

DJS IN NIGERIA AND THE AGE OF COPYRIGHT COMPLIANCE

Introduction

Nigeria's music scene is one of the country's proudest exports. From Afrobeats to street pop, and Disc Jockeys ("DJs") have been at the centre of pushing songs beyond borders, shaping trends and sounds, and keeping dance floors alive. Yet, behind the turntables lies a question many DJs have long avoided: *who actually owns the rights to the music being played, and what does the law require?*

On June 2, 2025, the Nigerian Copyright Commission ("NCC") issued Copyright Advisory No.4, a sharp reminder that DJs must secure licences and authorization before publicly playing music. Failure to comply now risks a fine of not less than One Million Naira (₦1,000,000.00) or up to 5 years in prison, or both¹. While this law has existed since the Copyright Act, 2022, the reminder marks a torchlight of the NCC on this practice and a turning point for Nigeria's creative economy.

This is not just about clamping down. It is about professionalising and commercialising an industry that has grown informally for decades. And for DJs, artists, event organisers, and even fans, the ripple effects will be significant.

¹ Section 44(7) of the Nigerian Copyright Act, 2022.

Why DJs Are Under the Spotlight

DJs are more than entertainers. They are cultural intermediaries - the bridge between artists and audiences. They determine which songs break into clubs, weddings, and festivals, effectively shaping the commercial life of music. But this influence comes with legal obligations.

Under the Copyright Act, 2022:

- Musical works (the composition — melody, lyrics, arrangement) and sound recordings (the recorded performance owned by labels, producers, or performers) enjoy full protection.
- Section 9 gives copyright owners the exclusive right to perform or communicate works to the public, either via wireless or wired means, while Section 12 extends similar rights to sound recordings.
- Any public performance, communication or use — whether at a club, hotel, or festival — requires authorisation.

In legal terms, this is called a public performance right. Nigeria's Act does not define it clearly, but it generally means *any performance outside of private spaces like family gatherings*. So, yes — a wedding gig, a hotel lounge, or a club set could count, contextually, as “public performance.”

How Licensing Works in Practice

Since it is impossible for DJs to chase down every songwriter or record label for permission, the law allows for collective licensing through Collective Management Organisations (“**CMOs**”).

In Nigeria, the Musical Copyright Society of Nigeria (“**MCSN**”) is the key CMO handling rights in musical works and sound recordings, including licensing, monitoring, and distributing royalties for rightsholders. DJs can obtain what's known as a blanket licence — a single authorisation that covers a wide catalogue of songs. This ensures:

SP
LP

- Artists get paid (through royalties collected by MCSN).
- DJs are protected (no lawsuits or sanctions for unlicensed performances).
- Venues stay compliant, avoiding liability under Section 36(e) of the Copyright Act, which makes them culpable if they knowingly allow copyright infringement.

In 2024, MCSN signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the DeeJays Association of Nigeria (“**DJAN**”) to streamline this process². The deal creates a structured pathway for DJs to become licensed, recognised, and professionalised.

The Stakes: Penalties and Protections

The law is clear: performing without a licence amounts to infringement. Possible consequences include:

- Civil claims for damages (lawsuits from rights holders).
- Criminal sanctions — fines of at least ₦1,000,000, five years imprisonment, or both.

But on the flip side, compliance has benefits:

- DJs gain legitimacy and can build sustainable careers without fear of takedowns.
- Artists receive fairer compensation, reinforcing the value chain.
- Venues avoid being shut down or fined for hosting unlicensed performances.

In effect, this is less about punishment and more about formalising music’s economic cycle.

² Leadership News, "MCSN, DJAN Sign Pact to Protect Copyright Law" (Leadership News - January 2025. Retrieved from <https://leadership.ng/mcsn-djan-sign-pact-to-protectcopyright-law/> on 6th June 2025.

What DJs Need to Do Now

Here's the compliance roadmap, simplified:

1. Join DJAN – It acts as the central body liaising with MCSN and the NCC.
2. Get licensed – A blanket licence from MCSN is now non-negotiable for gigs, mixes, or uploads.
3. Understand the rights involved – Playing a track triggers both *compositional rights* (songwriting) and *neighbouring rights* (recording). DJs must respect both.
4. Handle remixes/sampling with care.
5. Keep records – Document licences, receipts, and music sources; they are your shield if compliance is questioned.

The Bigger Picture: Why This Matters

For years, Nigeria's DJ industry has operated in a legal grey zone. Enforcement was rare, and many viewed licensing as unnecessary "wahala." But with Afrobeats now commanding tens of billions in royalties worldwide, the stakes have changed.

This move signals three key shifts:

- Professionalisation – DJs are recognised as serious players in the music value chain, not just informal entertainers.
- Revenue expansion – Royalties from DJ performances can meaningfully contribute to artists' income, especially in an era where streaming revenues are volatile.
- Global alignment – By enforcing copyright compliance, Nigeria edges closer to international standards, boosting investor and industry confidence.

Challenges Ahead

Still, hurdles remain:

- Awareness gaps: Many rural DJs remain unaware of these rules.
- Costs: Licensing fees may deter independent DJs.
- Monitoring difficulties: Enforcing compliance outside major cities is resource-intensive.
- Cultural attitudes: Piracy and informal practices remain deeply embedded.

Overcoming these challenges will require education, simplified licensing, and stronger partnerships between NCC, MCSN, DJAN, and venue owners.

Conclusion

Nigeria's copyright enforcement drive is not just a legal story — it's an industry-defining moment. DJs are now at the intersection of law, business, and culture, tasked with adapting to a system that demands accountability but also offers protection.

Handled well, this shift could elevate DJs from informal tastemakers to legally recognised professionals powering a billion-dollar industry. Handled poorly, it risks alienating grassroots DJs and pushing practices underground.

The future depends on collaboration: regulators enforcing fairly, CMOs managing transparently, DJs complying responsibly, and artists ensuring their works are registered. Only then will Nigeria's music ecosystem fully capture the value it creates at home and abroad.

SP
LP

SMITH & PARTNERS
LAW PRACTICE