

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS**

AUTHORIZED SPINAL TAP LLC,

Plaintiff,

v.

THE PARTNERSHIPS and
UNINCORPORATED ASSOCIATIONS
IDENTIFIED ON SCHEDULE “A”,

Defendants.

Case No. 23-cv-04912

COMPLAINT

Plaintiff Authorized Spinal Tap LLC (“Spinal Tap” or “Plaintiff”) hereby brings the present action against the Partnerships and Unincorporated Associations Identified on Schedule A attached hereto (collectively, “Defendants”) and alleges as follows:

I. JURISDICTION AND VENUE

1. This Court has original subject matter jurisdiction over Plaintiff’s claims pursuant to the provisions of the Lanham Act, 15 U.S.C. § 1051, *et seq.*, 28 U.S.C. § 1338(a)-(b) and 28 U.S.C. § 1331.

2. Venue is proper in this Court pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1391, and this Court may properly exercise personal jurisdiction over Defendants because Defendants structure their business activities so as to target consumers in the United States, including Illinois, through at least the fully interactive e-commerce stores operating under the aliases identified on Schedule A attached hereto (the “Seller Aliases”). Specifically, Defendants have targeted sales to Illinois residents by setting up and operating e-commerce stores that target United States consumers, offer shipping to the United States, including Illinois, accept payment in U.S. dollars and, on information and belief, sell products using infringing and counterfeit versions of Plaintiff’s federally registered

trademarks (collectively, the “Unauthorized Products”) to residents of Illinois. Each of the Defendants is committing tortious acts in Illinois, is engaging in interstate commerce, and has wrongfully caused Plaintiff substantial injury in the state of Illinois.

II. INTRODUCTION

3. Plaintiff filed this case to prevent e-commerce store operators who trade upon Plaintiff’s reputation and goodwill from further selling and/or offering for sale Unauthorized Products. Defendants create e-commerce stores under one or more Seller Aliases and then advertise, offer for sale, and/or sell Unauthorized Products to unknowing consumers. E-commerce stores operating under the Seller Aliases share identifiers, such as design elements and similarities of the Unauthorized Products offered for sale, establishing that a logical relationship exists between them, and that Defendants’ counterfeiting operation arises out of the same transaction, occurrence, or series of transactions or occurrences. Defendants take advantage of a set of circumstances, including the anonymity and mass reach afforded by the Internet and the cover afforded by international borders, to violate Plaintiff’s intellectual property rights with impunity. Defendants attempt to avoid liability by operating under one or more Seller Aliases to conceal their identities, locations, and the full scope and interworking of their counterfeiting operation. Plaintiff is forced to file this action to combat Defendants’ counterfeiting of its registered trademarks, as well as to protect consumers from purchasing Unauthorized Products over the internet. Plaintiff has been, and continues to be, irreparably damaged through consumer confusion and dilution of its valuable trademarks because of Defendants’ actions and therefore seeks injunctive and monetary relief.

III. THE PARTIES

4. *This Is Spinal Tap* is the famous 1984 rock mockumentary that followed a fake British metal band, Spinal Tap, on tour in the United States. The creators of the iconic mockumentary, including Rob Reiner, Harry Shearer, Christopher Guest, and Michael McKean, formed Authorized Spinal Tap LLC to police and enforce the intellectual property relating to the film. Authorized Spinal Tap LLC is a limited liability company having its principal place of business in California. Plaintiff Authorized Spinal Tap LLC and the above-listed creators of *This Is Spinal Tap* are referred to herein together or individually as “Plaintiff” or “Spinal Tap”. Plaintiff owns the trademarks asserted herein.

5. *This Is Spinal Tap* is a mockumentary that chronicles the disintegrating British band Spinal Tap as they embark on a tour of the United States to promote their new album “Smell the Glove”. The film hilariously depicts the self-contained universe of a metal band struggling to get back on the charts. As the famous movie critic Roger Ebert said, “[t]here are two stories told in the film: the story of what the rock band Spinal Tap thinks, hopes, believes or fears is happening, and the story of what is actually happening”, while dubbing the film “one of the funniest [] ever made”.¹ Indeed, the global media business Time Out Group ranked *This Is Spinal Tap* as the best comedy movie of all time.²

6. Plaintiff and its licensees market and sell a variety of products emanating from *This Is Spinal Tap*, including t-shirts, jackets, posters, and other merchandise bearing Plaintiff’s SPINAL TAP trademarks (collectively, “Spinal Tap Products”). Spinal Tap Products have become enormously popular and even iconic, driven by Plaintiff’s quality standards and innovative designs. Among the purchasing public, Spinal Tap Products are instantly recognizable as such.

¹ See <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-this-is-spinal-tap-1984>.

² See <https://www.timeout.com/film/100-best-comedy-movies>.

Spinal Tap Products are distributed and sold to consumers through authorized retailers and online at spinaltap.com.

7. Plaintiff has used the SPINAL TAP trademarks, and other trademarks, for many years and has continuously sold products under its trademarks (collectively, the “Spinal Tap Trademarks”). As a result of this long-standing use, strong common law trademark rights have amassed in the Spinal Tap Trademarks. Plaintiff’s use of the Spinal Tap Trademarks has also built substantial goodwill in the Spinal Tap Trademarks. The Spinal Tap Trademarks are famous marks and valuable assets of Plaintiff. Spinal Tap Products also typically include at least one of the Spinal Tap Trademarks.

8. The Spinal Tap Trademarks are registered with the United States Patent and Trademark Office and are included below.

Registration Number	Trademark	Registration Date	Goods and Services
6,493,486	SPINAL TAP	Sep. 21, 2021	<p>For: Printed matter, namely, posters, calendars, souvenir books featuring information on a musical and performing group, note cards, temporary tattoo transfers, decals, and stickers in class 016.</p> <p>For: clothing, namely, t-shirts, long-sleeved shirts, shirts, tops, jackets, sweatshirts, pullovers, hooded pullovers, pants, shorts, sweatpants, loungewear, sleepwear, pajamas, boxer shorts, boxer briefs, underwear, bandanas, caps, and hats in class 025.</p>

7,108,522	SPINAL TAP	Jul. 11, 2023	For: wireless chargers; wireless speakers; batteries; downloadable music files; downloadable video game software; recorded video game programs and downloadable computer game software; pre-recorded DVDs and compact discs featuring music and video games; headphones; audio-visual headsets for playing video games; Downloadable electronic publications, namely, newsletters and e-books all in the fields of music, movies, comedy and music and movie fan updates; Downloadable electronic publications, namely, sheet music; downloadable electronic publications, namely, magazines and newsletters in the fields of music and movies; Downloadable and recorded games software for casinos in class 009.
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9. The U.S. registrations for the Spinal Tap Trademarks are valid, subsisting, and in full force and effect. The registrations for the Spinal Tap Trademarks constitute *prima facie* evidence of their validity and of Plaintiff's exclusive right to use the Spinal Tap Trademarks pursuant to 15 U.S.C. § 1057(b). True and correct copies of the United States Registration Certificates for the Spinal Tap Trademarks are attached hereto as **Exhibit 1**.

10. The Spinal Tap Trademarks are exclusive to Plaintiff and are displayed extensively on Spinal Tap Products and in marketing and promotional materials. The Spinal Tap Trademarks are also distinctive when applied to Spinal Tap Products, signifying to the purchaser that the products come from Plaintiff, or its licensees, and are manufactured to Plaintiff's quality standards.

Whether Plaintiff manufactures the products itself or contracts with others to do so, Plaintiff has ensured that products bearing the Spinal Tap Trademarks are manufactured to the highest quality standards.

11. The Spinal Tap Trademarks are famous marks, as that term is used in 15 U.S.C. § 1125(c)(1), and have been continuously used and never abandoned. The success of *This is Spinal Tap*, in addition to the marketing of Spinal Tap Products, has enabled the Spinal Tap brand (“Spinal Tap Brand”) to achieve widespread recognition and fame and has made the Spinal Tap Trademarks some of the most well-known marks in the movie industry. The widespread fame, outstanding reputation, and significant goodwill associated with the Spinal Tap Brand have made the Spinal Tap Trademarks valuable assets of Plaintiff.

12. Products bearing the Spinal Tap Trademarks have been the subject of substantial and continuous marketing and promotion. Plaintiff has marketed and promoted, and continues to market and promote, the Spinal Tap Trademarks in the industry and to consumers through traditional print media, social media sites, point of sale material, and the website spinaltap.com.

13. Plaintiff has expended substantial time, money, and other resources advertising, promoting, and marketing Spinal Tap Products. Spinal Tap Products have also been the subject of extensive unsolicited publicity due to the longstanding success of the Spinal Tap Brand. As a result, products bearing the Spinal Tap Trademarks are widely recognized and exclusively associated by consumers as being high-quality products sourced from Plaintiff or Plaintiff’s licensees. The Spinal Tap Trademarks have achieved tremendous fame and recognition, adding to the inherent distinctiveness of the marks. As such, the goodwill associated with the Spinal Tap Trademarks is of immeasurable value to Plaintiff.

14. Spinal Tap Products are sold only by Plaintiff or through authorized licensees and are recognized by the public as being exclusively associated with the Spinal Tap Brand.

15. Defendants are unknown individuals and business entities who own and/or operate one or more of the e-commerce stores under the Seller Aliases identified on Schedule A and/or other seller aliases not yet known to Plaintiff. On information and belief, Defendants reside and/or operate in primarily Asian countries or other foreign jurisdictions and redistribute products from the same or similar sources in those locations. Defendants have the capacity to be sued pursuant to Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 17(b).

16. On information and belief, Defendants, either individually or jointly, operate one or more e-commerce stores under the Seller Aliases listed in Schedule A attached hereto. Tactics used by Defendants to conceal their identities and the full scope of their operation make it virtually impossible for Plaintiff to learn Defendants' true identities and the exact interworking of their counterfeit network. If Defendants provide additional credible information regarding their identities, Plaintiff will take appropriate steps to amend the Complaint.

IV. DEFENDANTS' UNLAWFUL CONDUCT

17. The success of the Spinal Tap Brand has resulted in significant counterfeiting of the Spinal Tap Trademarks. Because of this, Plaintiff has implemented an anti-counterfeiting program that involves investigating suspicious websites and online marketplace listings identified in proactive Internet sweeps. Recently, Plaintiff has identified many fully interactive e-commerce stores offering Unauthorized Products on online marketplace platforms like AliExpress.com ("AliExpress"), Amazon.com, Inc. ("Amazon"), Etsy, Inc. ("Etsy"), Pixels.com, LLC ("Pixels"), Fruugo.com Limited ("Fruugo"), Printerval.com ("Printerval"), Redbubble Limited ("Redbubble"), Walmart, Inc. ("Walmart"), and ContextLogic, Inc. d/b/a Wish.com ("Wish"),

including the e-commerce stores operating under the Seller Aliases. The Seller Aliases target consumers in this Judicial District and throughout the United States. According to a report prepared for The Buy Safe America Coalition, most counterfeit products now come through international mail and express courier services (as opposed to containers) due to increased sales from offshore online counterfeiters. *The Counterfeit Silk Road: Impact of Counterfeit Consumer Products Smuggled Into the United States*, prepared by John Dunham & Associates (**Exhibit 2**).

18. Because counterfeit products sold by offshore online counterfeiters do not enter normal retail distribution channels, the US economy lost an estimated 300,000 or more full-time jobs in the wholesale and retail sectors alone in 2020. *Id.* When accounting for lost jobs from suppliers that would serve these retail and wholesale establishments, and the lost jobs that would have been induced by employees re-spending their wages in the economy, the total economic impact resulting from the sale of counterfeit products was estimated to cost the United States economy over 650,000 full-time jobs that would have paid over \$33.6 billion in wages and benefits. *Id.* Additionally, it is estimated that the importation of counterfeit goods costs the United States government nearly \$7.2 billion in personal and business tax revenues in the same period. *Id.*

19. Online marketplace platforms like those used by Defendants do not adequately subject new sellers to verification and confirmation of their identities, allowing counterfeiters to “routinely use false or inaccurate names and addresses when registering with these e-commerce platforms.” **Exhibit 3**, Daniel C.K. Chow, *Alibaba, Amazon, and Counterfeiting in the Age of the Internet*, 40 NW. J. INT’L L. & BUS. 157, 186 (2020); *see also* report on “Combating Trafficking in Counterfeit and Pirated Goods” prepared by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Strategy, Policy, and Plans (Jan. 24, 2020), attached as **Exhibit 4**, and finding that on “at least

some e-commerce platforms, little identifying information is necessary for a counterfeiter to begin selling” and that “[t]he ability to rapidly proliferate third-party online marketplaces greatly complicates enforcement efforts, especially for intellectual property rights holders.” Counterfeiters hedge against the risk of being caught and having their websites taken down from an e-commerce platform by establishing multiple virtual storefronts. **Exhibit 4** at p. 22. Since platforms generally do not require a seller on a third-party marketplace to identify the underlying business entity, counterfeiters can have many different profiles that can appear unrelated even though they are commonly owned and operated. **Exhibit 4** at p. 39. Further, “[e]-commerce platforms create bureaucratic or technical hurdles in helping brand owners to locate or identify sources of counterfeits and counterfeiters.” **Exhibit 3** at 186-187. Specifically, brand owners are forced to “suffer through a long and convoluted notice and takedown procedure only [for the counterfeit seller] to reappear under a new false name and address in short order.” *Id.* at p. 161.

20. Defendants have targeted sales to Illinois residents by setting up and operating e-commerce stores that target United States consumers using one or more Seller Aliases, offer shipping to the United States, including Illinois, accept payment in U.S. dollars and, on information and belief, sell Unauthorized Products to residents of Illinois.

21. Defendants concurrently employ and benefit from similar advertising and marketing strategies. For example, Defendants facilitate sales by designing the e-commerce stores operating under the Seller Aliases so that they appear to unknowing consumers to be authorized online retailers, outlet stores, or wholesalers. E-commerce stores operating under the Seller Aliases appear sophisticated and accept payment in U.S. dollars in multiple ways, including via credit cards, Alipay, Amazon Pay, and/or PayPal. E-commerce stores operating under the Seller Aliases often include content and images that make it very difficult for consumers to distinguish

their stores from an authorized retailer. Plaintiff has not licensed or authorized Defendants to use the Spinal Tap Trademarks and none of the Defendants are authorized retailers of Spinal Tap Products.

22. Many Defendants also deceive unknowing consumers by using the Spinal Tap Trademarks within the content, text, and/or meta tags of their e-commerce stores to attract consumers using search engines to find websites relevant to Spinal Tap Products. Other e-commerce stores operating under the Seller Aliases omit using the Spinal Tap Trademarks in the item title to evade enforcement efforts while using strategic item titles and descriptions that will trigger their listings when consumers are searching for Spinal Tap Products.

23. E-commerce store operators like Defendants commonly engage in fraudulent conduct when registering the Seller Aliases by providing false, misleading and/or incomplete information to e-commerce platforms to prevent discovery of their true identities and the scope of their e-commerce operation.

24. E-commerce store operators like Defendants regularly register or acquire new seller aliases for the purpose of offering for sale and selling Unauthorized Products. Such seller alias registration patterns are one of many common tactics used by e-commerce store operators like Defendants to conceal their identities and the full scope and interworking of their counterfeiting operation, and to avoid being shut down.

25. Even though Defendants operate under multiple fictitious aliases, the e-commerce stores operating under the Seller Aliases often share unique identifiers, such as templates with common design elements that intentionally omit contact information or other information for identifying Defendants or other Seller Aliases they operate or use. E-commerce stores operating under the Seller Aliases include other common features, such as registration patterns, accepted

payment methods, check-out methods, keywords, advertising tactics, similarities in price and quantities, the same incorrect grammar and misspellings, and/or the use of the same text and images. Additionally, Unauthorized Products for sale by the Seller Aliases bear similar irregularities and indicia of being counterfeit to one another, suggesting that the Unauthorized Products were manufactured by and come from a common source and that Defendants are interrelated.

26. E-commerce store operators like Defendants communicate with each other through QQ.com chat rooms and utilize websites, like sellerdefense.cn, that provide tactics for operating multiple online marketplace accounts and evading detection by brand owners. Websites like sellerdefense.cn also tip off e-commerce store operators, like Defendants, of new intellectual property infringement lawsuits filed by brand owners, such as Plaintiff, and recommend that e-commerce operators cease their infringing activity, liquidate their associated financial accounts, and change the payment processors that they currently use to accept payments in their online stores.

27. Counterfeiters such as Defendants typically operate under multiple seller aliases and payment accounts so that they can continue operation despite Plaintiff's enforcement. E-commerce store operators like Defendants maintain offshore bank accounts and regularly move funds from their financial accounts to offshore accounts outside the jurisdiction of this Court to avoid payment of any monetary judgment awarded to Plaintiff.

28. Defendants are working in active concert to knowingly and willfully manufacture, import, distribute, offer for sale, and sell Unauthorized Products in the same transaction, occurrence, or series of transactions or occurrences. Defendants, without any authorization or license from Plaintiff have, jointly and severally, knowingly and willfully used and continue to use

the Spinal Tap Trademarks in connection with the advertisement, distribution, offering for sale, and sale of Unauthorized Products into the United States and Illinois over the Internet.

29. Defendants' unauthorized use of the Spinal Tap Trademarks in connection with the advertising, distribution, offering for sale, and sale of Unauthorized Products, including the sale of Unauthorized Products into the United States, including Illinois, is likely to cause, and has caused, confusion, mistake, and deception by and among consumers and is irreparably harming Plaintiff.

**COUNT I
TRADEMARK INFRINGEMENT AND COUNTERFEITING (15 U.S.C. § 1114)**

30. Plaintiff hereby re-alleges and incorporates by reference the allegations set forth in the preceding paragraphs.

31. This is a trademark infringement action against Defendants based on their unauthorized use in commerce of counterfeit imitations of the Spinal Tap Trademarks in connection with the sale, offering for sale, distribution, and/or advertising of infringing goods. The Spinal Tap Trademarks are highly distinctive marks. Consumers have come to expect the highest quality from products offered, sold, or marketed under the Spinal Tap Trademarks.

32. Defendants have sold, offered to sell, marketed, distributed, and advertised, and are still selling, offering to sell, marketing, distributing, and advertising products using counterfeit reproductions of the Spinal Tap Trademarks without Plaintiff's permission.

33. Plaintiff is the owner of the Spinal Tap Trademarks. Plaintiff's United States registrations for the Spinal Tap Trademarks are in full force and effect. Upon information and belief, Defendants have knowledge of Plaintiff's rights in the Spinal Tap Trademarks and are willfully infringing and intentionally using infringing and counterfeit versions of the Spinal Tap Trademarks. Defendants' willful, intentional, and unauthorized use of the Spinal Tap Trademarks

is likely to cause, and is causing, confusion, mistake, and deception as to the origin and quality of the Unauthorized Products among the general public.

34. Defendants' activities constitute willful trademark infringement and counterfeiting under Section 32 of the Lanham Act, 15 U.S.C. § 1114.

35. Plaintiff has no adequate remedy at law, and if Defendants' actions are not enjoined, Plaintiff will continue to suffer irreparable harm to its reputation and the goodwill of the Spinal Tap Trademarks.

36. The injuries and damages sustained by Plaintiff have been directly and proximately caused by Defendants' wrongful reproduction, use of advertisement, promotion, offering to sell, and/or sale of Unauthorized Products.

COUNT II
FALSE DESIGNATION OF ORIGIN (15 U.S.C. § 1125(a))

37. Plaintiff hereby re-alleges and incorporates by reference the allegations set forth in the preceding paragraphs.

38. Defendants' promotion, marketing, offering for sale, and sale of Unauthorized Products has created and is creating a likelihood of confusion, mistake, and deception among the general public as to the affiliation, connection, or association with Plaintiff or the origin, sponsorship, or approval of Defendants' Unauthorized Products by Plaintiff.

39. By using the Spinal Tap Trademarks in connection with the offering for sale and/or sale of Unauthorized Products, Defendants create a false designation of origin and a misleading representation of fact as to the origin and sponsorship of the Unauthorized Products.

40. Defendants' false designation of origin and misrepresentation of fact as to the origin and/or sponsorship of the Unauthorized Products to the general public involves the use of counterfeit marks and is a willful violation of Section 43 of the Lanham Act, 15 U.S.C. § 1125.

41. Plaintiff has no remedy at law and will continue to suffer irreparable harm to its reputation and the associated goodwill of the Spinal Tap Brand if Defendants' actions are not enjoined.

PRAYER FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff prays for judgment against Defendants as follows:

1) That Defendants, their affiliates, officers, agents, servants, employees, attorneys, confederates, and all persons acting for, with, by, through, under, or in active concert with them be temporarily, preliminarily, and permanently enjoined and restrained from:

- a. using the Spinal Tap Trademarks or any reproductions, counterfeit copies or colorable imitations thereof in any manner in connection with the distribution, marketing, advertising, offering for sale, or sale of any product that is not a Spinal Tap Product or is not authorized by Plaintiff to be sold in connection with the Spinal Tap Trademarks;
 - b. passing off, inducing, or enabling others to sell or pass off any product as a Spinal Tap Product or any other product produced by Plaintiff, that is not Plaintiff's or not produced under the authorization, control, or supervision of Plaintiff and approved by Plaintiff for sale under the Spinal Tap Trademarks;
 - c. committing any acts calculated to cause consumers to believe that Defendants' Unauthorized Products are those sold under the authorization, control, or supervision of Plaintiff, or are sponsored by, approved by, or otherwise connected with Plaintiff;
 - d. further infringing the Spinal Tap Trademarks and damaging Plaintiff's goodwill;
- and

- e. manufacturing, shipping, delivering, holding for sale, transferring, or otherwise moving, storing, distributing, returning, or otherwise disposing of, in any manner, products or inventory not manufactured by or for Plaintiff, nor authorized by Plaintiff to be sold or offered for sale, and which bear the Spinal Tap Trademarks;
- 2) Entry of an Order that, upon Plaintiff's request, those with notice of the injunction, including without limitation, any websites and/or online marketplace platforms such as AliExpress, Amazon, Etsy, Pixels, Fruugo, Printerval, Redbubble, Walmart, and Wish shall disable and cease displaying any advertisements used by or associated with Defendants in connection with the sale of counterfeit and infringing goods using the Spinal Tap Trademarks;
- 3) That Defendants account for and pay to Plaintiff all profits realized by Defendants by reason of Defendants' unlawful acts herein alleged, and that the amount of damages for infringement of the Spinal Tap Trademarks be increased by a sum not exceeding three times the amount thereof as provided by 15 U.S.C. § 1117;
- 4) In the alternative, that Plaintiff be awarded statutory damages for willful trademark counterfeiting pursuant to 15 U.S.C. § 1117(c)(2) of \$2,000,000 for each and every use of the Spinal Tap Trademarks;
- 5) That Plaintiff be awarded its reasonable attorneys' fees and costs; and
- 6) Award any and all other relief that this Court deems just and proper.

Dated this 27th day of July 2023.

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Martin F. Trainor

Martin F. Trainor

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