

Paul McCartney Sues to Get Back His Beatles Songs

By [BEN SISARIO](#) JAN. 18, 2017



Paul McCartney in Indio, Calif., in October. The former Beatle filed suit on Wednesday to reclaim ownership of a number of songs he wrote for with John Lennon. Credit Mario Anzuoni/Reuters

In the latest twist in a legal issue that has galvanized musicians, [Paul McCartney](#) filed a federal lawsuit on Wednesday against the music publisher Sony/ATV over ownership of some of the [Beatles'](#) most famous songs.

Mr. McCartney's suit is over what is known as [copyright termination](#): the right of authors — or any creators — to reclaim ownership of their works from publishers after a specific length of time has passed. It was part of the 1976 copyright act and in recent years has become a potent force in the music industry as performers and songwriters have used the law to regain control of their work.

In Mr. McCartney's suit, filed in United States District Court in Manhattan, lawyers for the singer detailed the steps they have taken over the last nine years to reclaim Mr. McCartney's piece of the copyrights in dozens of Beatles songs he wrote with John Lennon, including "Love Me Do," "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "All You Need Is Love." That process involved filing numerous legal notices, which, the suit says, should be enough to guarantee that Sony/ATV would return the rights to Mr. McCartney, starting in October 2018.

But the suit contends that late last year, after the band Duran Duran lost a copyright suit in Britain, executives at Sony/ATV began to suggest to Mr. McCartney's lawyers that the rule might not apply to his songs. In the [Duran Duran case](#), a judge ruled that the band's original contract was governed by British law, which barred it from reclaiming rights in the United States. Under United States law, this power cannot be waived by contract.

As Mr. McCartney's suit notes, he and Mr. Lennon signed a series of publishing contracts in Britain beginning in 1962. The suit contends that in a series of remarks and emails to Mr. McCartney's lawyers, Sony/ATV executives alluded to the Duran Duran case and refused to confirm that he could reclaim his rights.

The suit asks for a declarative judgment that Mr. McCartney would not be violating any contract by exercising his termination rights.

In a statement, Sony/ATV said that it had "the highest respect for Sir Paul McCartney" and that it worked closely with Mr. McCartney and the Lennon estate. But the company added, "We are disappointed that they have filed this lawsuit, which we believe is both unnecessary and premature."

For many musicians, especially those who had hits decades ago, copyright termination has become a powerful means to reclaim their work and to gain financial leverage with the record companies and music publishers that represent them. When Prince's classic albums were nearing the point at which he could reclaim them, he struck a [lucrative new deal](#) with his label, Warner Bros., to let the company continue to release his music.

And in the music industry, there is no more valuable catalog than the songs of the Beatles. Michael Jackson purchased the rights to those songs in 1985, and 10 years later he formed Sony/ATV as a joint venture with Sony. Last year, Sony bought out the share of Mr. Jackson's estate for [\\$750 million](#).

In a note referring to a standard legal threshold, Mr. McCartney's lawsuit includes a major understatement. "The copyright interests at issue in this case," the suit says, "are worth well in excess of \$75,000."

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