

Testimony on Bill 35-0030
"A Resolution honoring and commending Vaughn Benjamin"
To the Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection
By Bevan R. Smith Jr.
March 26, 2024

A blessed good morning to the Honorable Carla J. Joseph, Chair of the Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection, Honorable Novelle E. Francis, Jr., sponsor of Bill 35-0030, a Resolution honoring and commending Vaughn Benjamin, all other Senators present today, and to the listening and viewing audience. My name is Bevan Smith Jr., and this written testimony is submitted as a private citizen and a reggae music enthusiast residing in US Virgin Islands. I concur with the Legislature of the Virgin Islands, that it is fitting to posthumously honor and commend Vaughn Benjamin, on behalf of the Virgin Islands, for his outstanding musical, intellectual and spiritual contributions to both the Virgin Islands and the international community. The "whereas clauses" within this Bill has accurately highlighted several areas that validates why Vaughn Benjamin (hereinafter referred to as Akae Beka) is deserving of this recognition as the most prolific, globally accomplished and widely respected musician to ever come out of the Virgin Islands.

My first encounter with Akae Beka was while he was the lead vocalist for Midnite, in 1989 where they were performing on stage at the Midland night club. It became evident why so many have become intrigued by their pulsating bass sound and strong lyrics. Along with his elder brother Ronnie Benjamin Jr., they seemed to hit the ground running with their early music recordings and onstage performances. I was convinced that they were on the path for a successful musical career after seeing the audience's positive response during one of their performances at Roxy's nightclub in Washington, D.C. However, it was at the locally produced second annual Royal Reggae Fest that Professor Skank of *The Beat* magazine wrote, "In fall 2001, I was fortunate to receive the re-release debut album of Midnite, entitled *Unpolished*. After just one listen I knew this group was extremely special. They played a hard-core roots style which I absolutely loved. The catch was that they were not from Jamaica, rather hailed from St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands...".

It was evident that Akae Beka was an avid reader, but what is most notable was his ability to comprehend the information, use his own

insights to discern subliminal messages therein, convert them into lyrics and melodically convey an interesting interpretation to the listening audience. This is an attribute that school teachers and college professors try to instill in their students, making Akae Beka a role model in this regard. Many in the music industry considers him one of the most profound wordsmiths among artists within the reggae genre. However, with all the accolades bestow upon him as global entertainer performing in front a multitude of fans spanning many continents, what stood out to me was his humility; ability to remain grounded amidst the fame and global attention he was obviously exposed.

His firstborn son, Senuah and my son Deshaun, were teammates on one of the many American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO) U-12 teams. When he was on island, he made the time to attend the soccer matches' and would marvel at the athleticism displayed by these two young athletes. Even though he may have just returned from performing live concerts in several major cities, he would never mention a word or give me any indication that he was a super star in the making, his focus was always on the talents the young men would display. He was an intellect that loved sharing information and discussing world topics while cooling in the Frederiksted Fish market. In the documentary on the "Evolution of reggae music in the VI, it is apparent how much influence he had on other musicians and producers over the years, just listen to the chorus in Pressure Buss Pipe's song "Virgin Islands Nice."

It was on the morning of November 5th, 2019 while cutting grass and listening to the radio through my earphones that I heard the terrible news of his passing. I reflected on the last time we spoke after his performance on the grounds of the Lawaetz Museum earlier that same year. He was so amazed that even after the promoter announced the concert had to end, the audience stood in place as if waiting for an encore. Despite the huge crowds he had grown accustomed to while performing abroad, he was so taken aback at the tremendous positive response from his home crowd, that he insisted that the promoter should continue the show.

On the day of his interment, I planted two mango trees in his honor as my personal tribute to Akae Beka, therefore, it is fitting that this auspicious body enact Bill 35-0030 that posthumously honor and commend him, appropriate monies to construct the Vaughn Benjamin

Monument, and for in the waterfront park area west of Marley Homes, to be named "The Vaughn "Akae Beka" Benjamin Memorial Park.

In closing, I would like to recite a few lyrics from Midnite's very first album "Unpolished", in order to demonstrate its timeliness when it was released, and its applicability to Virgin Islanders and the global community even up to today:

"... your body is your temple, your one and only temple, you are living in the Holy places of the tabernacle of the Most High Jah, love the life you live, lead the life you love ... don't shed no tears ..."

"... Black is the color of our Solar System, out of blackness was born the light, Black is the color of the whole universe, your morning starts with darkness, did not your morning start with darkness, well so does tonight, Alpha and Omega I, the beginning and the end ..."

"...Mama, Mama, I keep wishing I could capture, love in a bottle and blow it all around, I keep wishing I could capture justice in America and fling it all around, sling ding dang whey ee, Justice dun sell out to the highest trigger finger awhoa, sling ding dang whey ee, when you them a call nigger, stop pull trigger pan one another, Mama, Mama ..."

"... it is international material competition, the eagle have the bomb, and the lion must have none, in their international material competition, who should have the lion's share now, Is the lion's son; CIA, KGB, the Mousad, the IRA and the Scotland Yard; the PLO, Tonton Makout, Israel and NATO; tell me oh God, why are they fighting so, everybody wants to be the leader in the house where the diamonds come from, everybody wants to be the leader, where all the natural resources come from, we are the lions, we coming dread, dread ina we walk, natty dread ina we head, dread out of Judah, straight down to zed, Addis Ababa, crown the king ..."

I thank you for this opportunity, it was and honor.