

Universal-TikTok feud ramps up as more songs come down

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Taylor Swift is among the Universal Music Group artists whose music has been removed from TikTok.

Universal Music Group has lambasted TikTok's approach to AI as the feud between the two companies over song royalties escalates and

popular music is expunged from the social media platform.

The result of the closely watched negotiations could have significant ripple effects across the industry, as two of the most powerful players in the music and tech industries jockey for leverage in a landscape rife with uncertainty over artificial intelligence.

In early February music including by Taylor Swift, BTS and Drake left TikTok after a breakdown in negotiations with Universal over renewing their licensing agreement, which expired January 31.

Then this week TikTok began stripping music from all artists connected to Universal's vast publishing catalog, per the multinational music company's requirement, with all songs written by Universal Music Publishing Group's songwriters subject to removal.

That affects any artist who may have a publishing deal with the label—examples include Harry Styles and SZA—even if they aren't signed under the UMG recording umbrella.

"We are in the process of carrying out Universal Music Group's requirement to remove all songs that have been written (or co-written) by a songwriter signed to Universal Music Publishing Group, based on information they have provided," said TikTok in a statement, saying they "remain committed to reaching an equitable agreement" with the music giant.

"Their actions not only affect the songwriters and artists that they represent, but now also impact many artists and songwriters not signed to Universal," TikTok's statement said.

Universal fired back late Thursday in an open statement to its songwriters, saying TikTok has "not agreed to recognize the fair value of

your songs."

Along with royalties, TikTok is "refusing to respond to our concerns about AI depriving songwriters from fair compensation, or provide assurances that they will not train their AI models on your songs," Universal said.

"Every indication is that they simply do not value your music."

Owned by Chinese company ByteDance, TikTok is one of the globe's most popular social media platforms, with more than one billion users.

TikTok previously had accused Universal of putting "greed" above artists' interests, while Universal has said TikTok is "trying to build a music-based business, without paying fair value for the music."

'Protected' or 'ass-backwards'?

Universal's publishing arm is the second largest of its kind worldwide, meaning the feud's impact is far-reaching.

A piece of music has two copyrights: one for the recording itself, governed by a label, and another for lyrics and composition, managed by a publisher.

That means a record from another company like Sony or Warner could go silent on TikTok if a Universal writer worked on the song.

The fallout has triggered concern among performers, songwriters and producers who rely on TikTok as a promotional tool, especially for emerging artists who increasingly count on it for exposure in the industry.

The drama went public in February just as much of the music world was gathering in Los Angeles for the Grammys.

Speaking to journalists backstage at the awards gala, the sought-after producer Jack Antonoff—who works with the likes of UMG artists Swift, and Lana Del Rey—skewered Universal's approach.

"You got a whole industry being like, 'You've got to do everything; you've got to do everything, and here's where you've got to do it,' and then one day it's like, 'Poof!'" he said, referring to the music leaving the platform.

"You've always got to make sure as an artist you can't get used to being paid less, which they try to get you used to. But I think it's ass-backwards."

But like many artists, German singer Kim Petras—who's found mammoth success on TikTok—has said Universal's insistence makes her feel "protected."

"I know people who have number one records and can't afford their rent, so I'm proud Universal is taking a stand," Petras said in a recent interview with the BBC.

Universal said they were "sensitive" to the impact the "disruption" is having on artists, but it was necessary for "the entire music ecosystem."

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