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Can I Print Song Lyrics On T-Shirts And Sell Them As A Private Clothing Line?

[Kristie Prinz](#)

Q.

Can I print song lyrics on t-shirts and sell as a private clothing line? I also want to give credit to the artist by putting the song and artist name on the inside tag.

-- Anonymous

A.

Yes, you absolutely can develop a private clothing line, in which you sell t-shirts with song lyrics printed on the shirts. However, before you start developing your line, you are going to need to negotiate a license agreement with the owner of the copyright on the lyrics.

Section 106 of the Copyright Act provides that only the owner of the copyright has the exclusive rights to do and authorize others to do the following:

1. to reproduce the copyrighted work in copies or phonorecords;
2. to prepare derivative works based upon the copyrighted work;
3. to distribute copies or phonorecords of the copyrighted work to the public by sale or other transfer of ownership, or by rental, lease, or lending;
4. in the case of literary, musical, dramatic, and choreographic works, pantomimes, and motion pictures and other audiovisual works, to perform the copyrighted work publicly;
5. in the case of literary, musical, dramatic, and choreographic works, pantomimes, and pictorial, graphic, or sculptural works, including the individual images of a motion picture or other audiovisual work, to display the copyrighted work publicly; and
6. in the case of sound recordings, to perform the copyrighted work publicly by means of a digital audio transmission.

Section 106 clearly provides that only the copyright owner has the right to create derivative works of a work,

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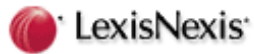
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which in this case is the song lyrics. While giving credit to the artist who sang the lyrics is a nice idea, you will still be committing copyright infringement if you print the lyrics and sell them on t-shirts without first negotiating a license with the copyright owner, who may or may not be the artist.

My advice is to approach the copyright owner of the lyrics, and inquire about licensing the rights to create derivative works of the lyrics. Once you have initiated the negotiations, you should consult with and retain a copyright licensing attorney in your jurisdiction to assist you with the negotiation and drafting of the license agreement. After you have an agreement in hand, if you want to give credit to the artist on the t-shirts, then you should likely be able to do so, assuming the license agreement you enter into does not state otherwise.

-- Kristie Prinz

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