Afrobeats and Copyright in the Streaming Age

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» Introduction: When Sound Becomes Data

From Fela's "Water no get enemy", Wizkid's "One Dance" featuring Drake, to Asake's "Lonely at the top" and Davido's "IF", Afrobeat has continued to traverse the world. It continues to change and adapt its form, sound, and distribution to the trend and technology of the moment. Afrobeat has evolved over time to produce a unique sonic feel. It has offered the world a unique interpretation of African music.

Not long ago, music, in Nigeria, used to travel primarily through record players, cassettes, Compact Disks (CDs), radio stations and word of mouth. Today it travels through algorithms. A song recorded in Lagos can reach listeners in London, New York or Tokyo within minutes of release through digital platforms such as Boomplay, Spotify, Apple Music, YouTube Music, Tidal, Deezer among others. Afrobeats has evolved from a regional sound into a global cultural and economic force, propelled by streaming platforms and digital distribution networks that have transformed how music is produced, distributed and consumed.

While Nigeria has recently amended its copyright law to recognise digital rights, the effective implementation of these reforms by the Nigerian Copyright Commission (NCC) will determine whether they translate into a sustained global competitiveness in the streaming era. The Act introduces key provisions such as notice-and-takedown mechanisms for

Artist Question

"What legal protections does Nigerian copyright law provide if my music is uploaded or shared online without my consent?"

infringing content, protections against the circumvention of technological measures, clearer rules on moral rights and the commencement of copyright, improved access to works for persons with visual impairments, strengthened regulation of collective management organisations, and remuneration rights for the broadcast of works. If properly implemented, these measures could enhance Nigeria's competitiveness in the global streaming economy.

As Nigeria's creative economy becomes increasingly digitised, legal infrastructure is no longer peripheral, it is foundational. The success of Afrobeats demonstrates the country's cultural influence, but long-term industry growth will depend on whether Nigeria can translate creative success into sustainable economic value through effective copyright governance.

» Afrobeats and the Global Digital Marketplace

The global rise of Afrobeats represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary music. Nigerian artists such as Burna Boy, Wizkid, Tems, Arya Starr and Rema have achieved international recognition, while collaborations with global artists and appearances on international charts have further expanded the genre's reach.

Nigerian artists have received nominations and wins at prestigious events including the Grammy Awards, the BET Awards and the Billboard Music Awards. Their works have also achieved significant chart success on global platforms such as the Billboard Hot 100 and the UK Official Charts, signalling the genre's growing commercial viability and international appeal.

Streaming platforms have democratized music distribution and consumption. Platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music and YouTube have eliminated many of the traditional barriers that once limited the international circulation of African music. Through digital distribution networks and algorithm-driven recommendations, Nigerian songs now circulate within a global marketplace where geographic boundaries are far less restrictive.

The result has been an unprecedented level of global exposure for Nigerian music. Afrobeats playlists attract millions of listeners worldwide, and viral trends on social media platforms such as TikTok have further amplified the genre's visibility. In many ways, digital technology has done for Nigerian music what traditional export channels could not: it has connected artists directly with global audiences.

Yet global visibility does not automatically translate into economic value. As digital distribution expands the reach of Nigerian music, questions about copyright protection, royalty administration and fair compensation become increasingly important.

» Copyright Law in Nigeria: Adapting to the Digital Era

Nigeria's copyright system has undergone significant reform in recent years. The enactment of the Copyright Act 2022 [1] represents one of the most comprehensive updates to the country's intellectual property framework in decades. The Act aligns Nigeria with international copyright standards, particularly in relation to digital rights management and online exploitation of works. [2]

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The new law introduces provisions that reflect the realities of a digital creative economy, including recognition of digital rights and protections against online copyright infringement.[3]

Historically, Nigeria's copyright regime was designed for a media environment dominated by physical distribution and broadcast licensing. The rise of digital streaming, however, has transformed the way creative works are accessed and monetised. Music is now consumed primarily through online platforms where content can be reproduced, shared and distributed almost instantaneously.

The updated legislation attempts to respond to these changes by addressing issues such as digital reproduction, online distribution and technological protection measures. These provisions are intended to ensure that creators retain control over the digital use of their works and are able to benefit economically from the growing global demand for Nigerian music.

Equally important is the role of the Nigerian Copyright Commission (NCC), the regulatory body responsible for administering copyright law and enforcing compliance across the industry. In addition to legislative reform, effective copyright protection depends on the ability of regulatory institutions to monitor digital markets and respond to infringement in real time.

Another critical component of Nigeria's copyright ecosystem is the system of Collective Management Organisations (CMOs), which administer royalties on behalf of creators and rights holders. CMOs operate under regulations issued by the Nigerian Copyright Commission and are responsible for licensing the public use of musical works and distributing royalties to artists and composers. [4]

Recent regulatory developments have further reshaped this landscape. The introduction of the Collective Management Organisation Regulations 2025 [5] represents a significant effort to strengthen transparency, accountability and operational efficiency within CMOs. The Regulations introduce stricter licensing requirements, enhanced reporting obligations and clearer governance standards. In particular, CMOs are now required to maintain more accurate records, provide periodic disclosures to rights holders and operate under increased regulatory oversight with respect to royalty collection and distribution.

In the context of streaming platforms, these reforms carry important implications. Digital service providers will be required to engage more formally with licensed CMOs, ensuring that usage data is accurately reported and that royalties are properly calculated and remitted. Given that streaming generates vast volumes of micro-transactions driven by user data and metadata systems, the need for precision and transparency becomes even more critical.

The Regulations also create an opportunity to standardise licensing frameworks between CMOs and streaming platforms, potentially reducing fragmentation in rights administration. However, they may introduce additional compliance obligations for platforms that must now align their global licensing structures with local regulatory requirements in Nigeria.

Recent developments within the Nigerian music industry further illustrate the tensions surrounding collective management and royalty administration. Notably, leading record labels such as Mavin Records, Davido Music Worldwide and Chocolate City Music reportedly secured an interim court order restraining the Musical Copyright Society of Nigeria (MCSN) from accessing or disbursing certain copyright levy funds.[6]

The dispute highlights longstanding concerns within the industry regarding the governance, transparency and accountability of collective management organisations. At its core, the case raises fundamental questions about who is entitled to collect, manage and distribute royalties generated from the commercial exploitation of musical works in Nigeria.

If the courts ultimately decide in favour of the record labels, the immediate implication may not simply be an increase in revenue, but rather a shift in control over royalty flows. Such a decision could enable rights holders, particularly well-structured labels, to exercise greater oversight over how royalties are collected and distributed, potentially leading to more efficient and transparent payment systems.

However, this outcome may also have broader implications for the collective management framework. It could weaken the centralised role traditionally played by CMOs, leading to a more fragmented system where multiple entities assert competing claims over royalty administration. While this may benefit larger rights holders with the capacity to manage their own licensing and enforcement, it could simultaneously disadvantage independent artists who rely heavily on CMOs for representation and income collection.

If the decision reinforces the authority of CMOs, it would underscore the importance of strengthening regulatory oversight and institutional accountability, particularly in light of the new Collective Management Organisation Regulations 2025.

The dispute underscores a critical reality: the effectiveness of Nigeria's copyright system depends not only on legislative reform but also on trust in the institutions responsible for managing and distributing royalties. Without that trust, even the most well-designed legal frameworks may struggle to deliver equitable outcomes in the digital music economy.

Ultimately, the success of the 2025 Regulations will depend on effective enforcement and institutional capacity. If properly implemented, they have the potential to enhance trust in Nigeria's royalty ecosystem and ensure that the economic value generated by streaming is more equitably distributed among creators.

» Copyright Reform and Nigeria's Digital Economy Strategy

Nigeria's copyright reform also aligns with broader national policy efforts aimed at building a competitive digital economy. The National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (2020–2030) identifies creative industries as an important driver of economic diversification and digital innovation. [7]

Within this policy framework, intellectual property protection is not merely a legal issue but a strategic economic priority. Creative industries such as music, film and digital media generate employment, attract foreign investment and contribute to Nigeria's cultural influence on the global stage.

Nigeria's copyright reform therefore reflects more than legislative modernization; it signals a recognition that intellectual property is a strategic economic asset. As global demand for Nigerian music continues to grow, the country's ability to compete in the digital marketplace will depend not only on creative output but also on the strength of its institutional frameworks.

Effective enforcement, transparent royalty systems and coordinated digital governance will determine whether Nigerian creators merely participate in global streaming markets or meaningfully shape them.

» Opportunities and Challenges in the Streaming Economy

Despite the opportunities created by digital distribution, the streaming economy also presents several structural challenges for Nigerian artists and rights holders.

Streaming platforms operate on a per-stream payout model that distributes revenue based on total platform streams. While this system enables global access and monetisation, it also concentrates earnings among artists who achieve very high streaming volumes. For emerging Nigerian artists, visibility alone does not guarantee meaningful revenue.

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Another issue frequently raised by Nigerian artists and industry professionals is the disparity in streaming revenue across different markets. Streams generated in countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom typically yield higher payouts than streams originating from developing markets, including Nigeria.

This disparity reflects differences in subscription pricing, advertising revenue and overall platform monetisation structures across regions.

Beyond these structural issues, Nigerian artists and industry stakeholders have consistently highlighted practical challenges associated with streaming platforms, particularly within the local market.

A recurring issue is the disparity in royalty payouts and streaming rates between artists in the Global South such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda and those in the Global North, including the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. It is important to distinguish between overall royalty payouts and per-stream rates.

Per-stream rates differ significantly by market. For example, one million streams generated from high-value markets like the US or UK can yield approximately $4,000–$7,000, whereas the same number of streams from predominantly African markets may generate between $1,000 and $2,500. This gap reflects structural differences in streaming economics rather than simply audience size.

Several factors drive this disparity. Subscription prices in African markets are generally lower due to reduced purchasing power and exchange rate realities, which directly impact the revenue pool available for distribution. Additionally, advertising revenues, another key component of streaming income, are significantly lower. Label and distributor deductions can further reduce artists' earnings, particularly where contractual terms are less favourable. Finally, artists in the Global North often benefit from larger listenership in high-paying markets, amplifying their overall returns.

Artists such as Portable have publicly expressed frustration with the minimal income generated from streams, noting that earnings from platforms such as Apple Music remain disproportionately low, especially when streams originate from the Nigerian market. This reflects broader concerns about the limited revenue potential of domestic streaming, where lower subscription fees and advertising yields directly impact artist earnings. [8]

Concerns have also been raised regarding the integrity of streaming data. Magixx has criticised the prevalence of "streaming farms" and automated bots used to artificially inflate play counts. Industry commentary suggests that such practices distort performance metrics, undermine credibility and disadvantage artists who rely on organic audience growth. Similar debates around the authenticity of streaming numbers have also involved artists such as Blaqbonez and Odumodublvck, reflecting broader uncertainty about the reliability of digital success indicators. [9]

Economic constraints within the Nigerian market further complicate streaming adoption. High poverty levels and limited purchasing power mean that a significant portion of the population is unable to afford paid subscriptions. In addition, high mobile data costs continue to restrict user engagement, reducing overall streaming volume and, by extension, potential revenue for artists. [10]

Infrastructure-related challenges also persist. Industry stakeholders have pointed to limitations in payment systems, particularly the difficulty of implementing seamless recurring subscription payments using local banking infrastructure. These constraints hinder the growth of subscription-based streaming models within the country. [11]

Piracy remains another significant obstacle. Despite the availability of licensed streaming platforms, many consumers continue to rely on free music blogs and unofficial distribution channels, reducing the competitiveness of legitimate platforms and further diminishing potential earnings for rights holders.[12]

Collectively, these challenges highlight structural limitations within Nigeria’s digital music ecosystem. While streaming platforms have expanded access and visibility, factors such as low monetisation rates, data manipulation, economic constraints and piracy continue to impede the ability of artists to derive sustainable income from digital distribution. [13]

» Bridging the Gap Between Law and Practice

Legislative reform is only one part of the solution. The long-term success of Nigeria’s copyright framework will depend on the ability of regulatory institutions to implement and enforce the law effectively.

Digital copyright infringement increasingly occurs across decentralized online platforms, making traditional enforcement methods insufficient. Effective protection therefore requires regulatory authorities to combine legal enforcement with technological monitoring systems capable of tracking unauthorized distribution across streaming services, social media platforms and digital file-sharing networks.

Institutional capacity is therefore central to Nigeria’s competitiveness in the digital music economy. Strengthening the operational capacity of regulatory agencies, improving the transparency of collective management organisations and investing in digital monitoring tools will be essential to ensuring that copyright protections remain effective in an increasingly complex digital environment.

Equally important is the need for greater industry awareness. Many artists and producers remain unfamiliar with the legal mechanisms available to protect their work and collect royalties. Expanding education and capacity-building initiatives within the creative sector will help ensure that Nigerian creators are better positioned to navigate the evolving digital marketplace.

» Nigeria's Position in the Global Music Economy

The rise of Afrobeats demonstrates that Nigeria has already achieved significant cultural influence in the global entertainment industry. Nigerian music now occupies a prominent position within international streaming ecosystems, and the genre continues to attract new audiences across continents.

However, global cultural influence must be supported by strong institutional and regulatory frameworks if it is to translate into sustainable economic growth. Countries that dominate the global music industry, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have long invested in robust copyright systems that protect creators while facilitating efficient licensing and royalty distribution.

For Nigeria, the challenge is not merely producing globally successful music but ensuring that the economic value generated by that success is effectively captured within the domestic creative economy.

» Conclusion: Owning the Value of Nigerian Creativity

Afrobeats has already secured Nigeria a powerful cultural presence on the global stage. The next challenge is ensuring that the legal and institutional systems governing the industry are capable of supporting that success in a digital economy.

Nigeria's updated copyright framework, complemented by evolving regulatory instruments such as the Collective Management Organisation Regulations 2025, represents a critical step toward aligning the country's legal infrastructure with the realities of the streaming age. However, the true measure of these reforms will lie in their implementation.

If enforcement mechanisms, royalty administration systems and institutional capacity evolve alongside the industry, Nigeria will not only remain a cultural leader but also emerge as a formidable economic force within the global digital music ecosystem.

[1] *The Nigerian Copyright Act 2022, Act No 38 of 2022, ss 9–13, 50, Pt VII and s 108.*

[2] *World Intellectual Property Organization, WIPO Copyright Treaty (WCT) (1996).*

[3] *The Nigerian Copyright Act 2022, Act No 38 of 2022, ss 9–13, 50, Pt VII and s 108.*

[4] *Copyright Act 2022, Act No 38 of 2022, s 88(2)(b); Copyright (Collective Management Organisations) Regulations 2007, reg 16.*

[5] *Nigerian Copyright Commission, Collective Management Organisation Regulations 2025.*

[6] *Federal High Court, Lagos, Suit No. FHC/L/CS/207/2026 (Record Label Proprietors Initiative & Ors v Musical Copyright Society of Nigeria), reported in Premium Times (2026); BusinessDay Nigeria (2026); The Guardian Nigeria (2026).*

[7] *Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (2020–2030) (Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 2019) pg. 16.*

[8] *The Guardian Nigeria, "Nigerian artists lament low streaming revenue despite global success" (2024);Pulse Nigeria, "Portable speaks on low earnings from streaming platforms" (2024); Apple Music, "Apple Music Royalties Overview" (explaining regional payout structures); International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, Global Music Report (latest ed).*

[9] *Pulse Nigeria, "Magixx raises concerns over streaming farms and fake numbers in the Nigerian music industry" (2023); Native Mag, interviews and commentary on streaming manipulation and industry credibility;International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, Global Music Report (discussion on streaming integrity and data accuracy); see also industry discussions involving Blaqbonez and Odumodublvck on streaming metrics and chart credibility.*

[10] *BusinessDay Nigeria, "How low purchasing power affects music streaming revenue in Nigeria" (2023).*

[11] *TechCabal, "Why subscription payments remain difficult in Nigeria's digital economy" (2023); comments by Rotimi Fawole (former Spinlet executive) on limitations of recurring payments in Nigeria; Central Bank of Nigeria, publications on electronic payment systems and financial infrastructure challenges.*

[12] *The Guardian Nigeria, "Piracy and free music culture threaten Nigeria's creative industry" (2023); International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, Global Music Report (latest ed) (discussion on piracy in emerging markets); World Intellectual Property Organization, studies on copyright infringement and digital piracy trends.*

[13] *World Intellectual Property Organization, reports on the digital music economy and copyright enforcement; PwC, Global Entertainment and Media Outlook (latest ed) (analysis of streaming revenues in emerging markets).*