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Father And Son Honored For Outstanding Contributions To Music Industry And VI Community

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Alwyn Baptiste Sr. and Alwyn Baptiste Jr. By. Alwyn Baptiste Jr.

ST. CROIX – In June Alwyn Alexander Baptiste (Big Al), former leader of the world famous Express Band and owner of Backyard Studios, was honored and commended posthumously for his outstanding contributions to the music industry (Bill 33-0039) and to the Virgin Islands community on a whole. Bills honoring Alwyn “Daddy Jones” Baptiste, Jr., (Al Jr.), Janice Pemberton Tutein, and the Virgin Islands Port Authority’s 50th anniversary were also introduced on the floor and unanimously approved.

Senator Alicia Barnes expressed that as a freshman senator, she realizes that the legislative body is often criticized when these types of bills are brought to the floor, and viewed as if the legislative

body is not doing any work. But, she noted, it's important to celebrate local heroes, those who have dedicated their lives to promoting the territory's local culture, its cultural identity, "and sharing a legacy of who we are as a people to future generations," she said.

Big Al, as Mr. Baptiste Sr. was affectionately called, was born on the island of Antigua and migrated to St. Croix to live with his older brother.

He was a self-taught musician whose musical interests began taking form in the Pentecostal church where he played gospel music as a child. While attending St. Joseph's High School on St. Croix, he developed an interest in the piano and the organ and they became his first instruments of choice. Music became his passion and he could often be found in his high school's gymnasium playing the piano.

Early on he played for LILO and the Laylights, Mind Body and Soul Busters, among others. In 1981, he joined the Caribbean Express Band and relocated to New York. He toured the east and west coast of the United States, the Caribbean, Canada, Europe, Africa, South America, and the Virgin Islands. During that time, he gained valuable insight and experience in the dynamics of managing a band and producing, arranging, and recording music.

In 1987, Big Al and his younger brother, Dean Baptiste, formed the Xpress Band, and they recorded over twelve albums in two decades. Big Al owned and operated Backyard Recording Studio and, along with Dean, created an internet station called Xpress Radio, which ran a variety of musical programs that appealed to people of all walks of life. Big Al did not limit his recording to one genre, but also recorded calypso, reggae, soca, and Christian music in his studio.

Big Al chaired the calypso festival committee and spent countless hours mentoring junior calypsonians. He also received numerous music awards and honors as well as the community event title, V.I. Music Award for producer and arranger of the year.

Senator Steven Payne, Sr., described Big Al as a professional who often recorded artists free of charge when they could not afford to pay him or travel to Puerto Rico to record, because he wanted to promote Caribbean music all over the world.

When referring to Big Al's contributions, Senator Oakland Benta said that the music produced in the V.I. is recognized for its own tone and a style that many are following today.

Senator Javan James, a sponsor of the bill along with Athneil Thomas and Dwayne DeGraff, said that Big Al's and Al Jr.'s contributions to the community should not be taken lightly. "We must document and preserve our V.I. history. We need a museum to showcase our local talent," he said.

Al Jr. has been immersed in his late father's work for as long as he can remember. Big Al, along with Funk Gumbs of the band 17 Plus, have been the biggest influence on Al Jr.'s musical journey. He continues his father's legacy and has written, produced, and sung many hit songs, winning several road march titles during carnival season on both St. Croix and St. Thomas. He has a healthy roster of artists and is a vital contributor to the West Indian music industry. His work is well-known and recognized in the U.S. Virgin Islands, the greater Caribbean, and the U.S. Mainland.

Senator Novelle Francis described Al Jr. as, "A son that is being honored who truly represents his father," and Senator Janelle Serauw noted that he was quiet and unassuming but is a musical giant.

Senator Myron Jackson said that Al Jr. is recognized globally for his innovation in composition and technology in the music world.

Mr. Jackson sponsored the bill (33-0057) that honored and commended Janice Pemberton Tutein posthumously for her service to the people of the Virgin Island through her years of educating the territory's youth, her dedicated service as a culture bearer, and her preservation of the territory's culture through her stories.

She taught in the public school system for thirty-three years and was a traditional story teller, sometimes traveling with the Department of Tourism to represent the V.I. abroad. She also served as a member of various local organizations, including on the Agriculture and Food Fair Board of Directors.

Additionally, the Virgin Islands Port Authority celebrated 50 years of service on February 11, 2009, and Mr. Jackson sponsored Bill No. 33-0083 that honors and commends the authority for its many years of service and contributions to the people of the Virgin Islands. V.I.P.A. is described as an economic lifeline of the territory. The tourism industry, facilitated in part by V.I.P.A., accounts for eighty percent of the territory's gross domestic product. The entity owns and operates many sea ports and terminals.

All Bills (33-0038, 33-0039, 33-0057, and 33-0083) received overwhelming support from the committee, and were favorably approved and will be sent to the full body for further consideration.