A GLOBAL MUSIC INDUSTRY RESOURCE

2026 Edition

Responsible Merch Guide

A practical guide and verified supplier directory for creating better merch and physical music products.

REVERB reverb.org

THE CSO SHOP

green music australia

About this Guide

This resource was created to help artists, merch teams, labels, and suppliers make informed decisions about responsible merchandise and physical music production. It highlights practical options available today, explains key trade-offs, and provides a verified supplier directory. We will update the guide as solutions evolve.

Authors & Acknowledgments

This report was co-authored by **REVERB**, **The CSO Shop**, and **Green Music Australia**.

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Table of Contents

A Letter from the Authors

Merch and physical music are some of the rituals of being a fan. The shirt from your first show, the hoodie you wear for years, the record on your shelf, the CD you played on repeat. These objects become part of our daily lives and our memories.

For artists, merch is a critical revenue stream – both on and off tour – helping sustain careers and support profitable touring. Beyond artists, physical products sustain the broader music ecosystem: labels, managers, merch teams, pressing plants, distributors, online stores and independent record shops. When made thoughtfully, they help keep the infrastructure of music alive.

But like anything that is grown, manufactured, and shipped around the world, merchandise has environmental and social impacts. Countries like the UK, Australia, and the United States rank among the most wasteful per capita when it comes to clothing – driven not only by how garments are made, but by how much is produced and discarded. While consumption is concentrated in high-income countries, many of the harms, pollution, waste and unsafe labor conditions, fall on lower-income, manufacturing nations.

We created this guide as music fans who love band t-shirts, vinyl, and supporting the artists who inspire us. We're also environmentalists who believe products can be made more responsibly.

This guide will help artists, merch companies, labels, and partners make informed choices, avoid greenwashing, and contribute to meaningful industry progress. Each section outlines available options, the trade-offs involved and the changes that can have the greatest impact.

Thank you for being part of a music community that cares about how products are made, moved and used.

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Why Merch Matters

Merch has a significant climate and ethical footprint: from materials and manufacturing to shipping, labor practices, and waste. Thoughtful choices can **reduce emissions, protect people,** and **cut waste.**

10%

of global **CO_2 emissions** come from apparel supply chains[1]

1 garbage truck per second

of textiles is landfilled or incinerated.[2]

84%

of a vinyl's carbon footprint is from raw materials and manufacturing.[3]

Millions

of factory workers exposed to unsafe conditions in global apparel supply chains[4]

Areas for Improvement

- **Materials & manufacturing**
  Lower-impact materials, non-toxic dyes, water-based inks, and ethical production
- **Shipping & logistics**
  Smarter routing, fewer air miles
- **Packaging & waste**
  Less plastic, better packaging
- **Production planning**
  Accurate forecasting and upcycling

What Fans Want

78% of consumers will pay a 5% premium for sustainably made products[5]

Merch that prioritizes sustainability **strengthens trust, loyalty, and brand alignment**.

Artists influence purchasing behavior at massive scale.

No matter your **genre or scale**, this guide helps artists make smarter merch choices that align with their values.

Sources: 1. UNFCC; 2. Ellen MacArthur Foundation; 3. Vinyl Alliance; 4. Fashion United; 5. PwC

Supplier Directory

Check out the suppliers and solution providers that can help you make responsible merch possible. This is an evolving list. We hope you take the time to consider collaborating with these suppliers for your next merch line.

VISIT THE DIRECTORY

Note: Pricing is shown as relative ranges ($–$$$) to help compare materials and product types. These symbols apply across currencies and reflect typical differences between options. Actual costs will vary based on factors like order volume, shipping, and production details, so this guide does not provide exact pricing.

While this guide includes examples from North America, Europe, and Australia, the principles are adaptable across markets. We encourage artists and teams to consider evolving regulations, recycling infrastructure, labor standards, and cultural contexts in their regions.

Case Studies

Lorde x Everybody.World

Billie Eilish (Coming Soon)

Waterwheel Foundation x Recover

Nathaniel Rateliff x TS Designs

GreenGear x Live Nation (Coming Soon)

Beggars Records (Coming Soon)

Mindful Manufacturing

One of the most sustainable choices an artist can make is to simply produce less.

Merchandise is often treated as a blank canvas for creativitiy – new designs, colorways, tour drops. But making only what will sell is key. Avoiding single-use promo items and multiple color variants designed to drive duplicate purchases is a simple, high-impact way to reduce footprint. The goal is to create long-lasting, loved merch… not just merch for merch's sake.

→ OVERPRODUCTION IS A MAJOR DRIVER OF WASTE.

When production outpaces demand, unsold or scarcely used items pile up in landfills or sit in storage. To help avoid that, artists and their teams can ask: ***Is this something fans will genuinely want and keep?***

This mindset encourages tighter forecasting, smaller runs, and a willingness to sell out – which often signals alignment between demand and production.

→ DESIGN CHOICES ARE ALSO LEVERS FOR REDUCING IMPACT.

Every additional colorway, sleeve print, or specialty finish increases material use, production time, freight weight, and unsold inventory risk. Artistic expression is essential, but understanding the footprint of each choice helps shape merch that is both meaningful and responsible. Strong, timeless artwork printed well on a quality garment is more likely to be worn, kept, and loved.

→ THE BEST OUTCOMES COME FROM RISK-AWARE PRODUCTION.

Using historical tour data, early demand signals, and flexible production strategies allows teams to adjust as dates, markets, or trends evolve. This helps achieve a balance between carefully protecting margins and avoiding excess inventory.

T-shirts & Hoodies | Materials

Tees and hoodies are some of the most common products that artists sell on tour.
With the right materials, production techniques, and distribution, tours can reduce the impact of these products and any other merchandise.

Considering Better Materials

The below framework is intended to help teams compare material options; availability, cost, and context will vary by tour. Material rankings below are based primarily on relative environmental and social factors associated with fiber production. Specific environmental impacts such as greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), microplastic pollution and end-of-life management should also be considerations in the decision making process.

BASELINE ★	PREFERED ★★	LEADING ★★★
Responsibly sourced* fibers for mono-material (one consistent fiber) garments	Certified natural fibers (e.g., GOTS[1]) FSC (responsible forestry and material sourcing) certified man-made cellulosics (e.g., Lenzing Tencel Lyocell or Tencel Modal) Recycled synthetic fibers (e.g., recycled nylon)** Recycled blends (e.g. recycled cotton/ recycled polyester)	Upcycled, overstock, or deadstock fabrics or garments Recycled natural fibers (e.g., recycled cotton, CIRCULOSE®) Organic and regenerative virgin natural fibers (e.g., Regenerative Organic Certified® cotton, hemp) Bio-based or low-impact next-gen fibers (e.g., Bananatex, Seacell)

Note:
***Responsibly sourced:** Aims to minimize negative impacts on people and the planet by considering environmental protection, fair labor, and social well-being throughout the supply chain; should be verified by third-party certifications.

****Recycled synthetic fibers** reduce demand for virgin fossil-based materials and can lower upfront emissions compared to virgin polyester. However, recent studies have found that recycled polyester may shed more microplastic particles during wear and washing than virgin polyester, increasing environmental impact. Material choices involve tradeoffs across impact categories.

[1]GOTS is a certification that **requires at least 70% organic fibers to have "made with organic" labeling and 95% for completely organic.**

Conventional Cotton

Conventional cotton is the material most artists use for tour merch tees and hoodies because it's low cost, comfortable, and blanks are easy to procure in almost any color. But it has harmful chemical inputs and uses lots of water, often in areas already impacted by climate change and water scarcity. This has driven interest in organic and recycled cotton as lower-impact alternatives. The environmental footprint of cotton varies widely by region and production method.

$; LOW COST

Lower Impact Alternatives

There is no single "best" option – each approach addresses different environmental and social impacts.

ORGANIC COTTON

Organically farmed and **grown without synthetic pesticides or fertilizers**. Strict environmental standards (often rain-fed and non-GMO) so it typically uses less water. **Should have a GOTS certification**, which requires at least 70% organic fibers to have "made with organic" labeling and 95% for completely organic.

$$; MID COST

SUPIMA COTTON

A type of high-quality, US-grown cotton that has extra-long staple fiber for improved strength, softness, and color. Focused on ethical production and soil health. Less commonly available for bulk orders.

$$; MID COST

RECYCLED COTTON

Recovered from existing cotton materials and reprocessed into new textile products instead of being grown as new (virgin) cotton. Material feedstock comes from post-industrial or post-consumer waste, and is typically mechanically recycled. This is a solution for the mass amounts of waste generated in the process of creating products, but there are arguments against recycled cotton saying that the final product is less durable. More info from Textile Exchange.

$$-$$$; MID-TO-HIGH COST

image: Everybody.World

CERTIFICATIONS TO LOOK FOR:

Polyester

Virgin polyester is made from polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic, derived from fossil fuels – it's emissions-intensive to produce and will never biodegrade. When washed, products made of polyester shed toxic microfibers contributing to plastic pollution. Note: Polyester generally adds strength to fabric and can be blended with organic cotton (e.g. 50/50 or tri-blends) to make soft, durable shirts, but will still shed microplastics. Typical hoodies will be a blend of cotton and polyester or use 100% polyester fleece.

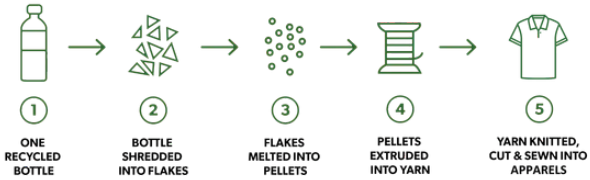
$; LOW COST

Polyester Alternative

RECYCLED POLYESTER (RPET)

$-$$; LOW-TO-MID COST

In the apparel industry, there are mixed feelings about rPET. Many assume it's made from old polyester fabrics, but typically it's made from post-consumer plastic like recycled water bottles.



rPET PROS: Each kg of mechanically recycled polyester reduces emissions by more than ~70% compared to virgin polyester.

rPET CONS: Recycling plastic doesn't eliminate its environmental impact, it changes it – rPet has been reported to shed 55% more microplastics when washed than virgin poly, and recycling PET repeatedly can degrade fiber quality. Water bottle-to-water bottle recycling is seen as a better closed loop system than water bottle to fiber which becomes open loop.

COST: Recycled poly fiber can be slightly more expensive than virgin (blended shirt blanks might be $1–$2 higher). Check the supplier directory for examples.

***A Note on Nuance:** There is an argument to steer away from synthetic fibers entirely. We recognize this might not be feasible depending on budgets or material priorities. If using synthetics, try to avoid virgin, and use recycled instead.

CERTIFICATIONS TO LOOK FOR

Global Recycled Standard ©TextileExchange

RECYCLED 100 claim standard

Blends vs. Mono-Materials

When it comes to end-of-life, simpler is better.

Mono-materials (e.g., 100% cotton, 100% polyester) are typically easier to recycle, making them the lower-risk choice. Natural mono-material garments may even be compostable at their end-of-life, depending on the dyes, finishers used, and type of composting.

Blends are materials made by combining different types of fibers (e.g., organic cotton + rPET, cotton + Tencel™, or recycled cotton + poly). Usually mid-range in cost, blends can improve the overall durability and feel of the product, and can be made more sustainable when part of the blend comes from recycled fibres. However, blended materials are often difficult to separate at end-of-life, making recycling harder and potentially creating unintended waste streams.

Alternative Fibers

There has been steady growth in the use of alternative fibers in apparel, including both natural fibers like hemp and man-made cellulosic fibers (MMCFs). Many of these materials offer renewable inputs, a soft hand feel, and in some cases a lower water or chemical footprint than conventional cotton. However, impact varies widely depending on sourcing and processing. Many of these materials are still relatively niche for merch blanks, but demand from artists and merch teams will help drive broader adoption.

HEMP

$$-$$$; MID-TO-HIGH COST

A durable, low-input natural fiber made from the hemp plant. It typically requires less water than conventional cotton and can grow without synthetic pesticides, making it a lower-impact option when responsibly farmed. Advances in processing have transformed hemp from a once nubby, scratchy material into a soft fabric suitable for T-shirts and sweatshirts. Look for organic certification and responsible processing.

Man-Made Cellulosic Fibers (MMCFs)

MMCFs are derived from wood pulp (such as bamboo, beech, or eucalyptus). While the raw inputs are renewable, the environmental footprint depends heavily on forest sourcing and chemical processing. Without certification and traceability, these fibers can rely on highly toxic solvents and contribute to deforestation.

RAYON/VISCOSE

The most common MMCF, derived from bamboo*, beech wood, or eucalyptus pulp. **Only lower-impact** when sourced and processed responsibly (look for FSC-certified raw materials and closed-loop production). Otherwise these can be high in chemicals and have stringent FTC marketing constraints.

$-$$; LOW-TO-MID COST

*Most “bamboo” on the market today is actually produced through a chemically intensive process - watch out for greenwashing & follow the FTC guidelines.

LYOCELL & MODAL

Operating under the Lenzing brand’s Tencel™ Lyocell or Tencel™ Modal, derived from wood pulp that is FSC-certified, and made in closed-loop processes that reuse water and solvents.

$$$; HIGH COST

Note: Canopy works with brands to eliminate MMCF sourcing from Ancient and Endangered Forests. Their Hot Button report assesses sourcing practices, with green shirt rankings signifying responsible production.

NEXT-GEN FIBERS (EMERGING)

Materials derived from banana, pineapple, seaweed, agricultural waste, and bio-based synthetics are starting to come to market.

COST VARIES

CERTIFICATIONS TO LOOK FOR:

FSC

OEKO TEX® STANDARD 100

bluesign® PRODUCT

T-Shirts & Hoodies | Production

Beyond materials, the production process of merch has a major impact on sustainability and ethics. Thankfully, both established and new approaches are helping reduce these impacts across the merch industry.

Check out this evolving list of apparel suppliers and production companies and their production techniques.

Fair Labor Manufacturing

We encourage artist teams to ensure your apparel comes from factories with safe working conditions and fair wages.

→ TIPS!

- Look for Fair Trade Certified factories or brands that use WRAP certified facilities (Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production) or part of the Fair Labor Association.
  - No child labor, reasonable work hours, no recruiter fees, and fair pay!
- Avoid sourcing from regions with well documented forced labor risks.

→ SOME SUPPLIERS LEADING THE WAY

- Known Supply (USA/India) produces in Fair Trade certified facilities in India where workers earn living wages and even sign the garments they make. They prioritize worker well-being and transparency (you can “meet the maker” via the tag).
- Ecofashion Corp produces from organic/regenerative farm/fiber to finished products in India/SE Asia with a focus on farmer livelihoods and QR-code traceability.
- Mindful Merch (AU): a Sunshine Coast-based apparel company producing premium ethical blanks, with direct oversight of their own small production units in Bangladesh and Vietnam – built in partnership with local families to ensure fair wages and transparent working conditions.

Cutting & Sewing

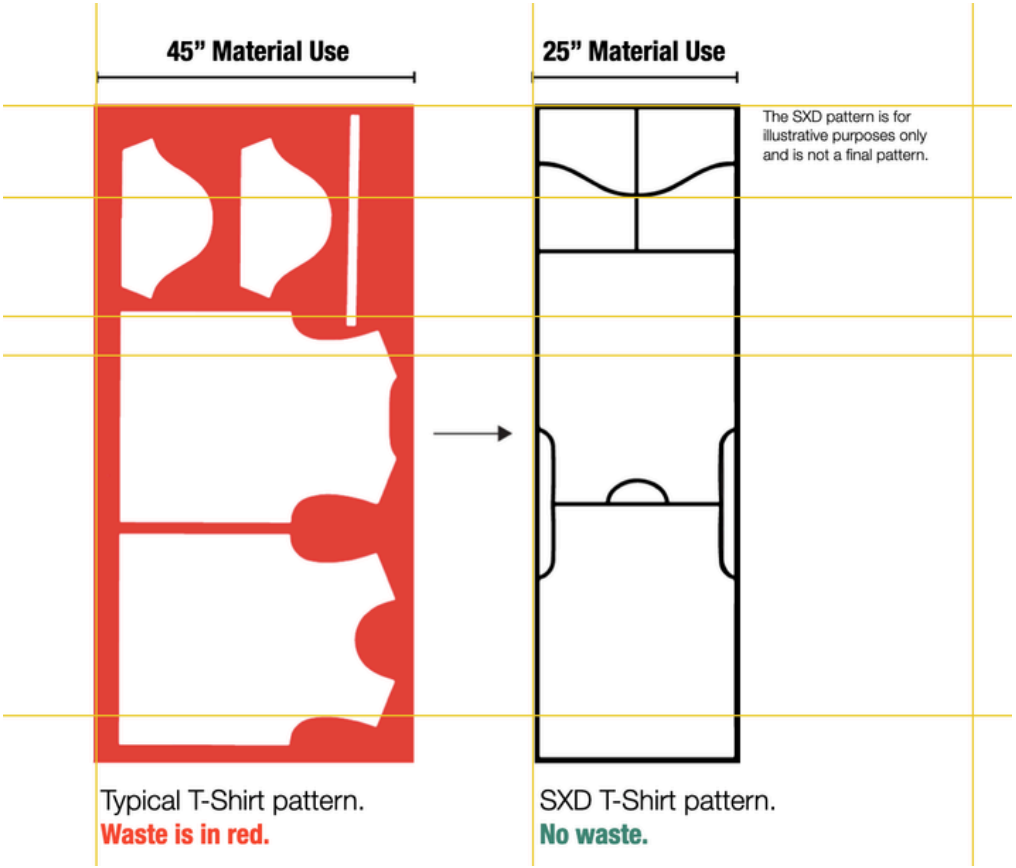
ZERO-WASTE PATTERNING & SCRAP UPCYCLING

Much of pre-consumer textile waste comes from inefficient cutting of the patterns used to make t-shirts and hoodies. The concept of zero-waste patterning (often using AI for precision) means designing pattern pieces that cut in a more efficient way (check out SXD).

→ TIPS!

- Opt for manufacturers that maximize fabric use.
  - Many ethical factories train workers to lay out patterns efficiently to reduce off-cuts.
  - Some use software that calculates the most efficient pattern placement.
- Consider design choices that use less fabric like standard weight hoodies instead of extra-heavy ones, or avoiding styles that create more waste (like heavily distressed garments which waste material in cut-outs).
- Ask suppliers if they can produce additional merch items from fabric off-cuts like patchwork totes, t-shirts, or scrunchies to help reduce waste and create unique pieces.

EXAMPLE OF ZERO-WASTE CUTTING PATTERN FROM SXD

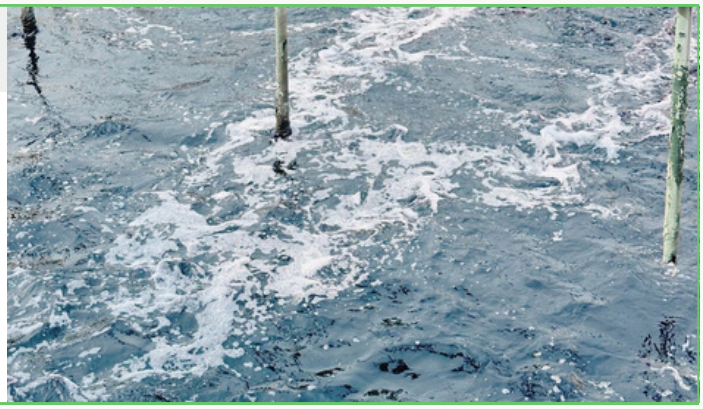


Dyeing

Conventional dyeing often uses synthetic dyes with high water, energy and chemical inputs.

LOW-IMPACT DYES

Ask for low-impact fiber-reactive dyes that molecularly bond with the fabric. Best is when water is reused and garments are dyed locally. Oeko-Tex Standard 100 signals water savings and reduced chemical runoff.



TIE-DYE & CUSTOM DYEING

Can create unique garments but can involve higher water and chemical inputs.

Where possible, artists should ask whether low-impact or fiber-reactive dyes are used, if water is reused or filtered, and whether garments are dyed locally to reduce transport. Tie-dye is generally best suited to limited runs rather than high-volume merchandise.

CERTIFICATIONS TO LOOK FOR:

GLOBAL ORGANIC TEXTILE STANDARD · GOTS ·

OEKO TEX® STANDARD 100

bluesign® PRODUCT

Printing

Typical screen printing uses plastisol inks, a PVC-based ink (aka a problematic plastic!!), which sits on top of the fabric, leaving behind microplastic fragments. Because it's plastic based, it reduces a product's biodegradability, even if the base fabric is biodegradable.

WATER-BASED INKS

Water solvent inks soak into the fabric giving a softer feel.

PROS: Works well on light colored fabrics, can be biodegradable – look for bio-based binders & pigments; requires less energy.

CONS: Can require more careful curing (to fully evaporate water); Doesn't sit as opaque on dark garments without special processes; require more water.

LOW-WASTE PRINT RUNS

For wet printing, filtration systems should capture ink pigment from washout water so it isn't dumped down drains.

- Ask if your print shop uses eco-friendly reclaimed chemicals.
- Try to prefer manual screen printing or energy-efficient electric dryers for curing.

DIRECT-TO-GARMENT (DTG) PRINTING

A digital, on-demand printing method that allows small or detailed print runs without screens or setup waste. Uses less water, helps reduce overproduction, and enables localized printing closer to tour stops. It can be slower and more expensive for large volumes.

T-shirts & Hoodies | Excess Merch

A key to sustainable merch is volume of production and what to do when there's excess. Responsible forecasting is essential to reduce overproduction and ensure you are not spending on merch that will not sell. Smaller initial orders, modest buffers (5–10%), and selective restocking can significantly reduce excess inventory. Other solutions exist, but come with a fee.

Excess Merch Pathways

MECHANICAL RECYCLING

Textiles are shredded or torn into smaller fibers to make new threads. Prioritize local options.

Industry experts:

- Looptworks
- Recover Brands
- Repreve
- Upparel (Australia)

CHEMICAL RECYCLING

Textiles are broken down to their original molecular structures, and then reassembled into new fibers. Used for mixed fibers.

Industry experts:

- Circ
- Evrnu

EXTENDED USE

Create designs that can live beyond a single tour. Personalize merch at point-of-purchase with stamps, patches, or live screen printing. Work with vendors to reimagine overstock into new products.

Example: Suay Sew Shop

UPCYCLING

Transform unsold items into something new: reprint on overstock, turn overstock into totes, repurpose signage, or rework into limited-edition pieces.

Examples:

- UMG and Bravado send 400,000 shirts from Nashville to Morocco so Hallotex, a Spanish manufacturer can turn them into recycled cotton yarn.
- Billie Eilish x Suay Sew Shop turned old work uniforms into a limited edition upcycled merch.

RESPONSIBLE DONATION

Partner with credible organizations to make sure there is an actual need (local charity shops over large chains). Be aware that irresponsible donation can cause real harm – the oversupply of donated clothing has devastated local textile industries in parts of Africa and South America. Donation is not a substitute for better planning. Call ahead to determine need before donating.

Physical Music

Physical music has always evolved with technology. Vinyl and tape gave way to CDs, CDs to digital formats, and vinyl has since returned as a dominant physical format. Each transition brought innovation – but also waste.

Overproduction, chart incentives, and fast-moving trends can also create large volumes of unsold "dead stock" that are difficult to reuse or recycle once demand changes. At the same time, physical music remains culturally important. Records and CDs are artifacts that preserve artwork, liner notes, credits, and creative intent in a way digital formats often cannot.

Fans want better products – **69% of vinyl buyers say they would buy more records if they were made with a reduced environmental impact** – and 77% say they would pay a premium for sustainably produced vinyl.

Vinyl – PVC vs. Lower-Impact Alternatives

Traditional vinyl records are made from virgin PVC, a plastic created from two main components: ethylene (typically derived from fossil fuels) and chlorine (derived from salt). These ingredients are combined and processed into a durable material that can be pressed into records.

While the finished product is safe for consumers, PVC production and disposal processes can raise health concerns, particularly for communities near manufacturing facilities. Recycling vinyl is also difficult because stabilizers and plasticizers make safe reprocessing challenging.

Lower-impact alternatives are still evolving, but several options are beginning to emerge.

WEIGHT OF THE RECORD

Raw materials account for ~40% of a vinyl record's carbon footprint. When material choices, weight, packaging and freight are considered responsibly, it can make a meaningful difference.

A standard 12" LP weighs around 140 grams, which is generally sufficient. **Heavier 180g records rarely improve sound quality but increase impact as they:**

- Use more PVC
- Require more energy to manufacture
- Increase transport emissions

RECYCLED PVC ★

Pressing plants often use terms like recycled, regrind, or eco-mix interchangeably, but they mean different things.

REGRIND	Clean offcuts generated during pressing (e.g., trimmed edges) that are immediately reused in production. **This is internal reuse, not true recycling.**
100% RECYCLED PVC	Implies material has already completed a previous life cycle before being reprocessed. Research suggests that 100% recycled PVC could reduce raw material emissions by ~39%, translating to an estimated ~16% reduction in total record footprint, depending on other lifecycle factors.
ECO-MIX / MIXED-COLOR VINYL	Usually made from combined offcuts of different colors. While visually appealing and great as a collector item, this is generally regrind rather than closed-loop recycling.

Transparency matters here: not all "recycled" claims mean the same thing, and it's important to be clear when marketing your record.

INJECTION MOULDING & RPET ★★★

This process replaces traditional PVC with a PET-based disc manufactured through a fully electrified process. A Vinyl Alliance study found injection moulding:

- uses 62% less electricity
- eliminates fossil gas in manufacturing
- results in about 42% lower carbon emissions

Using rPET (recycled PET) can reduce impact even further.
Suppliers currently using this method include Good Neighbor and Sonopress.

BIO-ATTRIBUTED PVC ("BIO-VINYL")

★★

Bio-attributed PVC (often called "bio-vinyl") is now available. It uses a mass-balance approach, where the ethylene component of PVC can be sourced from plants instead of fossil fuels. **The final material is still PVC**, made through the same process and manufactured into vinyl records in the same way.

Important nuance from MCP/Vinyl Alliance Program Report:

- Looking at only manufacturing (cradle-to-grave), switching to plant-based inputs only reduces emissions by ~1%.
- Because plants absorb CO_2 as they grow, some accounting methods count that carbon differently – which can make emissions appear much lower (up to ~40–80%).

Because this carbon may be released at end of life (e.g., incineration), the climate benefit depends on how emissions are measured and what happens after use.

Bio-attributed PVC reduces reliance on fossil fuel inputs, but emissions claims can vary widely depending on methodology. Since it's chemically the same as PVC, it does not biodegrade or break down differently than conventional PVC. **The Vinyl Record Manufacturers Association (VRMA) recommends avoiding vague terms like "bio-vinyl" without explanation.**

Plants like Optimal Media, Citizen Vinyl offer bio-attributed PVC records. Plastchem is a manufacturer supplying bio-attributed PVC. Program, Suitcase, and Holiday Records in Australia / New Zealand also offer these types of products.

EVOVINYL

★★★

PVC-free bioplastic made mainly from sugarcane. Developed by Evolution Music in the UK, these records use a plant-based polymer that can be composted in industrial facilities and recycled within its own process.

Evovinyl can be pressed on the same machines at lower temperatures and in half the time, saving about 30-50% energy.

Examples of Sustainable Vinyl Pressings

A number of indie labels and global artists have started trying out these methods.

Coldplay decided to re-release all of their albums on clear 140kg EcoRecords, each record made from on average nine recycled plastic bottles. In 2024, they produced a limited edition LP with Ocean Clean Up plastic.

Billie Eilish's recent HIT ME HARD AND SOFT: THE TOUR vinyl was made with "recyclable or recycled compounds," plant-based inks, and water-based dispersion varnish. The sleeves were 100% recycled and reusable. On the recent anniversary edition, she switched to a bio-attributed PVC vinyl.

Finneas released his FOR CRYIN' OUT LOUD! record: This record is made of BioVinyl, a bio-attributed PVC using cooking oil or industrial waste gases. His site provides great information like: "All vinyl packaging is made from FSC® certified recycled paper/boards made 100% from post-consumer waste and recycled pre-consumer fibers. The ink used is raw plant-based and water-based dispersion varnish. In place of shrink-wrap, the sleeves are 100% recycled and reusable. For shipping, all finished goods are packaged and shipped in 100% recyclable shipping boxes."

Sydney indie duo **Lime Cordiale** pressed their latest album Enough of the Sweet Talk using a low-carbon vinyl compound developed by Suitcase Records. The band have long been committed to reducing their footprint on tour and beyond, having made merch from thrift store garments and produced a carbon neutral beer.

Sustainable Vinyl Packaging & Finishing

RECORD JACKETS & INNER SLEEVES

Always choose paper or cardboard that is **100% recycled or FSC-certified** ensuring responsible sourcing. Many vinyl jackets today already use recycled chipboard with a printed cover. If gloss is not essential, **choose uncoated or matte finishes**.

If possible, **avoid plastic inner sleeves and use paper or a biodegradable sleeve**. Some companies make sleeves from PLA bioplastic or translucent paper. If static is a concern, antistatic treatments for paper sleeves.

SHRINK WRAP ALTERNATIVES

Artists can **ask for no shrink wrap**. Alternatives include a **paper obi strip or a recyclable band**. If you need to seal the jacket, some pressing plants offer bio-polyethylene bags made from plant-based plastic that is recyclable and has a lower carbon footprint. You can also **use a sticker to close the jacket.**

PRINTING & INSERTS

Use **vegetable-based inks**, like soy or linseed, for printed pieces. Most presses can now run these easily. For inserts or liner notes, choose recycled paper.

Keep inserts minimal, or combine them with the jacket to avoid extra paper. Printing on one side of the inner sleeve instead of adding a separate insert can reduce materials.

DISTRIBUTION PACKAGING

When shipping vinyl, use mailers made from **100% recycled cardboard**. Companies like EcoEnclose and Defendapack's MusicMax produce record mailers and packaging that fit snugly and eliminate the need for plastic padding. Also consider bulk shipping: if you're sending vinyl to different tour stops, pack them in reusable totes or durable boxes that can be used repeatedly, rather than single-use cartons each time.

CDs 

The CD market has declined since its early-2000s peak, with billions of discs discarded worldwide. But CDs remain relevant, particularly as vinyl prices rise and fans look for more affordable physical formats.

The disc itself is relatively standard worldwide. Packaging is where the biggest environmental differences lie.

PHASE OUT JEWEL CASES

Jewel cases are made from brittle, high-impact plastic that breaks easily and is difficult to recycle. While cheap, they contribute disproportionately to waste, and give CD packages a sense of disposability.

According to a study by Arup and Julie's Bicycle, switching from plastic jewel cases to card wallet packaging can **reduce CD packaging emissions by up to 95%**.

SOFTPAK VS DIGIPAK

Our recommendation is for the industry to **rapidly replace jewel cases with softpak** packaging globally.

- Softpaks use plastic-free cardboard sleeves and are easier to recycle if unsold.
- Digipaks use less plastic than jewel cases but still include plastic trays, limiting recyclability.

VINYL AND CD RECYCLING, REUSE & DISPOSAL

The most effective end-of-life strategy is prevention – **pressing only what you're confident you can sell**, and being realistic about the demand. That said:

- Recycling PVC records can be a difficult process, and it needs to be done properly. **Ask your pressing plants if they can regrind unsold vinyl** into new records if the material source is known. They will remove the center label, and regrind the remaining PVC.
- Some pressing plants will also have solutions for unused PVC to be downcycled into building materials.
- CDs are best handled through e-waste recycling streams, which are designed for mixed materials.
- Paper packaging should be separated and recycled wherever possible.

Shipping & Delivery

Touring involves moving not just people and gear, but also merchandise and physical music from city to city (and country to country). When it comes to transport, the mode matters enormously – sea and ground freight produce a fraction of the emissions of air freight, making shipping decisions one of the highest-impact choices an artist can make.

Reduce Shipping Emissions

→ SHIP SMARTER

- Consolidate merch into bulk shipments rather than frequent small deliveries
- Use sea, ground freight or rail instead of air whenever possible to cut emissions
- Ship to regional hubs (e.g., within-continent distribution rather than cross-continental air freight) rather than weekly air freight

→ PRODUCE LOCALLY

- Print merch or press vinyl in-region for international tour legs
- Partner with regional merch vendors or fulfillment centers
- Use local print-on-demand for region-specific items when feasible

→ DIRECT-TO-FAN SHIPPING (OPTIONAL)

For e-commerce sales, branded recycled packaging can support sustainability storytelling. Check out suppliers who offer custom recycled boxes and mailers.

→ ACKNOWLEDGING CARBON FOOTPRINT

Prioritize reducing emissions first through routing, transport choices, and lighter packaging. For unavoidable remaining emissions, artists can support high-quality climate projects that draw down greenhouse gases (e.g., through REVERB's Climate Project Portfolio). Look for projects that are additional, transparent, durable and have verified community benefits. Learn more about carbon offsets.

Lower Impact Packaging

These recommendations apply across all merch categories and are intended as practical, supplier-ready guidance. Always start by thinking about the 'end-of-life' of each item: **how can you reduce waste from the very start?**

1. USE LESS MATERIAL

- Right-size boxes to reduce freight volume and costs
- Avoid padding for soft goods like tees and hoodies

2. CHOOSE BETTER MATERIALS

- Boxes: 100% recycled, recyclable corrugate
- Bundling: bulk packs or paper bands instead of polybags - especially for in-venue merch
- Mailers: recycled paper or 100% recycled poly mailers (EcoEnclose, Batter Packaging Co., noissue)
- Padding (when needed): kraft paper, shredded cardboard, molded pulp (Ranpack)

Avoid compostable plastics unless industrial composting is accessible and guaranteed.

3. PALLETS & FREIGHT

- Opt for recyclable or biodegradable pallet wrap when shrinkwrap is unavoidable
- Collect and recycle pallet wrap where facilities exist
- Smaller, tighter packaging = fewer trucks and lower emissions

4. ON DIRECT-TO-FAN SALES

If an artist ships merch directly from their website, branded recycled or reused packaging is possible. EcoEnclose and similar suppliers offer custom-printed recycled boxes and mailers. This adds cost but can reinforce brand and sustainability storytelling. This may be out of scope for tour merch, but worth considering for e-commerce.

5. END-OF-LIFE CONSIDERATIONS

- Paper-based mailers, kraft tape, and recycled cardboard are biodegradable and recyclable, making them a better bet for circularity.
- Plastics smaller than 2" often fall through recycling systems and end up in landfills
- For hard to recycle items, consider Terracycle.
- Avoid "greenwashed" compostable mailers made from PLA unless you know fans or venues have access to industrial composting – they often end up in landfill.

Marketing & Communication

When you make lower-impact choices, it's worth letting fans know. Not everyone will care, but for those who do, thoughtful production can influence purchasing decisions and signal that better options exist.

Clear communication can also help explain higher prices when better materials, fair labor standards, or slower freight are used. How you communicate matters: vague or overstated claims can undermine trust.

Communicating Responsibly

- **Avoid absolute claims** like "sustainable," "eco-friendly," or "carbon neutral" unless you clearly explain what they mean.
- **Be cautious with bio-plastics**, especially for single-use packaging. They're often misunderstood and don't always break down as advertised.
- **Explain the basics in plain language**: what the product is, why its impact is lower, and where it was made.
- **Verify supplier claims**. Many cases of greenwashing come from repeating unverified information from vendors.
- **Don't overlook logistics.** Shipping by sea instead of air, or producing closer to where products are sold, can reduce impact as much as material changes.

Fans are increasingly savvy and quick to spot vague claims. Clear, honest communication protects credibility and helps normalize better practices across the industry.

Examples:

INSTEAD OF...	TRY...
"Sustainable merch"	"Made from GOTS-certified organic cotton, manufactured in a Fair Trade facility"
"Eco-friendly packaging"	"Printed on 100% recycled card with vegetable-based inks, no plastic"
"Carbon neutral tour"	"We acknowledge unavoidable emissions through [verified program / fund] – here's what we actually measured"
"Bio-vinyl record"	"Pressed on bio-attributed PVC, which has a lower carbon footprint at the material stage

The Bigger Picture

There is no single silver bullet for responsibly produced merch because it always involves tradeoffs. Even materials considered more sustainable carry some environmental cost – **there is no zero-impact option when creating a new product.**

However, **there is power in the decisions we make and how we make them**. At the design stage – where around 80% percent of a product's environmental impact is determined – we can adjust material choices and origins. In production, we can choose local manufacturing, lower quantities, and fair labor. During the use-phase, we can support fans through extended wear and responsible disposal pathways.

And notably, we can explore creative solutions to repurpose overstock and deadstock merch, steering our industry away from contributing to overproduction, and offering fans unique keepsakes.

Unlocking more responsible merch also lies in developing better systems. Higher costs of responsible materials and ethical production, manufacturing minimums, and lack of supply chain transparency can all present as roadblocks to more responsible production.

No single artist or tour can transform the current system alone. But together, we can shift the economics and norms of merch production. Through better materials, joint sourcing initiatives, shared infrastructure, and unified standards, we have the power to help make the music industry, and the merch we all love so much, a more sustainable industry.

If you're interested in exploring lower-impact merch options, bulk sourcing opportunities, or collaborating to shift industry standards, reach out to us – we'd love to build it together.

Certifications

Key Certifications & What They Mean

Think of certifications as useful signals, not a requirement to "do everything right." Not every product will carry them – and not all responsible suppliers can afford them – but when they're present, they can add confidence and transparency. It's also worth recognizing that compliance-based systems have limits, and some companies will aim to meet minimum requirements rather than go beyond them.

Certification	What it means	Used for
GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard)	Confirms organic fibers + strict chemical and labor standards across the supply chain	Apparel, textiles
OCS (Organic Content Standard)	Verifies how much organic fiber is in a product	Apparel, textiles
Fair Trade Certified™	Factory meets fair labor and wage standards; workers earn premiums	Apparel, cotton
bluesign®	Safer dyes and chemicals; reduced water and air pollution	Fabric, wet processing, apparel, dyes
OEKO-TEX® Standard 100	Tested for harmful substances; safe for skin contact	Fabric, blanks, prints, inks
GRS (Global Recycled Standard)	Confirms recycled content (50%+) and supply-chain tracking	Recycled apparel, packaging
FSC® (Forest Stewardship Council)	Paper from responsible or recycled sources	Posters, packaging, record jackets, and apparel
ISCC PLUS	Verifies sustainable bio-based materials	Bio-vinyl, bioplastics
B Corp	Company meets high social & environmental standards	Merch vendors

About Us

REVERB
REVERB.ORG

REVERB is the music industry's leading sustainability partner. For more than 20 years, the nonprofit has harnessed the cultural power of music to drive real-world change. Founded in 2004 by environmentalist Lauren Sullivan and Guster frontman Adam Gardner, REVERB has partnered with festivals, venues, industry leaders and hundreds of artists across all genres.

REVERB has greened thousands of concerts, eliminated millions of single-use plastic bottles, brought large-scale clean energy solutions to live music, and raised $21 million for environmental and social causes.

THE CSO SHOP

The CSO Shop offers fractional sustainability and social impact advisory services to consumer brands, cultural influencers and forward-thinking organizations. We help unlock the power of strategic sustainability and translate it into a driver of value and growth.

Founded in 2022, The CSO Shop's Founder Danielle Azoulay has over two decades of experience driving sustainability and social impact transformations for start-ups and Fortune 500s alike. We connect strategic frameworks with internal processes and decision making to ensure this work is embedded and impacts are mitigated for the long term.

green music australia

Green Music Australia is an independent non-profit shaping a new generation of climate leaders in music. Working at the intersection of culture and environment, we equip artists and industry workers with the skills, confidence, and platform to champion solutions and galvanize audiences to push for a just and livable future. Learn more about us here.

Green Music Australia is assisted by the Australian Government through Music Australia, the NSW Government through Sound NSW, and supported by the City of Sydney through their Innovation and Ideas Grant.

NSW GOVERNMENT
Sound NSW
Australian Government
Music Australia
CITY OF SYDNEY

A GLOBAL MUSIC INDUSTRY RESOURCE

2026 Edition

Thank You

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