

# Benny Demus to Receive Official Key to the Virgin Islands for Outstanding Achievements in Music and Dedication to the VI Community

Senators praise the entertainer's global success and commitment to philanthropy as a role model for local youth

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Bryan Boulai, known as Benny Demus, has been praised for his “hard hustle and sleepless grind,” admired not only for his global music success but also for his unwavering dedication to the Virgin Islands community. **By. V.I. LEGISLATURE**

In the final block of the day's agenda, the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection considered Bill 35-0285, a measure honoring one of the territory's most beloved musicians and philanthropists – Bryan Boulai – for his “outstanding

achievements in the music and entertainment industries and for his contributions to the Virgin Islands community.”

Mr. Boulai, or “Benny Demus” as he is more popularly known, is a world-renowned “entertainer extraordinaire,” according to Senator Ray Fonseca, sponsor of the legislation. “Benny Demus has stamped his own ticket to success. He has thousands of fans in over 180 countries, and has a clear passion for using his celebrity status and resources to enrich the lives of others,” Mr. Fonseca continued. “Having grown up knowing what a struggle it could be to recognize your dreams first hand, Benny D has vowed to give opportunities to youth he could only dream about at their ages.”

While Mr. Boulai has perhaps achieved most recognition for his work with Senegalese-American singer-songwriter Akon, Benny Demus has collaborated with a host of other musicians, including Kendrick Lamar, Jada Kingdom, and Kardinal Offishal, among others. According to Sen. Fonseca, it was Mr. Boulai’s “hard hustle and sleepless grind that took him from the island’s clubs...to being worldwide on sold out stages in countries such as Brazil, Germany...France, Uganda, Liberia, Senegal, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Korea, Saudi Arabia...carrying the Virgin Islands name on his back.”?

Calvin White, commissioner of the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation, while present in his official capacity, chose to highlight his personal relationship with Mr. Boulai as part of his testimony. The pair have known each other since the early 1990s, and according to Mr. White, “bonded over our shared love of basketball” when Mr. Boulai moved into the community where Mr. White lived. “Why do they call you Benetton,” Mr. White recalled asking during their first introduction on the basketball court. “Never mind,” he continued, after seeing the Benetton logo on the young Mr. Boulai’s shirt. The nickname came from Mr. Boulai’s affinity for wearing the brand’s clothing. “He had the shirts, the pants, the socks every day,” Mr. White recounted. “Come to find out, his brother worked at Benetton clothing store and would hook him up with free clothes.”

Despite his love of the game, Mr. Boulai was never very good at basketball. Mr. White joked, “I am here to put it on the record that thank God he was blessed with music skills, because basketball was not his strong suit.” Mr. White described Benny D’s early start in the music business as an up and coming DJ who took a “leap of faith” and relocated to Atlanta Georgia after his initial success in the territory. There, Mr. Boulai’s meteoric rise truly began. Despite hobnobbing with celebrities and his increasing economic standing, Mr. White says that his childhood friend never lost touch with his true self. “Through all his success, through the money, through the houses to the cars, he remains Benetton from the basketball court to this day, he hasn’t changed one bit.”

Mr. White praised his friend for his loyalty to his hometown. “His VI pride is evident during his shows, whether he’s repping a VI flag or displaying the VI tattoos on his body to the world. He takes every opportunity to remind people of his roots.”

Theron Thomas, [the Grammy's 024’s Songwriter of the Year](#), also testified in favor of the measure to honor Mr. Boulai on Tuesday. “There is no Rock City, literally, without Benny.” Mr. Thomas explained that when he and his brother began rapping, “we wanted to rap like Americans, because that was the only rap we ever heard.” It was Benny, Mr. Thomas said, who challenged that mentality. “Benny proceeded to teach me and my brother how to formulate words with our accent and feel comfortable as rappers, and that became one of our staple sounds,” Mr. Thomas disclosed. It was Rock City who introduced Mr. Boulai to Akon, and once he had achieved a measure of success from his work with the superstar, “Benny came back and he got me and my brother,” Mr. Thomas said, giving the duo their first deal. Ultimately, “Benny became our tour

manager and our booking agent, and started doing all the behind the scenes stuff that people don't see," Mr. Thomas noted.?

Other testifiers spoke about the multitalented entertainer's long list of film credits, with appearances in TV shows including *Sleepy Hollow*, and movies such as *Road Trip* and *Alvin and the Chipmunks*.

?Apart from Mr. Boulai's inspirational career trajectory and his meteoric rise to success, testifiers on Tuesday highlighted the honoree's dedication to philanthropy. Among a myriad of other acts of kindness that have gone unnoticed, Mr. Boulai has purchased hurricane relief supplies for the territory following the passage of hurricanes Irma and Maria, and has donated generously to several nonprofit organizations in the territory. Benny D's celebrity kickball game has become a highly anticipated annual fixture on the non-official St. Thomas Carnival calendar, and the Demus Foundation has become a powerhouse in the philanthropy space.?

When it came time for questions from lawmakers, Mr. Boulai told Senator Milton Potter that the most significant personal attribute that contributed to his success is the ever-present knowledge that he is in the service business. "In my mind, everything that I do is for the betterment of you...and by me helping you to get better, I think it's going to make everything else around me better," said Mr. Boulai as he explained his mindset.

Expressing his discomfort with having such high praise heaped upon him so publicly, Mr. Boulai nevertheless told lawmakers that he felt particularly proud of his ability to assist in getting hurricane supplies sent to the territory after 2017's devastating hurricanes. He spoke about being able to turn around his troubled childhood, ultimately graduating from night school after getting expelled from the Ivanna Eudora Kean high school. According to bill sponsor Senator Fonseca, the story exemplified Mr. Boulai's fighting spirit. "The only way you really know how good you are is when you've suffered a defeat, when you fall down and you get back up."?

While lawmakers overwhelmingly supported the intent of the measure to honor Mr. Boulai, some were concerned about a provision in the draft legislation that would appropriate an annual \$10,000 subvention for the Demus Foundation. Given the government's current shaky cash flow situation, "establishing an annual appropriation for the Foundation is not prudent," warned Maurice Wells, assistant commissioner of Budget Operations in the Department of Finance. That provision was ultimately struck from the draft legislation in an amendment, and as such, the measure to honor Mr. Boulai will only award him an official key to the territory as a tangible recognition of his contributions to the Virgin Islands.

The amended legislation was unanimously passed by all committee members who were present. It will next be considered for ratification at an upcoming legislative hearing.