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Principles of Professional Writing
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Understanding Modern Music Copyright Complexity:
A Study on Taylor Swift's "Taylor's Version"

Introduction

As one of the most well-known female artists among current Gen Z listeners, Taylor Swift has gathered a global fanbase due to the relatability of her lyrics and strong marketing. However, she has also created significant changes in the realm of intellectual property and contract law. Swift's re-recordings of her old albums, known as "Taylor's Version," have exposed the complexity of music copyright laws, including but not limited to the multiple layers of copyrights and the minimal power artists have in the music ownership process.

The Different Types of Music Copyrights

In music ownership, copyright is divided into two parts. The "circle C" copyright applies to the musical work itself, such as "the notes and lyrics as composed" (Doolittle, 2024). This "is usually controlled by the composer/songwriter or by a publishing company acting on their behalf" (Doolittle, 2024). The second copyright, commonly known as the "master recordings" or "the masters," is the "circle P" copyright, which applies to any original sound recording of the work (Coleman, 2024; Doolittle, 2024). This is usually managed by the recording studio or label (Doolittle, 2024). Whenever a song is played in public, one or both of the copyright holders get paid (Coleman, 2024).

The Catalyst Behind "Taylor's Version"

As a singer-songwriter, Taylor Swift owns "the copyright to the lyrics and music as written" (Doolittle, 2024) - the circle C copyright. However, Big Machine Records, her recording label at the time, owned the copyright to the master recordings (Doolittle, 2024) - the

circle P copyright. Though Swift was offered to manage her masters, she declined due to unjust conditions and left Big Machine Records in 2018. In 2019, Scooter Braun bought the company and sold it to Shamrock Holdings, including the master recordings of Swift's six multi-million-selling albums (Coleman, 2024).

To gain complete ownership of her music, Swift publicly announced to remake her albums, which became titled "Taylor's Version." Under her new contract with Universal Music Group, she obtained ownership of any master recordings she newly produced (Doolittle, 2024). Therefore, as the main songwriter of her songs, she gained rights and majority control of her music, including her re-recordings and newest masters.

The Future of Music Copyright

Swift was not able to release her first "Taylor's Version" until three years after she left Big Machine Records because "before then, she was not allowed to re-record any of the material" (Coleman, 2024). Often, recording agreements prohibit artists "from going out and re-recording a song" for five to seven years from the original release date, or two years from the contract's expiration, to recover their investment in artists, producers, and recording times (Doolittle, 2024). However, Swift's re-recordings have led record companies to attempt to extend this prohibition to up to 30 years (Doolittle, 2024) to maintain ownership and monetary flow.

Conclusion

Taylor Swift's battle for music ownership, marked by her re-recordings, has created a significant shift in intellectual property discussions and set a new precedent for artists seeking control over their work. Unfortunately, this has also potentially led to the extension of re-recording prohibitions, making it more challenging for emerging artists to gain ownership of their music.

References

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