

The Lion King Chant Roars Into Federal Court

April 6, 2026

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Most people know the opening chant of Disney's "The Lion King," even if they can't quite place the words. That chant, "Nants'ingonyama bagithi Baba," was composed and originally performed in 1994 by Grammy-winning South African artist Lebohang Morake, known professionally as Lebo M. Its meaning, as published in the 2019 soundtrack liner notes, is a royal Xhosa proclamation: "All hail the king, we all bow in the presence of the king." On March 16, 2026, Lebo M filed a federal lawsuit in the Central District of California against Zimbabwean-born comedian Learnmore Jonasi, who told millions of podcast and social media viewers that the chant actually translates to "Look, there's a lion. Oh my god." The complaint, seeking over \$20 million in damages, raises an unusual and provocative question: when does a comedian's viral joke cross the line into actionable harm to an artist's livelihood and legacy?

The lawsuit brings four distinct claims. The first invokes Section 43(a) of the Lanham Act, arguing that Jonasi's false "translation" amounts to a misleading description of Lebo M's commercially significant creative work. The remaining three claims concern state law: 1) defamation per se, alleging the joke implies that a celebrated, award-winning composition is meaningless gibberish; 2) trade libel, targeting the disparagement of the composition itself as a commercial product; and 3) tortious interference with prospective economic advantage, based on Lebo M's concern that the viral mockery could jeopardize his decades-long working relationship with Disney. Notably, the complaint **does not** include a copyright infringement claim, as Jonasi never reproduced the composition itself. Therefore, the theory of harm here is reputational and commercial, not about unauthorized copying of protected works.

Ultimately, the case will hinge on the tension between intellectual property protections and the First Amendment. Jonasi's legal team is likely to argue that a humorous riff on a song lyric's meaning is protected speech, comprising an opinion or parody, not a provably false "statement of fact" as defamation law requires. But the complaint lays groundwork to counter that defense: it alleges that Jonasi presented his translation in an informational podcast setting (as opposed to, for example, a stand-up special where such humor is expected as a matter of course), that Lebo M personally contacted Jonasi with the correct translation, and that Jonasi explicitly refused to retract. If the court finds those facts credible, the case for actual malice (and potentially significant damages) becomes much more compelling. For creators, brand owners, and anyone whose professional reputation is tied to a specific body of work, *Morake v. Mwanyenyeka* is a case worth watching as it develops.