% of all Spotify streams, the enforcement actions—and the collateral damage to independent artists—are significant.

Quick Reference: Red Flags to Watch For

Red Flag	What It Means
“Guaranteed” streams or followers	Likely uses bots or click farms
Paid playlist placement	Violates Spotify’s terms
Sudden spike in streams from one location	Could indicate bot activity
Single playlist driving most of your streams	May be a bot playlist
Service can’t explain how they generate streams	Likely using prohibited methods
Too good to be true pricing	It probably is

6. Build Your Fanbase Organically

This is the long game, but it's the safest one. Editorial playlist pitching through Spotify for Artists is the primary sanctioned channel for playlist placement. Focus on:

- Engaging with your fans on social media
- Building an email list
- Playing live shows (virtual or in-person)
- Collaborating with other artists
- Creating content that drives genuine interest in your music

What If You've Already Been Flagged?

If you receive an artificial streaming alert, act quickly:

1. **Document everything**—screenshots of your dashboard, emails from Spotify and your distributor, and a timeline of your promotional activities
2. **Escalate within your distributor**—ask for a specialist or supervisor
3. **Pause all promotional activity** immediately
4. **Investigate the source** of the flagged streams
5. **Submit documentation** to your distributor for them to forward to Spotify

But be prepared: even with documentation, reinstatement is not guaranteed.

The Bottom Line

Artificial streaming isn't just about bots and click farms. It's about **any stream that doesn't come from a real person's genuine choice to listen to your music**. Spotify's enforcement is aggressive, the penalties are harsh, and the appeals process is virtually nonexistent.

The good news is that **you can protect yourself**. Vet every service you use. Never pay for guaranteed streams or playlist placements. Monitor your metrics. And above all, focus on building a real, engaged fanbase—one genuine listener at a time.

Your music deserves real listeners. Don't let shortcuts put your career at risk.

1. Vet Every Promotional Service Thoroughly

This is the single most important step. Before you pay for any promotion, ask hard questions:

- Do they guarantee a specific number of streams or playlist placements? **Red flag.**
- Do they charge for playlist placement? **Red flag.** Real promotional services do not sell Spotify placements.
- Can they explain exactly how they generate streams?
- Do they have verifiable testimonials from real artists?

As CD Baby advises: *"We strongly advise you to thoroughly vet any marketing or promotional services you're considering as part of your release campaign. If it seems too good to be true…"*

2. Never Pay for Guaranteed Streams or Playlist Placement

Spotify's policy is clear: *"Any third-party promotional service that advertises streams in exchange for payment violates our terms and conditions, and using such services may result in your music being removed from Spotify."*

If a service promises you a spot on a Spotify playlist in exchange for money, walk away.

3. Monitor Your Spotify for Artists Dashboard Regularly

Keep an eye on your streaming metrics. Look for:

- Sudden, unexplained spikes in streams
- Streams coming from unusual geographic locations
- A single playlist driving the majority of your streams

If you notice any of these patterns, investigate immediately. You can report suspicious playlists directly to Spotify using their **Playlist Reporter** tool at artists.spotify.com/c/playlist-reporter.

4. End Any Suspicious Promotions Immediately

If you suspect a service you're using might be generating artificial streams, end the promotion right away. The sooner you stop, the less damage can accumulate.

5. Educate Yourself

Spotify has launched educational resources—including a masterclass—to help artists understand artificial streaming and avoid falling for scams. Take advantage of these free resources.

How Spotify Detects Artificial Streaming

Spotify doesn't share the full details of its detection algorithms—and for good reason. If the system were public, bad actors would find ways to evade it. However, we do know some of the signals they look for:

- **Sudden spikes in streams** from a specific location where you have no existing fanbase
- **Unusual listening patterns**, such as accounts that listen exclusively to one artist for hours on end
- **Streams originating from a single playlist** with suspicious characteristics
- **Metadata signals** like IP location, listening duration, and repeat patterns

When Spotify detects artificial streaming, **those streams do not earn royalties**. *Send an email to issasongwriters.todd@gmail.com with the word "Royalties" to receive a free "Summit Raffle Coupon"* Public metrics—including your monthly listener count and a track's all-time stream count—are adjusted to remove the artificial activity.

The Consequences: What Happens When You're Flagged

The penalties for artificial streaming are severe and escalating:

- **Royalties are withheld** for the flagged streams
- **Public stream counts are corrected** (meaning your numbers drop)
- **Spotify charges a penalty fee** of approximately **€10 per track per month** to labels and distributors when flagrant artificial streaming is detected
- **Your distributor may pass these fees directly to you**
- **In severe or repeated cases, your track or entire album is removed from Spotify**—and in some cases, your account may be suspended

And here's the kicker: **there is no direct appeal process for artists**. Your distributor can submit an appeal and provide additional context, but they cannot override Spotify's algorithmic determinations. The final decision rests entirely with Spotify.

How to Protect Yourself

The best defense against artificial streaming flags is **prevention**. Here's what every independent artist should be doing:

What Counts as an Artificial Stream?

Spotify's detection systems look for patterns that don't match genuine human listening behavior. Here are the most common examples:

1. Bots and Automated Scripts

This is the most obvious form of artificial streaming. Bots are automated programs that play songs on repeat, often from thousands of accounts simultaneously. These streams don't come from real listeners—they come from code.

2. Paid Services That "Guarantee" Streams

Any third-party service that promises a specific number of streams in exchange for payment is violating Spotify's terms. These services often use bot networks or click farms to deliver the streams they promise. As Spotify makes clear: *"Any service that offers guaranteed playlist placement in exchange for money violates our terms and conditions and should not be used."*

3. Click Farms and Paid Listening

Some services pay real people to listen to songs on repeat. While these are technically "human" streams, they don't reflect genuine listening intent—and Spotify's algorithms can detect the unnatural patterns.

4. Playlists That Use Bot Activity

Bot playlists serve two purposes: they fraudulently collect streaming revenue and they scam artists into paying for fake streams. If your music is added to one of these playlists without your knowledge, you can still be flagged.

5. Leaving Content on Repeat

Extended, non-active listening—such as leaving a single track on loop for hours—can also trigger flags if the pattern appears unnatural.

6. Artificial Streams from Multiple Versions of the Same Song

Spotify's policy limits a single song to 20 streams per account per tracking period. Uploading multiple versions of the same track to bypass this limit is considered manipulation.