



Digital Rights Awareness

Episode 7

Music Metadata: The Hidden Infrastructure of Fairness

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In today's music world, data is money, and every play, stream, clip, or remix is a transaction. Each use – potentially - triggers a payment, but only if the system knows who the money belongs to. For thousands of creators, that simple condition determines whether they get paid or disappear into digital oblivion.

So, how can an industry build on creativity still lose very large sums of money in value simply because its data doesn't match?

In this episode, we delve into the foundations of digital fairness. The systems of information that decide who is seen, who is credited, and who gets rewarded for their work.

Setting the Scene: Metadata and the Invisible Logic of Fairness

Behind every digital stream lies a silent transaction, signals travelling through databases, matching codes and identifiers to names, rights, and royalties. At the centre of this process is metadata: the information that identifies who created a piece of music, who performed it, who owns the rights, and how it should be paid for.

Metadata is often called the DNA of recorded music, a complex network of information that determines not only how songs are catalogued, but also whether the people behind them receive what they deserve.

Why Metadata Matters: From Codes to Royalties

When recorded music travels through online platforms, its identifiers travel with it. Each code or identifier plays a distinct role:

- The International Standard Recording Code (ISRC) identifies the sound recording.
- The International Standard Musical Work Code (ISWC) identifies the musical composition.
- The Interested Party Information (IPI) identifies the authors, composers, and publishers entitled to be paid. This code is assigned by CMOs. IPIs are attached to ISWC numbers to include information about authorship for works with an ISWC.
- International Performer Numbers identify performers through access to the International Performers Database (IPD), either directly or via a performer's collecting society.

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If these codes are complete and aligned, royalties find their way home. If they are missing or inconsistent, the money vanishes into black boxes — unclaimed, untraceable. For instance, we know that, as things stand, ISWCs do not usually exist at the point of creation (or release) of a sound recording. There is also no “ISRC-ISWC Registry” that record producers can access to retroactively retrieve ISWCs, when they are later allocated by CMOs.

As regards IPÎs, the right-holders normally do not know their own identifiers and, what is more, record producers have no access to IPI Numbers.

IPNs are currently relevant to broadcasting and public performance revenues paid via collective organisations, but not to streaming (where session musicians do not have a statutory remuneration right).

Fair MusE’s research highlights a simple truth: metadata and royalty tracking are inseparable. Without accurate identifiers, payments cannot be traced or fairly distributed. In digital music, fairness starts with data.

The Chain of Responsibility for Metadata

From record labels to composers’ and performers’ collecting societies, every actor in the music industry’s value chain touches metadata and each can strengthen or weaken its accuracy. In the online music industry, record labels transfer their recording metadata to streaming platforms. This data embodies information about the recording artists and the recording title itself. In the most common scenarios, the ISWC identifying the musical compositions embodied in the recording is *not* assigned until after usage of that recording has been reported to composers’ collecting societies.

For Do It Yourself (DYI) artists, their recording metadata is transferred to online music exploiters by aggregators, who act as intermediaries between platforms and artists and receive usage reports from the former, paying royalties to the latter.

In both the above-mentioned scenarios, composers’ and publishers’ collecting societies must reconcile all this information, matching plays to musical compositions — a task still riddled with mismatches despite growing use of solutions provided by companies such as BMAT, PEX, Orfium, and, for its music repertoires, a company like Unison.

The Cost of Data Fragmentation

Such a fragmented situation isn’t just technical; it’s structural. Each category of actors — record labels, platforms, publishers, CMOs — keeps its own database. The result is duplication, inconsistency, and potential invisibility for thousands of creators whose

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agents or collective representatives are not well equipped to identify their works on the grounds of usage reports that refer just to sound recordings.

Creators with professional data management get paid faster and more accurately. Independent and minority artists, instead, because of their weaker data capacity, get systematically overlooked. New formats — remixes, livestreams, short-form videos — multiply these mismatches since every new format becomes another opportunity for data to fail.

Metadata Governance: Building a Fairer System

This is why metadata governance is now central to copyright policy. As streaming and social-media licensing converge, interoperability is no longer optional — it is the foundation of any fair remuneration system. Good governance means using standards like *DDEX*, the global standard for data exchange in digital music. This way, interoperability fosters accountability for data quality and makes inclusiveness a design principle. Without that, even the most progressive licensing framework collapses into confusion.

To address these challenges, the European Union would need a public-interest copyright data infrastructure for the music economy.

A Music Copyright Data Infrastructure

Such an infrastructure could:

- make universal identifiers mandatory at source (or upload) — ISRC, ISWC, IPI, IPN;
- use open, auditable formats so that anyone can verify them;
- publish data-quality indicators to show how well royalties are being matched;
- provide creator dashboards to let artists trace every use of their work; and
- create cross-platform recognition protocols, so that a recording used on TikTok is recognised on YouTube or Spotify too.

Fairness would no longer depend on goodwill — it would be built into the architecture of rights management.

The Legal Landscape: Transparency, Fragmentation and Control

European law recognises data transparency as a creator's right. Yet, it still assumes that the underlying data are already in place.

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Article 19 of the DSM Directive guarantees regular, comprehensive reporting on the use of copyright works. Directive 2014/26 on collective rights management obliges collective management organisations and platforms to share relevant information with right-holders. Both directives provide that authors and performers shall be informed about how their works are used and how revenues are distributed.

However, these obligations concern reporting, not infrastructure. They presuppose the existence of accurate and interoperable metadata without requiring or fostering its creation. The result is a paradox: transparency is legally mandated, but the data foundation that transparency depends upon remains optional.

Toward a Legal Architecture for Metadata Governance

The Fair MusE legal and policy analysis points toward a more coherent framework — one that defines responsibilities for every stakeholder.

- Creators already have a right to information. However, they lack the tools to verify or correct their data.
- Labels and publishers create their own metadata; yet they treat them as proprietary, uncoordinated assets.
- Platforms have reporting duties; yet, they have no legal obligations or incentive to reject incomplete files.
- Collecting societies depend on upstream data but cannot compel its correction.

To overcome this, Fair MusE identified best practices and recommendations - which are currently being discussed in the music industry - aimed at building a better music copyright data infrastructure. Improvements and reforms should consider the following points:

1. (Mandatory Metadata at Upload) – In principle, platforms should not accept music lacking ISRC, ISWC, and IPI information, nor be allowed to overwrite existing metadata.
2. (Identification of Unmatched Works) – Online music exploiters and CMOs should actively identify and resolve unmatched tracks, ensuring “black-box” revenues are distributed fairly.
3. (Linking Works and Recordings) – Every recording submission should include its corresponding composition identifier; the ISRC and ISWC could be linked by law.
4. (Licensing Hubs and IMEs) – Hybrid licensing entities operating in the EU, like ICE and MINT, should be treated as CMOs, with equivalent transparency and accountability duties.
5. (EU-Wide Oversight) – Metadata-quality supervision across the EU could be a mandatory requirement for all CMOs willing to obtain a ‘Passport’ to issue online

licences for musical works. This would give composers' and publishers' societies greater incentives to partner with technical providers like BMAT.

6. Performer Remuneration and Data – If the EU decided to introduce and harmonise a statutory remuneration right for online uses of music performances, this right should be backed by performer-identification data to foster fairness and traceability.

Conclusion and Looking Ahead

Metadata are - therefore - more than technical identifiers. They are the legal and ethical architecture of authorship in the digital age, deciding who exists in the economy of visibility and who remains unseen. Without reliable metadata, fairness collapses into bureaucracy and guesswork. But with shared standards and genuine transparency, data can become a tool of justice, turning fairness from a principle into a measurable reality.

To make that vision tangible, Europe could move towards a Music Metadata Agreement - an open, auditable, and inclusive framework ensuring that transparency and accountability are built into the very infrastructure of music rights.

If you missed our previous episode, *Streaming Services v. Social Media Platforms*, we invite you to explore how digital intermediaries transformed licensing and revenue flows — the very mechanisms that metadata now seeks to make accountable.

In our next episode, we turn to the next frontier: *Artificial Intelligence*. How will machines that learn from music reshape creativity, ownership, and the very idea of what it means to be a creator?