Viacom to sell music publisher

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NEW YORK — Viacom Inc. said Wednesday it will sell its Famous Music publishing unit to Sony/ATV Music Publishing, the song catalog co-owned by pop star Michael Jackson.

The deal is estimated to be worth $370 million in cash, people familiar with the talks said.

Famous Music's catalog of more than 125,000 songs and sound cues includes music by Eminem and Shakira as well as soundtracks from "The Godfather" and "Mission: Impossible." Famous was founded to publish songs from movies.

The deal is the first major move by recently appointed Sony/ATV Chief Executive Martin Bandier, the former head of EMI Music Publishing.

As part of the deal, Sony/ATV will be entering the production music business through the Famous Extreme division.

Sony/ATV is jointly owned by Sony Corp. and Jackson. Its catalog includes songs by the Beatles, Neil Diamond, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix and others, making it the fourth-largest music publisher.

Bandier, who oversaw EMI Music Publishing's growth from the No. 4 player to the industry's largest, said he was appointed to expand the business through acquisitions and the addition of songwriters. "We're in the hunt for great artists and people to build the team," Bandier said. "This deal announces that we're in the game."

Sony/ATV bought the catalog of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller last month in a deal valued at around $50 million. The songs include "Hound Dog," "Jailhouse Rock" and "Stand by Me."

Publishing has become one of the more coveted segments of the music industry as recorded music has been hit by piracy. It has been affected by consumers' relatively slow transition to buying digital songs to make up for the downturn in CD sales.

Publishing is less vulnerable to the vagaries of music retailing, generating revenue by licensing songs to a variety of users, including television, advertising, radio and live performance.

This month, French media giant Vivendi's Universal Music Publishing Group unit became the world's largest music publisher after it bought BMG Music Publishing in a $2.19-billion deal.

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