AFM & SAG-AFTRA Intellectual Property Rights Fund Distributing A Record $70 Million In Royalties

By David Robb
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Some 50,000 session musicians and background singers will be sharing more than $70 million in royalties collected by the AFM & SAG-AFTRA Intellectual Property Rights Distribution Fund – the largest distribution in the fund’s history. The average payment is about $1,500, but some performers are receiving well above that amount. Checks started going out April 30.

The not-for-profit organization collects and distributes royalties to non-featured performers on sound recordings for songs played on satellite radio, non-interactive streaming, and other digital formats domestically and internationally. As digital platforms have grown, so has the fund’s collections and distributions. Since its inception in 2008, the fund has distributed more than $500 million to participants and their beneficiaries. It distributed more than $62 million last year and $60 million in 2019.

“Every year, we’ve been able to collect more revenue on behalf of our participants,” said Sidney Kibodeaux White, the fund’s chief operating officer. “Given the enormous impact the pandemic has had on the ability to earn a living on both instrumentalists and vocalists, we are thrilled to be able to assist non-featured performers by collecting and distributing royalty income they might not know they’re entitled to receive. Unlike other rights collectives, there is no membership or registration requirement in order to qualify – as long as a musician participates as a non-featured performer on a covered sound recording, that musician is considered a ‘participant’ for distribution purposes.”

White also encouraged those who think they may be owed money to visit the fund’s website for more information.

“Though the music industry is slowly recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, its repercussions will be experienced for years to come,” the fund said in a statement. “As artists are searching for alternative streams of revenue in the face of economic uncertainty, the fund offers both union and non-union session musicians and vocalists a sense of relief.”

Said singer Kudisan Kai: “As a recording artist, I’ve been very fortunate to work with Elton John, Mary J. Blige, Joe Cocker, and many others. I also sing on movies, television shows, and commercials, so when I started receiving royalties from an organization with this long, funny name, I was happily surprised.”

Added Grammy-winning artist Alvin Chea of a cappella group Take 6: “If you’ve worked as a vocalist or a musician, the AFM & SAG-AFTRA Fund may have some funds for you. I know I’ve worked on a lot of big projects with artists like Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, and Elton John, along with some smaller projects – and they find them all. They’ve blessed me and given me many pleasant surprises in my mailbox.”

Although initially formed by the American Federation of Musicians and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the fund is an independent entity whose purpose is to collect and distribute royalties from various foreign territories and royalties established by government statute under U.S. Copyright Law. The U.S. Copyright Act, which originally covered performance rights only for publishers and authors, underwent significant changes in the 1990s. The most important of these were the Audio Home Recording Act of 1992, the Digital Performance Right in Sound Recordings Act of 1995, and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998. These acts amended the original Copyright Act to provide performance royalties in digital media (subscription services, webcasting, home recording) to copyright holders, featured performers and non-featured performers, such as session musicians and vocalists.