TikTok turned his song into a creepy meme — until fans took it back

For years, Absofacto's "Dissolve" has been a fixture on TikTok — specifically the first few seconds of the chorus, a hooky rising vocal line singing the words, "I just wanted you to watch me dissolve…" The song never broke as big as "Old Town Road" or "The Box," but TikTok fame has given it millions of streaming plays and even a minor chart breakthrough in 2019, a full four years after it was released.

But last weekend, Jonathan Visger (who records under the Absofacto name) got some alarming news from his followers. "I started getting messages from people that were survivors of childhood sexual abuse," says Visger. "They told me there were videos on TikTok using my song that were extremely upsetting to them."

"The stress probably took a year off my life, but it was worth it"

The messages were about an unsettling meme that had grown up around Visger's song. Described as "daddy daughter POV" videos, the videos show young users making direct eye contact with the viewer, setting a scene of a daughter accidentally walking in on her father. The lighter instances of the meme were only vaguely creepy, but others seemed to be straightforward references to incest and sexual abuse. None were explicit enough to trigger moderation, but they were still deeply disturbing. For longtime fans, it was jarring to see it soundtracked by a song they loved.

"I probably wouldn't have understood the meaning behind this

trend, if the people who had been affected hadn’t told me about it and asked me to do something,” Visger says. “This is uncharted territory for me.”

The result has been an unusual fight to reclaim “Dissolve.” Unlike most content fights, this one has mostly taken place among users, avoiding top-down moderation in favor of mass action within the strange ecosystem of TikTok. But for Visger and other musicians who have used the platform to reach a new audience, it’s an ugly reminder of how little control there is over how a song is used, and how hard it can be to take back your work.

From the beginning, Visger seemed to be fighting an uphill battle against TikTok’s algorithm. Users who register likes on a lot of “Dissolve” memes are likely to be shown more of them, which means the users who already had an attachment to Visger’s song were the ones most likely to see the unsettling meme. And because recommendation algorithms tend to surface content that gets a lot of reactions — whether it’s likes, comments or TikTok duets — the controversy around the videos may have only promoted them more.

Visger’s first response was a TikTok post, calling on fans to take back the song and beat back the “gross daddy POV trend,” as he called it. “This song means a lot to me,” he wrote in a caption. “Please save it from being associated with this daddy play acting thing.” The post brought in half a million likes, and launched a wave of countermemes under the same audio tag, a slowed down version of Dissolve’s familiar hook. One popular user posted a POV video with the caption “I’m your cool aunt looking at a picture you just colored with your other aunt after I get back from burying your creepy pedophilic dad in the woods,” which spun off an entire wave of response videos. In another response, a gay couple poses with their infant child under the caption “POV: you got taken away from your creepy dad and adopted by a lesbian witch family.”

Along the way, many of the users behind the original daddy-daughter meme have gotten the message. Many have taken down their posts, sometimes posting apologies alongside them. (Visger duetted one on Friday, trying to boost the message.) After last week’s flood, the memes are now difficult to find on TikTok, and far less likely to pop into the pivotal For You page.

Still, the experience has left Visger unsettled, and with a radically new perspective on what it means to be a popular artist on TikTok. He’s decided that, at least for a while, he’ll dedicate his TikTok account to spreading awareness about child sexual abuse, hoping to comfort survivors and turn the experience into something more positive.

“I’m so happy I spoke up and I’m so thankful to the CSA survivors who put it on my radar,” he says. “The stress probably took a year off my life, but it was worth it.”

https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/18/21329534/absofacto-daddy-daughter-pov-meme-csa-abuse-response