

Billie Eilish, Nicki Minaj, Stevie Wonder and more musicians demand protection against AI

Publication Date: 2024-04-02

Author: Nick Robins-Early

Section: Technology

Tags: Technology, Artificial intelligence (AI), Nicki Minaj, Billie Eilish, Stevie Wonder, REM, Elvis Costello, news

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/apr/02/musicians-demand-protection-against-ai>



A group of more than 200 high-profile musicians have signed an open letter calling for protections against the predatory use of artificial intelligence that mimics human artists' likenesses, voices and sound. The signatories span musical genres and eras, ranging from A-list stars such as Billie Eilish, J Balvin and Nicki Minaj to Rock and Roll Hall of Famers like Stevie Wonder and REM. The estates of Frank Sinatra and Bob Marley are also signatories. The letter, which was issued by the Artist Rights Alliance advocacy group, makes the broad demand that technology companies pledge not to develop AI tools that undermine or replace human songwriters and artists. "This assault on human creativity must be stopped. We must protect against the predatory use of AI to steal professional artists' voices and likenesses, violate creators' rights, and destroy the music ecosystem," the letter states. The letter does not call for an outright ban on the use of AI in music or production, saying that responsible use of the technology could have benefits for the industry. Music producers have used artificial intelligence tools in a variety of ways in recent years, in one case employing AI to isolate John Lennon's vocals from an old demo track and use them to create a "new" Beatles song which was released last year. The Artist Rights Alliance letter is part of an industry-wide pushback from artists and creators against the use of generative artificial intelligence, as the technology continues to present ethical and legal issues surrounding copyright infringement and labor rights. Artist unions and advocacy organizations have sought to pressure lawmakers and tech companies to regulate the use of AI, while studios have become interested in its potential for reducing production costs. Concern over AI being used to write songs and scripts, or produce images and video of actors and entertainers, was at the center of several contract negotiations and entertainment industry union strikes in 2023. The spread of pornographic AI-made images of Taylor Swift also drew additional attention to the malicious use of deepfakes, and earlier this year prompted lawmakers to introduce a bill aimed at criminalizing non-consensual, AI-generated sexualized imagery. Just last week, ChatGPT-maker OpenAI delayed the release of a program that can mimic voices over concerns of responsible use. In March, Tennessee became the first US state to enact legislation directly intended to protect musicians from having their vocal likeness generated by AI for commercial purposes. The Ensuring Likeness, Voice, and Image Security Act or "Elvis Act" goes into effect on 1 July, and makes it illegal to replicate an artists' voice without their consent. That legislation did not address artists' work being used as data to train AI models, a practice that has resulted in several lawsuits against companies such as OpenAI and is mentioned in the letter. "Some of the biggest and most powerful companies are, without permission, using our work to train AI models," the letter states. "These efforts are directly aimed at replacing the work of human artists with massive quantities of AI-created 'sounds' and 'images' that substantially dilute the royalty pools that are paid out to artists." The Artist Rights Alliance is a non-profit organization run

by music industry veterans, such as board member Rosanne Cash – daughter of Johnny Cash. It is unclear how the organization recruited the artists who signed the letter, which include country stars such as Kacey Musgraves, rappers such as Q-Tip and younger indie pop stars including Chappell Roan. The Artist Rights Alliance did not immediately return a request for comment. Estates representing deceased artists are also among the signatories to the letter. There has been an increased debate within the entertainment industry over how artists' likenesses can be used after their death, with AI tools demonstrating a growing ability to create realistic video based on old footage. Several AI versions of dead actors and musicians have appeared in film, video games and television in recent years, prompting controversy and ethical debates. As AI tools become more publicly available and pervasive, musicians have increasingly been forced to stake out a position on what is a permissible use of artificial intelligence. A few artists, such as Grimes, have viewed generative AI's ability to create simulacra of their work as an opportunity to experiment or to encourage fans to make songs using their vocal likeness. Other musicians have expressed more negative feelings about imitations of their musical stylings. In January of last year, a fan asked ChatGPT to generate lyrics in the style of the singer-songwriter Nick Cave and asked the artist what he thought of the result. "This song is bullshit, a grotesque mockery of what it is to be human," Cave responded.