



Release a CD – Do it yourself

- [Why release a CD?](#)
- [Putting together a CD](#)
- [The money](#)
- [The recording process](#)
- [After the recording: mastering, office work, manufacturing](#)
- [Promoting and selling your CD](#)
- [More Information](#)

As a musician, the release of your first CD is an important step in your career. This article will guide you in the process of creating, recording, manufacturing and selling your music.

Releasing your own CD is a good idea when record labels are not yet interested in releasing your music. Within a reasonable budget, you can do everything yourself with the result that you create exposure, draw attention and show that you are taking things seriously. When you have released a first CD successfully, it may help to secure co-operation with a label in the next project, though some musicians actually prefer to keep doing it themselves.

Why release a CD?

Though music is now distributed through different types of media, a CD release is still at the centre of a new music release. 70% of all music is still sold on CD, so at present, a CD release is a worthy investment, easily combined with digital or other media (vinyl).

There are basically three reasons to release your own music on a CD:

- **Artistic statement:** the audience and critics consider a CD as an important artistic statement. It shows who you are as a musician, and how serious you are about making music. A single-track release will probably not have the same impact as a full album. And: a recording turns your playing into a piece of art that will last.
- **Promotion tool:** of course, a CD can bring your music onto the desk of bookers and promoters. But it is also a news event in itself, giving media a reason to review and interview you, and play your music. For you, it could be a reason to organize a presentation or a tour. If you record for promotion reasons only, your recording does not need to be as long as a full CD: four songs could be sufficient, but remember that many artists send in a full album, including artwork, so your demo has some serious competition.
- **To make money:** you can make some money by selling your CDs, but be realistic about this: CD sales do no longer bring in as much money as they used to. Also, remember that you will give away CDs for promotion. A good aim for your first non-commercial release is to at least earn back the money you invested in producing the CD in the first place.

Putting together a CD

Consider the things listed below to develop a strong concept for your CD.

Make choices

A CD is a statement and a statement is a choice. Think of what should be included in the recording and what should be left out, based on the general idea of it. Save material and ideas that do not fit the overall concept of the recording for your next project or your bonus releases. And if you want to make your CD a real statement, do not try to copy the CD of your heroes, but make the one you are missing!

Place it in a bigger context

A CD represents who you are, artistically. The artwork will be understood in relation to the music. The same goes for photographs on your CD and promotion material, just as the things you say



about your music in interviews. Presenting a consistent style increases your credibility and visibility. Think about a visual style and language that support your music. It could be a good idea to find a general *theme* that underlies your project, because it makes your CD stand out, more interesting and easier to remember.

Target your audience

No matter what the CD means to you, the artist, it will eventually find a place in people's lives where it fits and to which it contributes. You could consider playing into this and design it for specific situations in specific people's lives.

Unity and diversity

Some unity should be felt in the overall mood, subject, sound, or concept. But within this unity there should be enough diversity, variation and contrast to keep it interesting.

Think about the sound

Recording is actually another creative layer in the music. Countless styles, philosophies and fashions exist in the recording world, and have resulted in many different 'sounds'. Some have become the signature of a specific label, a producer or a style. Take this seriously: develop a good idea about how your music should sound. Listen to the 'sound' of recordings. Ask engineers and producers about it. Collect some reference recordings and play them to the people you will work with. Look for the studio, the equipment and the people that can deliver the sound that you want.

Consider hiring a producer

Recording standards are high nowadays, and the whole job can be quite complex and specialized. An experienced producer (it could be the recording engineer) can prevent you from making beginner's mistakes. He/she is also more objective than you and enables you to see your project through somebody else's eyes. He/she could be a help when there are different opinions in the band/ensemble. Finally, he/she can keep an eye on the time and money while you are busy recording.

The money

Assuming that you will earn back the expenses of your recording within two years, the main question is how to raise the funds to pay for the production costs. You can use your own savings, or try (crowd) funding.

Where does the money go

Here is an estimate of professional prices (all prices exclude VAT):

- **Studio time:** most studios are booked by the day. A day usually consists of 10-12 studio hours. Prices vary between € 400 and € 900 per day, excluding the engineer. Booking by the hour is more expensive, but it could be more profitable if you use the time efficiently. Make efficient use of your studio time: prepare well (equipment, decisions, planning, practice, sound) and do not book longer sessions than you can handle. Long hours usually affect your assessment abilities and creativity. Take breaks in between sessions to prevent making hasty decisions.
- **Engineer:** most studios have their own engineer. A good and committed engineer is extremely valuable because he knows how to get the best sound out of the studio. Meet with him before your recording session, play him your demo tracks and some reference tracks and find out if your ideas match (€ 175 – 500 per day).
- **Musicians:** if you play with your own band/group/ensemble, it is reasonable to ask them to cut down or even withhold any charges, since they will benefit directly from the results (concerts). If you need to hire a specialized studio musician, their prices will vary from roughly € 300-1000 per day depending on their skills and reputation.
- **Producer:** you could agree on a fixed amount for the whole project, a share of the royalties or a combination of the two. Agree on the tasks beforehand since the job of a producer is not well defined. His tasks could include: taking responsibility for the quality of the recording sound; keeping an eye on time and money; making artistic choices; solving conflicts; etc.



- **Catering:** good food and drink keep everybody happy while working hard. Think about it in advance: once in the studio, you may not have time to get it cheap! Maybe a friend would like to take care of this.
- **CD-Rs/back-up space:** the studio will charge you for the CDs of the recordings that you take home in between the sessions and for the hard-disk space that your project needs. Count on a maximum of € 50 for the whole project.
- **Artwork material:** you may need to hire a photographer or artist. Sometimes you can negotiate a deal with the artist, as your CD can give his/her work exposure. Look for someone who is in the same stage of his/her career as you. A decent photo-shoot may cost you € 500.
- **Artwork design:** for the booklet and inlay, you need someone who can make a cool design and prepare it technically for printing according to the specifications (to be given by the CD manufacturer).
- **Mastering:** the average price for an album mastering is € 600. To save money, you could have your recording engineer do it, but remember that it is a different kind of job, and a pair of fresh ears could be very welcome for your mastering.
- **Manufacturing:** search the Internet for the cheapest deal. On the whole, prices do not vary significantly, but if you have special needs (a small number of CDs, a special edition, fast delivery), you may find some special offers. € 1,30 per cd with a circulation of 500 CD's.
- **Copyright:** if you release music that is copyright-protected, you will have to pay a small sum for every CD that you print. This money is meant for the original composer/lyricist. If this composer is not you, it will cost you about € 0.65 per CD.
- **Travel and hotel expenses:** agree on this when you book the musicians.
- **Promotion:** you will spend money to make sure those boxes filled with CDs in your room find their way to many homes and stereo systems! (CD presentations, website, flyers, posters, etc).

More money tips

Do not put financial pressure on the people you work with. They are passionate professionals who, just like you, try to make a living out of their art. So respect the fact that they need money to live from.

Friends might be willing to help you out and work for less, but you create a more professional relationship if you pay, even if it is just a little bit.

Time is money: if you do not have much money to spend, you can use your time to make your project cheaper. Prepare very well. Practice well. And see if you can do some things yourself. Anything can be learned if you take the time and the effort. People who are passionate about music are usually willing to share their knowledge with you, and the Internet is also a good source of information.

The recording process

Set up the instruments in the best possible way in terms of sound and view (you should be able to see each other). Let the engineer place the microphones. Check the monitoring system and do a sound check. Then start your recordings. Fix the most urgent mistakes.

Next step (if desired) is overdubs: a musician/vocalist adds an extra part to the recording. This can be done in a different time and place. Then you edit the material: fix little mistakes; throw away unnecessary recordings. After this, you are ready to mix: match the different tracks and manipulate as much as you think is necessary and as much as you like.

Two ways of recording: live recording vs. overdubbing

In a live recording situation, the whole ensemble plays the music at the same time, and the engineer captures the recording to make it sound like the listener was there himself. The goal of this recording is to create a perfect impression of the music as it is played by the musicians (jazz) or



the intentions of the composer (classical). Sound effects, manipulations, overdubs and edits are sparse, and only to make the music sound more 'natural'.

Pros and cons

Live recording is mostly done in the case of classical and jazz music. It takes little time in the studio; all you need is a good sound check and a well-prepared ensemble. The success of the recording depends greatly on the performance and synergy of the musicians at that moment. You could record your entire CD within two or three days. But you need a space with good conditions in terms of space, acoustics, leakage and view. The studios suitable for these sessions are generally more expensive. Secondly, it is harder to repair mistakes and add overdubs because of the leakage and playing differences. Good microphones are a must; extensive processing equipment is less important.

Overdubbing

Musicians do not play at the same time, but each in turn. Layer after layer, they try out and add their parts. Decisions on the arrangement are sometimes even delayed until the mixing starts. The studio is used as a creative tool for sound manipulation. Pop and rock recordings are usually made in this way. The music is 'constructed' rather than 'registered'.

Pros and cons

Overdubbing takes more time (and money), but you have more control over the result. Between recording sessions, you can listen at home and prepare new dubs efficiently. And you can endlessly try new dubs and instruments, and some dubs can be done in a cheaper place (home). On the other hand, it is more difficult to create a lively sounding track. And some music relies so much on the moment of playing together that the overdub technique is unsuitable (improvised music, classical ensemble playing, rhythm section).

Combination playing live and dubbing

The music will decide which technique to use. You could decide to record part of your music live and add the other instruments by dubbing. Some tips:

- For a rock band: record the bass and drums together and then finish the recordings through dubbing.
- For a vocal jazz band: record the vocals together with the band without leakage, so later on you can decide to re-record them.
- For a big production: record the basis of the music first, and then record sections like string and horns through dubbing.
- Create a big section: record the same players of a section several times (though the sound will not be as good as a whole section).
- Creative ideas: first collect a lot of material through jamming and playing, which you can then use as basic material for further processing and dubbing.

General recording tips

- Check the sound properly: check the recorded sound, the leakage and the monitoring. A good monitor mix is crucial, because you will play according to what you hear.
- Make sure it is clear who makes the final decisions.
- Keep the musical flow and do not discuss and listen back more than necessary.
- Distribute your energy well throughout the session: keep an eye on everyone's energy and focus.
- Do not make countless takes of one song; stop when you sense you have reached the maximum of your capabilities (very likely within four takes) and move on.
- Only fix the mistakes that can merely be fixed right after recording; leave the rest for the overdub stage.
- Make notes of your takes, dubs, mistakes etc for the later stages of the process.
- Keep a good and positive atmosphere whatever happens.



Editing

Once you start to listen critically for mistakes or unevenness, you will probably hear many of them. But do not be discouraged: it is because you are focused on them. Before you start fixing every little detail, sit back, broaden your perspective and listen if in the general flow of the music the mistakes are really disturbing. On the other hand, a CD will be played many times, so a 'mistake' will not be forgotten as easily as one made during a concert.

Mixing

For a good workflow you do the real mixing after you have finished all the recordings. The amount of work depends greatly on the type of recording. When you have done a 'live recording' with a good sound check, mixing will be limited to a few adjustments in colour, levels and space. When you have made lots of dubs, without a fixed plan, the actual process of creation will start now: selecting and combining tracks, processing the sounds, adding effects, cutting and copy-pasting fragments, etc. This workload varies from basic to extensive.

Generally, this is what you can do in the mixing process:

- Adjust the colour of the instruments (equalizing) so they will sound better together.
- Adjust the volume of the instruments (level) and keep their dynamics in control (compression/limiting).
- Apply special effects to the instruments (amping, modulation, filtering, etc).
- Divide instruments over the left and right channel (panning).
- Add artificial space (reverb/delay) to all or some of the instruments.
- Mix down to a single stereo track ready for mastering.

General mixing tips

Give the engineer time to first set up a basic mix before you start talking about details.

A good mix is like a puzzle where every piece will fall into its place. Realize that every track has its own function in the mix: not every instrument should be equally loud, or 'wet', or 'in front'. Keep your ears fresh: take rests in between, play reference records in between, compare your work with other mixes.

After the recording: mastering, office work, manufacturing

Master / artwork

In the mastering process, you will assemble all the tracks and fine-tune them. Some people leave this stage totally up to the master engineer; some like to join the mastering sessions, giving the engineer input and learning from it. This is roughly what a mastering engineer does:

- Adjust the high, low and middle tones of all tracks so that they are all in balance.
- Adjust the dynamics of all tracks so the loud and soft passages are in balance and can be enjoyed from an average stereo system.
- Put the tracks in the right order (pq codes), with pauses in between.
- Add information about the composer, performer, producer (CD-text) and the ISRC code to every track.

Paperwork and laws: things to take care of

- **ISRC codes:** you attach a unique code to each digital track so every song can be identified wherever it is played or copied. In this way your copyright organisation can easily find out which radio station broadcasts your song(s). Apply for ISRC codes at Sena a few weeks before the mastering date. They are free.
- **Copyright:** in the Netherlands you have to comply with the copyright rules, before you send your master to the factory. Do this a couple of weeks before manufacturing. Through a form or through the Internet, you inform STEMRA (the Dutch copyright organization for duplication) of which songs you will multiply, how many copies, and what your retail price will be. STEMRA will then calculate your copyright costs. If all of your tracks are copyright protected, it will cost you approx. €1 per CD. If you are printing your own songs, or a



classical/traditional repertoire that is no longer copyright protected, STEMRA will charge you, but you can apply for a refund of that money.

- **Label and catalogue number:** your CD production should be classified by label (the name of your own record company) and a number. You can give it any name and number you want, as long as it is unique.

Manufacturing your CD

There are several companies that print CDs and artwork. You have to deliver your material according to their specifications. You can also upload the material. Give the specifications for the artwork to your graphic designer. Keep in mind that they just copy the material you give them, so make sure you hand in the correct design without any mistakes.

The factory will make a glass master of your CD, on the basis of which it will make as many copies as you want. For your second printing, you do not have to pay for this glass master again. The usual delivery time is two weeks.

How to deal with your own copyright

Things are changing in the enforcement of and attitudes towards copyright. How copyright will develop in the future is unclear. In any case, make sure you have proof that you are the original composer. In the Netherlands, this can be done in two ways. The first way is to write down the music on a sheet of paper, put it in an envelope and send it to yourself by mail. Once received, do not open it. The other way is to go a designated accountancy and let them put a stamp on your sheet.

For your first recordings, consider that if you are the only one printing and selling your music, on a small scale, it is cheaper not to become a member of a copyright organization. It will start to become beneficial as soon as other parties (record company, marketing company, film, etc) start releasing your music. If you regularly perform your own music live, you could become a member of BUMA only.

A new, interesting, and more flexible way to assert your copyright is through Creative Commons.

Promoting and selling your CD

Where and how

- **Sell your CD at concerts:** this is probably the best moment to sell your records. Some theatres may claim a percentage (10%) of your turnover, because you are selling under their roof.
- **Put your CD on the Internet:** sell it on your own site or put it your music on other sites.
- **Sell directly through a record store:** ask a record store (preferably a specialized one) to sell your CDs in their shop. They will pay you for every CD that they sell and keep ca. 40%. Check every few months and ask for a prominent display.
- **Distribution deal:** you collaborate with a distributor (the company that delivers the CDs to the retail stores). This ensures that your CD is available on demand in every record store. You take care of the main part of the promotion, and you will still be the owner of the master and the music. This form of distribution is effective when your reputation is spreading. Also think of big Internet retail stores (Bol, Amazon).
- **Licence deal:** you agree with a company that they will take care of both distribution and promotion. This could work if the company is committed to promoting you.
- **Sell it as a download:** as an independent artist, you can make your music available on iTunes through an aggregator (at the moment, CDbaby or Tunecore are the most popular).

Trends

The Internet and modern technology are rapidly changing the way people 'consume' music. They also change our role as musicians, as well as the way we can generate money, eliminating traditional possibilities whilst opening up new opportunities. For the music industry, these are times of struggle, experimentation and shifting marketing models.



People's experiences of culture are becoming more interdisciplinary. A musical experience now goes together with a video, a website, an app, an event, a special location. As musicians, we can play into this development by creatively embedding our music in a bigger experience.

Music itself is not the only factor that makes people decide to buy it. They are also attracted by other things: the fact that it is new, available, their identification with the artist and the way in which the music reflects their lifestyle. You can see this in the way music is promoted: things 'around' the music are just as important as the music itself: the video, personality of the artist, news and media appearance.

Though illegal downloads may suggest the opposite, people are still prepared to pay for things they find valuable. This 'value' to people may be something else, or something more than just the music.

Tips

- **Change the focus of your creativity:** use it not only for your music, but also for the way you bring it to the audience.
- **Try to establish a new money flow:** many people download music for free, but still spend a lot of money on 'lifestyle items': clothing, pieces of art and accessories related to your music. Use this merchandise option to increase your income. You could also try to make money through live gigs. Although the pay will not be that high in the beginning, it is something that cannot be copied illegally. Earn money from the people that benefit from the traffic that you generate: advertisers (this is, for example, how the free version of Spotify works). Try to create things around you that people like to spend money on: events, teaching, writing, signed instruments, etc.
- **Do not forget, 'old school' still works:** there are still many people who like to get an original physical copy of your music, such as in the form of a CD.
- **Make the CD an attractive item,** so that a copy will not be valued as much as the original. You can release different versions. Once the first wave of sales has ebbed away, you can make a new release with a bonus track, or a bonus live-DVD.
- **Make use of new technologies:** the CD is mainly a carrier of 74 minutes of sound. A DVD adds motion pictures to it and makes the experience multi-medial. An app can make the experience interactive. And once you let go of the strict borders between creator and listener, a new range of possibilities opens up.
- **Develop a relationship with your audience:** people will be more committed if you show they mean more to you than just the source of your income. The Internet offers opportunities to create 'relationships' with your audience. Involve them in the process of creation by showing them how you work. One step further is to involve the audience in the creation of your music or side-products: give them samples of their music to create remix versions or let them provide images for your video or artwork.

More information

Op BeroepKunstenaar.nl

- Find info on: *Marketing, Music on the internet, Experience economy, record labels, copyright, funds and crowdfunding*. Also, read about: *I want to make a CD*