

# Fighting the Perpetuation of Homophobia and HIV Stigma

A deeper intersectional look into the DaBaby controversy from the perspective of a queer music industry veteran living with HIV.

September 8, 2021 By David Swartz

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Editor's note: David Swartz is a queer man living with HIV and the founder of Singular Arts Group, which manages artists including Mykki Blanco. For more about him, please go to the end of this article.

As many are aware by now, a rapper named DaBaby took it upon himself [recently](#) to use his platform on stage at the Rolling Loud festival in Miami to spread homophobia and referenced HIV in such a way that perpetuated dangerous stigma around the disease.

In a video posted to his social media after his on-stage remarks received so much attention, DaBaby essentially doubled down on his remarks while also using it as an opportunity to both provide justifications and excuses for what he said.

The more recent developments in this narrative have been an apology posted in text to his social media that was widely and rightfully criticized as something disingenuous written by a public relations team, it was deleted just a few days after he posted it. Most recently, there was a [virtual meeting](#) with HIV advocates that both sides claim was productive.

When it comes to DaBaby's personal responsibility and the social accountability of the companies in business with him, there are a few key points I believe have not been adequately addressed in the media.

No one asked DaBaby to comment on the value of queer lives or anything about HIV. This was not an interview where he was put on the spot or presented with some "gotcha" question. This was unprompted and unprovoked.

In a slice of twisted irony, he has invoked the rationale that somehow social media is to be blamed for this controversy. Artists and the companies they are in business with leverage the power of social media to their advantage, they make use of its utility to reach a massive audience quickly with messaging that they want to push. You can't get away with simply blaming social media when something is being spread around which is not to your liking (especially when it was literally

something you said that was getting picked up widely across social media channels). This reminds me of the old parenting wisdom of telling kids “if you have nothing nice to say, then don’t say anything at all.” If you don’t want a lot of people on the internet seeing something you said or did, simply don’t say it or do it; it’s not the fault of social media.

Despite his choice of artist name, DaBaby is not a baby or a child. He is a 29-year-old adult who has access to the internet and its abundance of available information on the history of the struggles of LGBTQ people and the history of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

DaBaby is signed to a record label imprint under Interscope Records which is part of the Universal Music Group and DaBaby is signed to a publishing deal with Universal Music Publishing Group. An artist’s record label and publisher are essentially the two biggest business partnerships that an they work with to create, release, and promote their work in the music industry. There has not been a single remark or statement officially released by Universal Music Group or any of its key executives to address this controversy.

The [roster](#) of Interscope Records includes ultra-famous legendary supporters of the queer community like Lady Gaga, as well as queer acts such as Years & Years. Beyond Interscope, the Universal label rosters and the roster of Universal Music Publishing Group includes so many [key members](#) of the LGBTQ community and the community’s allies such as Elton John, Demi Lovato, Imagine Dragons, Queen, Billie Eilish, Rosalía, Brandi Carlile, Taylor Swift, Katy Perry, Sam Smith and Troye Sivan.

To add further fuel to the fire of hypocrisy, Universal Music has a specific organization they created, primarily in response to the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement, called the [Taskforce For Meaningful Change](#). It was set up to show, what many consider to be purely performative and symbolic, that they were actively taking action to stand in solidarity with marginalized communities.

And for some icing on the cake, don’t look further than the recent launch of Universal Music Group’s “[Music Is Universal](#)” LGBTQ celebration for the Pride month of June. Pandering to LGBTQ consumers while also turning a blind eye to bigotry against LGBTQs must be called out.

The [Rolling Loud](#) festival that booked DaBaby literally organized the event that placed him on the stage. The festival, as an organization, along with its two cofounders ([Tariq Cherif](#) and [Matt Zingler](#)), have said nothing about the controversy. To the contrary, they’ve only celebrated what a tremendous performer DaBaby is on their social media channels in multiple posts. They have not officially addressed what happened as far as I can see. If they have, it’s not anywhere prominent.

[Mac Agency](#) is the booking agency that represents DaBaby as a performer. They are responsible for handling all his performance bookings and generate their revenue in the form of commissioning the fees that DaBaby receives to perform on stage at concerts and festivals. Similar to Rolling Loud, this agency has made no official comment or statement on the controversy. To the contrary, they have applauded what a tremendous performance he gave on that festival stage.

[Arnold Taylor](#), founder and CEO of South Coast Music Group, is the music industry executive who signed DaBaby to management and to his record label imprint South Coast Music Group. The Instagram account of South Coast Music Group re-posted the text apology that DaBaby made and then later deleted. Taylor has posted on his personal Instagram account a few posts related to this controversy. Despite those posts, there's nothing Taylor has publicly said in his own words that indicates he feels any level of wrongfulness or bigotry of the actions of his client. Taylor is the executive who claims responsibility for discovering DaBaby and helping him to become successful.

This controversy matters, especially in the genre of rap music, because homophobia is so widespread within communities of color. HIV is a disease that disproportionately affects Black and brown people in the United States. The genre of rap has a well-documented legacy of misogyny, homophobia and transphobia.

Fighting against the stigma of HIV, especially in communities of color, has been ongoing for over four decades. Rap music came into existence as a medium to channel narratives from voices of communities of color to speak out about their lived experiences. Thus, it holds a unique responsibility as a platform to address the issues facing marginalized groups within communities of color in America and across the world.

DaBaby seems to have a commercially successful business with a dedicated fanbase, and it doesn't appear that this audience is going to disappear overnight simply because of this controversy. To the contrary, many of his fans, along with several other prominent rappers, have come out on social media and in the press to come to DaBaby's defense.

A record label like Interscope is not going to cease to have a consumer base because they come out with a statement distancing themselves from the remarks of one of their artist clients. Rolling Loud has a huge fanbase with multiple sold-out events coming up on the calendar and seems to be in no danger of going away. I don't believe there's a conflict of interest for a party in business with DaBaby to make an official statement that clarifies their perspective in light of this controversy.

DaBaby has been removed from the lineups of many upcoming festivals that he was booked to play. It's important to address the way in which the promoters have chosen to go about this because it says a lot about the ethos and character of their festival brands. In an age where so many festivals are already sold-out before the line-up is even announced, it's more important than ever for these festival brands to cultivate a sense of loyalty from their fans and customers.

[Parklife](#) festival in the U.K. removed DaBaby from its lineup by updating the flyer image on their website, but no statement. [Governors Ball](#) in New York City issued a post, though not mentioning DaBaby by name, that there would be a lineup change and removed DaBaby from their flyer. [Lollapalooza](#) made a brief statement when they dropped DaBaby from the lineup. [Austin City Limits](#) not only made a statement, but went further to replace DaBaby with queer artist Tyler The Creator.

In my personal experience working as [Mykki Blanco's](#) manager, I have experienced an immense

level of fulfillment, not only because of the passion and admiration I have for their tremendous multidisciplinary artistic talents, but because I know that the success we experience together for their career has a greater social and cultural impact than that of the majority of artists working in the entertainment industry.

For the world to see a gender-fluid person of color who is publicly HIV positive, especially one whose music has existed for much of their career categorized within the genre of rap/hip-hop, represents such a meaningful narrative of progress. This is something I am so proud to play a role in contributing to with Mykki.

Beyond just the standard music work (recording, touring, etc.) with Mykki, there is a significant further set of projects we have been involved with, a few examples include:

- \* Hosting and co-creating a [documentary](#) with i-D on queer creatives thriving in South Africa
- \* Multiple literary endeavors such as their recent contributions to queer anthologies [We Can Do Better Than This](#) (where Mykki writes about a path towards ending stigma against HIV) and [The Queer Bible](#) (where Mykki writes about the iconic legacy of Vaginal Davis) published by two of the world's biggest publishing houses (Penguin Books and HarperCollins, respectively)
- \* Taking on the role of [Guest Editor for Dazed](#) for a month to shine a spotlight onto the work of femme-identifying people and those coming from otherwise marginalized communities

We have heard, loud and clear for as long as there has been a music business, from the voices of white heterosexual cis-male artists. This is a group who have been significantly over-represented within the culture and over-rewarded with industry accolades and commercial success. This is the nature of the power dynamics of our society being reflected in the sector of entertainment and the arts. It is also something I have made a commitment to actively work to attempt to fight back against within my industry.

Shifting culture and progressing societal ideologies can only come about when you get people together to rally against the struggles of those marginalized and under-represented groups. For example, Ireland passed marriage equality by a popular vote, the first country in the world to do so in that way and a country with a historic hyper-religious aversion to the acceptance of homosexuality.

It would be such a shame to not utilize the opportunity granted to those folks in positions surrounding talent and others with great cultural influence where there's a possibility to ensure a dialogue is realized that can help lead to a tipping point on these critical issues affecting our society. This DaBaby controversy is a case study for seizing an opportunity to engage in a real meaningful dialogue toward positive change.

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Further Reading

[GLAAD's "2021 State of HIV Stigma" Report](#)

[“An Open Letter to DaBaby” by U=U and signed a dozen key organizations](#)

[“DaBaby’s Homophobia Is About More Than Homophobia” by George M. Johnson](#)

[“Lil Nas X, DaBaby, and The Incoherence of Homophobia” by Spencer Kornhaber](#)

[“The Music Industry Is Holding DaBaby Accountable” by Elizabeth Blair](#)

[“People living with HIV face harmful stigma daily - DaBaby’s rant was just more public than most” by Sannisha Dale](#)

[“The de-platforming of DaBaby marks an important opportunity for anti-homophobia in rap” by Jenessa Williams](#)

[“No Homo? Hip Hop And Homophobia” by GLSEN](#)

[“I Don’t See An End To This” by Craig Jenkins](#)

[“We Can Do Better Than This” by Amelia Abraham \(Vintage / Penguin Books\)](#)

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## About the Author

David Swartz is a queer man living a healthy thriving life, despite his HIV diagnosis over 10 years ago, and is an artist manager who has been working around the music industry for nearly two decades across a variety of sectors of the business.

The journey of Swartz’s career in music has taken him from being a concert promoter to a booking agent and then into artist management. He has done work with artists from a wide spectrum of genres, with rap and hip-hop being a central area of the early years of his work. He promoted shows and/or organized tours with artists such as The Clipse, Digable Planets, Guru (of Gangstarr / Jazzmatazz), The Streets, Dizzee Rascal, Immortal Technique, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, KRS-One, Atmosphere, Sage Francis, among many others. Outside of the hip-hop/rap genre, he worked with many rock and electronic acts; for example, he spent a few years (working in collaboration with agent Jenna Adler and manager/mentor Merck Mercuriadis) as the agent exclusively tasked with booking Justin Tranter (along with his former bandmates from Semi Precious Weapons) and Lady Starlight for official Monster Ball after-parties during their global touring as the opening act for Lady Gaga.

Swartz has been working as an artist manager for over a decade now. He moved from Los Angeles to Berlin back in 2015 and spent a few years working for !K7 (where he began his working relationship with Mykki Blanco, and also managed the legendary UK pioneer Tricky, signed in the

queer avant-garde artist Lotic, and also brought in Kele Okereke to sign with for a label services deal for his solo releases). He left !K7 a few years ago to go back to running his own business: [Singular Arts Group](#) which he founded in partnership with [Matt Lambert](#), and they look after a small roster of artists which includes the trailblazing pioneer Mykki Blanco.

In the most recent chapter of Swartz's career, he has sought to do work with and be a champion of non-heteronormative and gender-nonconforming artists coming from marginalized communities and those who have otherwise generally been under-represented within the music industry. For example, to name but a few: Mykki Blanco, Patrick Wolf, Kele Okereke (Bloc Party), Lotic, Finn Ronsdorf, Kiddy Smile, Cakes Da Killa, Big Freedia, and Tami T.

Swartz is hyper-aware of the impact that their work can have on the social and cultural fabric of this world. He is of the belief that for those in the arts and culture sector, and the wider entertainment industry at-large, working with talent means contributing to work that can have great influence on the masses; there must be certain moral responsibilities for those people and they must assume some level of accountability.

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<http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/fighting-perpetuation-homophobia-hiv-stigma>