

Judge hears Anthropic's fair-use defence over song lyrics in music publishers' case

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Business News Tech AI Anthropic, music publishers square off on 'fair use' defense in AI copyright case

Anthropic, music publishers square off on 'fair use' defense in AI copyright case Reuters Last Updated: Oct 22, 2026, 07:42:34 AM IST

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Synopsis US District Judge Eumi Lee did not rule at a hearing in San Jose but pressed both sides on the fair use question, which could be key to dozens of other high-stakes copyright infringement cases in the AI era.

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Listen AP Anthropic urged a judge in California on Wednesday to rule that the AI company's use of millions of song lyrics to train its chatbot Claude is protected as "fair use" under US copyright law, as it seeks to scuttle a lawsuit brought by Universal Music Group and other music publishers.

US District Judge Eumi Lee did not rule at a hearing in San Jose but pressed both sides on the fair use question, which could be key to dozens of other high-stakes copyright infringement cases in the AI era.

Lee also questioned the publishers' assertion that Claude's ability to compose lyrics threatens the market for the publishers' lyrics.

Anthropic lawyer Sonal Mehta of WilmerHale argued that its AI training leads to the creation of transformative new content, putting it squarely under the fair use doctrine.

The publishers' attorney Matt Oppenheim of Oppenheim + Zbrak responded that Anthropic misuses its lyrics to generate competing content that harms human songwriters.

Oppenheim said Claude received nearly 120,000 requests to generate "synthetic" lyrics over a six-month period. He said large language models like Claude "could overwhelm the market with AI-generated content very easily."

Mehta countered that AI has not reduced demand for the lyrics, and that the publishers could not identify any specific instances of market harm from Claude or other large language models.

Mehta also said that UMG itself has said that AI is "overwhelmingly a net positive" for the music industry.

EARLY FAIR USE RULINGS

Fair use could determine the fate of pending lawsuits brought by authors, news outlets, visual artists and others against tech giants including Anthropic, OpenAI and Meta Platforms over their AI training.

Two other Northern California judges who have already weighed in on the closely watched issue have split on whether generative AI training generally makes fair use of copyrighted material, which would shield tech companies from liability for using millions of copyrighted works to train their systems without content owners' permission.

Now-retired US District Judge William Alsup sided with Anthropic last year on its argument that its AI training made fair use of books. Two days later, US District Judge Vince Chhabria ruled for Meta in a similar lawsuit but warned that AI training "in many circumstances" would not be fair use.

In the case being heard by Lee, music publishers UMG, Concord and ABKCO sued Anthropic in 2023, alleging its use of their lyrics to train Claude to respond to human prompts infringed their copyrights in hundreds of songs by artists including Beyonce, the Rolling Stones and the Beach Boys.

Anthropic has argued that its AI training makes transformative use of song lyrics to "help Claude understand human language and enable progress and productivity in science, business and education."

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