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Your Honors:

I welcome this opportunity to comment on the review of rates and terms for royalties for songwriters. Songwriting is an honorable profession, and a lifelong vocation with the same discipline, attention to detail, and devotion to craft as every other creative pursuit which elevates our humanity and expresses our deepest feelings. ‘It all begins with a song’, as a recent documentary about songwriters was titled.

I am a guest teacher in music and writing departments at various universities around the country— Yale, NYU, University of Iowa, University of Pennsylvania, and more, as well as a songwriter for forty-plus years. I’m enormously grateful for the gift of being able to weave poetry and stories into melodies, and have applied a rigorous discipline to better myself in my work over the decades. The intensity of purpose and willingness to work hard which I see in young songwriters when I hold writing workshops is heartwarming, and often heartbreaking, because I know so few of them will actually ‘make it’ in the music business.

One of the most reliable ways a songwriter can still make a minimum-to-decent wage is through mechanical royalties from sales of songs— both download and physical purchases— but the small percentage of these sales going to songwriters has not been raised or even been adjusted for inflation since the rate was set 15 years ago. Vinyl sales are increasing— which is wonderful news for creators. Young music consumers are newly enamored of vinyl records. They want something they can own, and hold in their hands. They want to read liner notes and pull out the inserts and see who the musicians are, and who wrote the songs, and read the lyrics. I am by no means a young or new artist, but even my audience is slowly turning back to vinyl, as partly evidenced by the number of vinyl records I sign after each show.

There are many things that need to be changed to support the creative class and show writers and artists that they are valued members of society, and that they deserve to be paid for their work as much as any other professional who provides service— and we are indeed a service industry, albeit one for the heart and soul.

One easy change is to release songwriters from a 20 year freeze-out (to use a term from songwriter Bruce Springsteen, who, by the way, is doing fine financially, but I assume would want young songwriters coming up behind him to also do fine), to increase the rate, and adjust for inflation.

I value the next generation of songwriters deeply, and I don't want to see an entire population give up their passion and their chosen vocation, because they can't pay the rent. I am also fine financially (not as fine as Bruce or Beyonce, but who is?) but there are many, many struggling songwriters who critically depend on a fair rate for physical sales.

The need for fair pay in regards mechanical royalties from sales of songs is more dire because of the lack of fairness in compensation from streaming services. Streaming services are not in the music business. They are in the tech business, and they have built multi-billion dollar profit machines on the back of songwriters and musicians whom they use as loss-leader content. Again, a modicum of equity and fairness could be created for songwriters in a place that can be controlled by setting a fair rate, adjusted for inflation. It's only a beginning in our determination to protect and value the creative population, but it's a very real-world, common sense step, and I hope you consider who is behind the music that sustains, nurtures, and uplifts you in your lives, and adjust this critical royalty rate.

It all begins with a song.

Respectfully,

Rosanne Cash  
Songwriter  
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