

# BREAKING OUT THE CODE THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARD RECORDING CODE (ISRC) PROGRAM

## A POWERFUL TOOL FOR ROYALTY COLLECTION, ADMINISTRATION, AND ANTI-PIRACY SAFEGUARDS IN THE DIGITAL ARENA.

The ISRC contains 4 sub-codes:

**COUNTRY CODE:** The country where the registrant's home office is located (2 characters).

**REGISTRANT CODE:** Identifies the Registrant within a National Agency (3 alphanumeric characters).

**YEAR OF REFERENCE:** The 2-digit year in which the ISRC was assigned to the recording.

**DESIGNATION CODE:** The code assigned to the sound recording by the registrant. This code may not be repeated within the same calendar year (5 digits).

**Example:** ISRC US-Z9A-99-00001

For visual presentation, the letters "ISRC" should always precede the ISRC and the sub-codes should be separated by hyphens.

### BACKGROUND

By implementing the International Standard Recording Code (ISRC), the recording industry is facilitate digital music broadcasting and digital phonorecord delivery.

### WHAT DOES IT DO?

The ISRC is a unique international identifier for sound and music video recordings. It comprises a 12 character alphanumeric code and functions as a universal serial number for each sound recording. Unlike the Universal Product Code, the ISRC is tied to the recording in the track and not the carrier of the track (CD, cassette). In addition, the ISRC remains allocated to a sound recording regardless of changes in ownership. It is an extremely powerful tool for royalty collection, administration and anti-piracy safeguards in the digital arena.

### HOW IS IT USED?

The ISRC is usually assigned by the first owner of a sound recording, or track (usually a recording company). The owner of the sound recording applies for a registrant code from the national agency for the country where the owner resides. In the US, that agency is the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). Once the RIAA has issued a Registrant Code, the owner may then allocate ISRCs for each individual sound recording that is to be released to the public.

ISRCs can be embedded in many digital sound carriers. They are stored as PQ codes on Red Book audio CDs and they are inserted in the data stream during the pre-mastering process.

### ISRC GUIDELINES

The International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) maintains the ISRC Handbook and is the international authority on all matters relating to the ISRC. The handbook provides a wealth of detailed information on ISRCs and is recommended reading for anyone who issues music products.

It is available at:  
[ifpi.org/isrc](http://ifpi.org/isrc)

### Encoding ISRC

The ISRC is encoded at the mastering stage of the recording. In the case of music videos, the ISRC appears in the time code for all analog formats and on the label outside of the box.

### Registrant Code

In 1998, the term, "Registrant Code" replaced the previous term, "First Owner Code." The Registrant Code simply identifies the organization that assigned the ISRC. In most cases, it is the first owner of the sound recording.

### Phonogram and Videogram Registrant Codes

The registrants must be able to distinguish between the ISRCs that are assigned to phonograms and those that are assigned to videograms. The RIAA recommends that music producers with a relatively small number of video assets begin all video ISRCs with a "9." This allows the use of a single Registrant Code for both audio and audiovisual assets. Producers with more video assets may want to request a separate Registrant Code for use only with videograms.

### Year of Reference Code

The Year of Reference Code now identifies the year in which the ISRC was assigned to the recording.

### Designation Code

In 1994, the five digit Designation Code replaced the three/four digit Recording Code and the one/two digit Recording Item Code outlined in the 1991 Implementation Guide. The Designation Code consists of five digits and should preferably be assigned sequentially. Care should be taken to ensure that Designation Codes are not re-used within a calendar year.

### Separate Exploitation

If at any time in the future the asset may be separately exploited (this does not necessarily imply monetary value), then an ISRC should be allocated. Examples include: 30-second clips, hidden tracks, interludes, callouts, and skits.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please visit the Recording Industry Association of America's web site at [www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com), or contact Laura Coker or Carlos Garza at +1 202-775-0101 or send an email message to [isrc@riaa.com](mailto:isrc@riaa.com).

## Frequently Asked Questions about ISRC

### ***Q. What exactly is an ISRC?***

**A.** ISRC is a unique identifier for sound and music video recordings where one, and only one, identifying code is allocated to each version of a recording. For code allocation purposes, the ISRC is separated into its different elements. However, when the code is being used, it is the complete code that represents the sound or music video recording and no significance should be accorded to any one element.

In particular, the Registrant Code cannot be assumed to identify a current rights owner as the recording may have changed ownership since code allocation. Additionally, rights may vary territory by territory. Further, the year of reference cannot be assumed to be a year of recording. It represents the year the ISRC was assigned, which may or may not be the year the sound recording was released.

### ***Q. What is the difference between a “sound recording” and a “track”?***

**A.** A “sound recording” is the fixation of a musical work in an auditory format. A full-length release, such as an album, will contain several sound recordings. Each sound recording usually contains one musical work of authorship (medleys are an exception).

The instantiation of a sound recording on a release is called a “track.” A Sound recording can appear as different tracks on different releases. For example, track 3 on your first album could appear as track 1 on a greatest hits album or compilation. If the sound recording is the same then each track should carry the same ISRC.

### ***Q. What does it cost?***

**A.** The RIAA currently does not charge a fee for assignment of Registrant Codes or answering questions on the ISRC program. Your implementation of the ISRC is cost effective. It can be done without special investment in equipment or technological measures. It only requires you to develop an internal system for administering ISRCs.

### ***Q. How do I create ISRCs?***

**A.** The first step is to apply for a Registrant Code for your recording company. This code can be obtained from RIAA, the national ISRC administration agency for the United States. Membership in the RIAA is not required to obtain a Registrant Code. RIAA strongly encourages all U.S. sound recording copyright owners to apply for an ISRC Registrant Code and assign ISRCs to all sound recordings that are planned for release.

### ***Q. How do I apply for a Registrant Code?***

**A.** The application form for a Registrant Code can be obtained through the contacts above or downloaded from the RIAA web site: [http://www.riaa.com/issues/audio/isrc\\_faq.asp](http://www.riaa.com/issues/audio/isrc_faq.asp)

### ***Q. Who is responsible for assigning ISRCs?***

**A.** The first owner of the rights to the sound recording usually assigns an ISRC. However, if the first owner of the track did not assign the ISRC, then the current owner should assign it using the current owner’s Registrant Code. ISRC Agents designated by the RIAA are also authorized to issue ISRCs for small labels and independent artists who give them exclusive permission to do so on their behalf.

### ***Q. How long is an ISRC good for?***

**A.** Once assigned, the ISRC identifies the track throughout its life. No other sound recording should have the same ISRC and only one ISRC should be used to identify a sound recording. ISRC functions like a vehicle identification number on a car or a serial number on a piece of equipment.

***Q. Does change in ownership affect ISRC?***

**A.** Changes in ownership do not affect the ISRC. An ISRC must be assigned to every track on a phonogram or videogram. When an unchanged sound recording is reused on a new phonogram or videogram, a new ISRC should **not** be applied even if there is a new owner of the sound recording.

***Q. When must a new ISRC be allocated to a previously existing recording?***

**A.** A new ISRC must be allocated when:

1. A sound recording is re-mixed or edited
2. If a new fade changes the length of a track by more than 10 seconds.
3. Edits that change the length of a sound recording by more than 10 seconds (playing time is measured from the first recorded modulation to the last recorded modulation).
4. A previously released sound recording is partially used as part of a compilation.
5. A “full restoration” of a historical recording is performed by re-mastering, re-pitching, re-equalizing, de-noising or de-clicking a sound recording to meet contemporary quality standards. The registrant of the recording has discretion when making the determination between full re-mastering (sound restoration) and simple re-mastering (reproduction without sound restoration).

\*\*This is not a complete list of instances that require new ISRCs for previously designated sound recordings. For a complete description of situations that require a new ISRC, please consult the 2003 ISRC Handbook available at [www.ifpi.org](http://www.ifpi.org).

***Q. What if I change the name of my song?***

**A.** If a company decides to change the title of a sound recording, with no alterations to the sound recording track itself, we recommend keeping the same ISRC.

***Q. What if a sound recording has more than one copyright owner?***

**A.** One company in the split ownership must be responsible for the ISRC assignment.

***Q. Can I register a track that has been previously issued, but never assigned an ISRC?***

**A.** Yes. Although an ISRC should be assigned by the first owner, this does not always happen. The current owner can assign ISRCs for sound recordings that have not been assigned ISRCs by their first owners. The Registrant Code will be that of the current owner of the rights and the Year of Reference Code will be the year the ISRC was assigned.

***Q. What do I need in order to assign ISRCs to my sound recordings?***

**A.** First, the owner of a sound recording needs a Registrant Code. You can find the ISRC Registrant Code Request form at the RIAA web site. For more information, contact us by e-mail ([isrc@riaa.com](mailto:isrc@riaa.com)) or at (202) 775-0101.

***Q. Do I have to be a member of RIAA to apply for a Registrant Code or request information about the ISRC program?***

**A.** No. RIAA is the national administrator of the ISRC program in the United States, and as such does not require membership to assign Registrant Codes or provide information to sound recording copyright owners.

***Q. How long does it take the RIAA to assign a Registrant Code?***

***A.*** It can take up to one week from the day we receive the request form. The request form can be faxed to us at: (202) 775-7253 *or* scanned and emailed to: [isrc@riaa.com](mailto:isrc@riaa.com)

***Q. Does a sound recording copyright owner only need a single Registrant Code?***

***A.*** It depends. If the sound recording copyright owner produces sound recordings and music video recordings, it may want to have separate Registrant Codes for sound and music video recordings. This is recommended for Registrants with substantial video catalogs. Smaller labels and independent artists may also differentiate their video ISRCs by beginning the Designation Code with the digit, “9”.

***Q. How do I assign the Year of Reference Code?***

***A.*** This 2-digit code reflects the year in which the ISRC is assigned, irrespective of when the sound recording was originally fixed or released.

***Q. If recording rights are sold or transferred does the ISRC change?***

***A.*** No, if the sound recording remains the same, so should the ISRC.

***Q. What should I do with the ISRC once I have it?***

***A.*** 1.) The ISRC should be allocated to a recording when a master is completed and the decision to release a recording has been made. Once you have an ISRC it should be encoded in digital sound carriers in the pre-mastering or authoring process in according with the specification on the format used.

2.) We also strongly recommend that Registrants keep good records and ensure that the details of the recording (the metadata) and the ISRC allocated are included in relevant repertoire databases.

***Q. Where can a sound recording copyright owner obtain a detailed copy of the ISRC implementation guidelines?***

***A.*** Please contact the Technology Department of the RIAA ([isrc@riaa.com](mailto:isrc@riaa.com)) or the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) on the web at [www.ifpi.org](http://www.ifpi.org) ([isrc@ifpi.org](mailto:isrc@ifpi.org)).