

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, VETERANS AFFAIRS
AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

BILL NO. 35-0030

Thirty- Fifth Legislature of the Virgin Islands

February 27, 2023

An Act honoring and commending Vaughn Benjamin posthumously for his contributions to reggae music in the Virgin Islands and the global communities; appropriating \$45,000 to the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation for the design and construction of the “Vaughn Benjamin Monument” and naming the waterfront park west of the Marley Homes “The Vaughn ‘Akae Beka’ Memorial Park”

PROPOSED BY: Senators Novelle E. Francis, Jr., Angel L. Bolques, Jr.
and Carla J. Joseph

1 **WHEREAS,** Vaughn Andre Benjamin was born to Ronald and Jenita Benjamin on the
2 island of Antigua, on August 13, 1969; and

3 **WHEREAS,** at the age of nine, Vaughn immigrated to the island of St. Croix with his
4 parents and three siblings and attended the Claude O. Markoe Elementary School; and

5 **WHEREAS,** Vaughn was a gifted and accomplished student and athlete during his school
6 years on St. Croix; and

7 **WHEREAS,** Vaughn, raised by a father who was a notable musician and music studio
8 owner, and a mother who was a school principal, began singing and playing music at an early
9 age alongside his older brother, Ron Benjamin, and his sisters Shenneth and Anthea; and

1 **WHEREAS**, in 1989, Vaughn and Ron Benjamin formed the band Midnite, a roots reggae
2 band, that featured Vaughn Benjamin as lead vocalist, and Ron on the bass and keyboard. Lovers
3 of Midnite said that Ron’s musical expertise provided an outstanding complement to Vaughn’s
4 ethereal chanted vocals that many felt seemed to channel a shrewd and perceptive ancestral
5 spirit; and

6 **WHEREAS**, Midnite played numerous shows on St. Croix before moving to Washington,
7 D.C. in the mid 1990’s; and

8 **WHEREAS**, Midnite began attracting a larger and larger regional and national following
9 after playing near nightly shows in the Washington, D.C. metro-area; and

10 **WHEREAS** in Namibia in 1997, Midnite released its first album, “Unpolished”, which
11 became a critically acclaimed ‘classic’ album and included many of the band’s best-known
12 songs; and

13 **WHEREAS**, Midnite returned to St. Croix in 1999, where the band began recording
14 extensively under Ron Benjamin’s music label, Afrikan Roots Lab. Vaughn also recorded as a
15 solo artist with various record labels on St. Croix and, eventually, others around the world; and

16 **WHEREAS**, for 25 years, the St. Croix-based band Midnite toured extensively around the
17 world and headlined shows and music festivals in the United States, the Caribbean, Europe,
18 Africa, and North and South America; and

19 **WHEREAS**, Midnite became renowned around the world for its trademark deep-roots
20 sound, and spiritually engaging lyrics that have become universally associated with St. Croix
21 reggae music. The band’s intense and improvisational live performances often lasted three hours
22 or more; and

23 **WHEREAS**, following some life changes, Vaughn and his brother disbanded Midnite in
24 2015. Following a period of deep reflection, Vaughn took the name Akae Beka, after sacred

1 oaths written in an ancient Hebrew religious text, and formed a new band, also called Akae
2 Beka; and

3 **WHEREAS**, Vaughn Benjamin’s albums were routinely charted in the Billboard Top Ten
4 Reggae Albums Chart, with his collaborative effort “Beauty for Ashes” was awarded the honor
5 of iTunes Reggae Album of the year in 2014; and

6 **WHEREAS**, notwithstanding his Billboard successes, the substantial impact of
7 Vaughn’s music cannot most accurately be measured by record sales, radio play or industry
8 awards, but by the devoted following he amassed through his voluminous releases (72 albums,
9 61 as Midnite, 11 as Akae Beka) and his extensive tours throughout the Caribbean, the United
10 States, Africa, Latin America and Europe; and.

11 **WHEREAS**, Vaughn was an avid reader and lifelong student, writing songs and music
12 and publishing a collection of poetry titled, Koll Pekude, becoming a spiritual teacher and leader
13 to many in the Rastafarian faith. Through his recorded works, writings, interviews, and live
14 performances, he became a true global icon in the Rastafari movement; and

15 **WHEREAS**, over and above his musical impact, Vaughn also contributed to the St.
16 Croix community as a committed spiritual advisor to the incarcerated men at the Golden Grove
17 Prison where he was given status for the Rastafarian inmates, led weekly study sessions, and
18 donated countless hours and many of his personal books; and

19 **WHEREAS**, Vaughn devoted much of his life to the service of others, both in and outside
20 of music, often counseling many residents of Frederiksted, whether at the fish market or on his
21 stoop in Estate Concordia, during his many years living on St. Croix; and

22 **WHEREAS**, Vaughn Benjamin passed away on November 4, 2019, at the age of 50. His
23 passing unleashed a local and global outpouring of love and respect, with numerous notable
24 reggae artists and international music publications paying tribute to his lifetime contributions.

1 “There are many clichés in reggae, but Vaughn was a refreshing, genuine voice who explored
2 things the way you might in literature, cinema, academia or in conversation, blending ideas
3 and words, captivating people and sparking imaginations,” commented Laurent “Tippy”
4 Alfred; and

5 **WHEREAS**, Vaughn Benjamin is widely viewed as one of the most prolific, globally
6 accomplished and widely respected musicians to ever come out of the Virgin Islands; and

7 **WHEREAS**, over his career, Vaughn released an estimated 1,500 songs; his
8 spellbinding words, steeped in Biblical verse, historical injustices, African liberation and the
9 teachings of Ethiopian emperor and Rastafarian Divinity, Haile Selassie, were intended to
10 help build a more cognizant and compassionate society. He has left a profoundly powerful,
11 unique legacy; and

12 **WHEREAS**, a memorial site and learning center honoring Vaughn Benjamin’s life and
13 works is undisputedly necessary to inspire the collective memory and creative consciousness of
14 the Virgin Islands and global communities to ensure that Vaughn Benjamin is never forgotten.
15 Such memorials would benefit the Virgin Islands, and serve as important attractions for the many
16 people around the world who want to visit St. Croix, and pay tribute to Vaughn Benjamin; Now,
17 Therefore,

18 ***Be it enacted by the Legislature of the Virgin Islands:***

19 **SECTION 1.** The Legislature of the Virgin Islands, on behalf of the people of the Virgin
20 Islands, honors and commends Vaughn Andre Benjamin, a.k.a. Akae Beka, posthumously for
21 his outstanding musical, intellectual and spiritual contributions to the Virgin Islands and global
22 communities.

23 **SECTION 2.** In recognition and appreciation of his contributions to the people of the
24 Virgin Islands, the President of the Legislature or the President’s designee shall have a perma

1 plaque copy of this Resolution prepared and presented to the family, or the family’s designee,
2 of Vaughn Andre Benjamin, a.k.a. Akae Beka, at an appropriate ceremony.

3 **SECTION 3.** In recognition and appreciation of his contributions to the people of the
4 Virgin Islands, and to acknowledge the significance of Vaugh Benjamin’s global respect and
5 influence, the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation and the Department of Property and
6 Procurement shall facilitate the construction of a physical monument to Vaughn Benjamin by
7 the Ethiopian World Federation Local Number Five Inc., to be located on Veterans Shore Drive
8 adjacent to the Frederiksted fish market located at 458 and 9JB Veterans Shore Drive.

9 **SECTION 4.** (a) The sum of \$45,000 is appropriated in the fiscal year ending September
10 30, 2024, from the General Fund to the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation to be used
11 by the Ethiopian World Federation Local Number Five, Inc., for the design and construction of
12 the Vaughn Benjamin Monument.

13 (b) The monies appropriated in subsection (a) remain available until expended.

14 **SECTION 5.** The Ethiopian World Federation Local Number Five Inc. shall comply with
15 the financial disclosure requirements under 2 V.I.C. §29 in administering the funds appropriated
16 in section 3 of this act.

17 **SECTION 6.** The waterfront park area west of Marley Homes, extending south from
18 Fisher Street until Square Deal Way (Plot 37-AA Veterans Shore Drive) is named “The Vaughn
19 “Akae Beka” Benjamin Memorial Park”. The Department of Sports, Parks, and Recreation
20 Public Works shall erect and display appropriate signage reflecting the name.

21 **SECTION 7.** Title to all structures and other improvements attached to the realty at 37-
22 AA Veterans Shore Drive remains vested in the Government of the Virgin Islands.

23 **SECTION 8.** No later than 180 days after the enactment of this act, the Department of
24 Sports, Parks and Recreation shall publicly solicit designs and plans for a “Vaughn Benjamin

1 Memorial and Learning Center” to be located in the town of Frederiksted, St. Croix, whose
2 construction will be subject to later legislation.

3

BILL SUMMARY

4 This act honors and commends Vaughn Andre Benjamin, a.k.a. Akae Beka, for his
5 contributions to the people of the Virgin Islands, and in recognition of his global respect and
6 support, appropriates \$45,000 to the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation for the design
7 and construction of the “Vaughn Benjamin Monument” to be erected adjacent to the
8 Frederiksted Fish Market. The act also names the waterfront park west of Marley Homes “The
9 Vaughn ‘Akae Beka’ Benjamin Memorial Park”.

10 **BR23-0152/PFA/January 27, 2023/PFA/Updated by HLF**