



## ISLAND MATTERS *Mufi Hannemann*

# No Worries, Bette — You're Still Divine

When Bette Midler picked up her Tony award for her performance in *Hello, Dolly*, now on Broadway, she took a moment in her backstage interview to thank two of her Radford High School teachers — Myrna Ishimoto and Betty Blake Rice — for inspiring her to pursue her youthful aspirations and dreams.

Through the years, the Divine Miss M has sometimes seemed a bit standoffish about her feelings for the islands. She grew up in Hālawā Housing, which was a warren of ramshackle wartime military barracks converted to civilian housing and sitting on what is now the Aloha Stadium and freeway interchange. We had relatives living there, so I knew the neighborhood could be a rough-and-tumble one at times based on my recollection, as well as a fun and exciting place to spend the weekend.

Bette was one of only a few haole kids attending the district public schools at the time. And while her childhood experiences didn't seem to dampen her ambition to go on and be a superstar entertainer, they couldn't have been entirely enjoyable.

When local folks go on to earn a place in the sun — beyond Hawai'i, that is — we tend to be taken aback when our pride in them isn't reciprocated in equal measure. Bette, for one, has been the target of such criticism by some folks in our community and news media. Local people always believe there's no place like Hawai'i, Hawai'i nō ka 'oi. But we must be mindful that

our own experiences aren't necessarily shared by everyone who grows up here.

Similarly, for former President Barack Obama, life in Hawai'i — not only as a relative newcomer, but as an African American — was trying at times. Yet, he continued to acknowledge his time here, has maintained his friends from high school, and he and his family have been frequent returnees to our shores despite the restrictions of his duties. When we met up for the first time in Washington, D.C., decades after our first encounter at ILH schools, Sen. Obama was then a presidential candidate and was quick to fondly recall the basketball rivalry between 'Iolani and Punalou. And when as President Obama, the U.S. Conference of Mayors would call upon him at the White House, he would always cheerfully acknowledge two mayors: Chicago's Richard Daley and yours truly, his "homie mayor from Honolulu."

Hawai'i has produced so many people who have left the islands to seek greener pastures, to find new opportunities unavailable here at home. Some have gone on to find great fame and fortune, while others may not be household names, but are nonetheless successes in their chosen fields. Many of them no longer have strong ties to the islands, except for the rare visit to see relatives, if at all. My point is that we mustn't judge people for not loving us back the way we want them to; instead, we should be happy for them and glad that they have been able to enjoy the rewards of their

determination, hard work and sacrifices, in whatever place those rewards may be.

So it is with Bette, whom we should applaud for everything she's been able to achieve. The sincere testimony she heaped upon her two Hawai'i public school teachers in one fell swoop was worth its weight in gold as it showered praise on our public school system that is too often maligned and criticized. Mahalo, Bette, for the precious shoutout and "no worry" about not performing in Hawai'i anytime soon. We still aloha you!

### Special Session Goals For Rail

It appears that the Legislature is on the verge of calling a special session this summer to resolve the funding situation for the city's rail transit project. While there's been no announcement of a consensus proposal, some of the preliminary discussions have called for using revenue from the transient accommodations tax, commonly known as the hotel room tax, to help pay for rail.

From my perch as president and CEO of the Hawai'i Lodging & Tourism Association, as well as former mayor of Honolulu, here are my thoughts on the matter.

Above all, I continue to contend that an extension of the current half-percent general excise tax surcharge offers the best means of funding rail. It is broad-based, is paid by residents and visitors alike, and would be less affected by fluctuations in the tourism economy. That's why I advocated for and supported the GET tax surcharge as mayor when it was approved by the



The Divine Miss M herself, Bette Midler, was raised in Hālawā Housing. PHOTO COURTESY WARNER BROS. RECORDS

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Legislature and City Council in 2005 and then first levied in 2007.

Using the hotel room tax would tie the revenue stream directly to how well tourism is doing and could make us less competitive as a travel destination. Moreover, the Legislature has been using room tax revenue increasingly for purposes other than what was originally intended. The hotel room tax was established to market tourism, support the convention center, and give

money to the county governments, which provide many critical services enjoyed by our visitors and ensure public safety. Over the years, much of that revenue has been diverted to other spending by going into the general fund. If the room tax is raised or raided for rail, it would represent yet another diversion of public money for unintended purposes.

However, if this source of revenue is indeed used, as the House speaker, Senate presi-

dent, and of late the governor seemed to imply and endorse, then there should be a firm nexus to tourism. Foremost among them is that rail must connect Ala Moana Center with the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport, and the public should be permitted to ride in from the West side (where many of our visitor industry employees reside) with a fully integrated multi-modal system to complement rail on a sooner rather than later timetable.

## An End To The HART Debate

We would also insist that the money be wisely spent. The permanent HART (Honolulu Authority for Rail Transportation) executive director, whenever that person is selected, should bring much-needed budget discipline to the project. And as I have long opined, HART and the city should push for public-private partnerships, involving developers and landowners along the rail route, to contribute to the system insofar as they will profit handsomely from the development that rail brings. P-3 models exist all over the Mainland, utilizing an overarching developer that should be tapped into not only for rail, but also for proposed initiatives at the airport and Aloha Stadium. It should also be not-

ed that P-3s are looked upon quite favorably by the Trump administration in Washington. Honolulu desperately needs a new game plan to leverage public money with private investment, one that has been conspicuously missing in recent years. Transit-oriented development benefits, such as affordable housing, commercial and retail growth, recreational, environmental and sustainable opportunities, should be vigorously pursued.

As an aside, it is emphatically clear the mayor has lost credibility with certain key state legislators. We, therefore, need new representatives and faces from the city to take the lead to work with the Legislature, perhaps led by the two most recent Council chairmen

### ***Transit-oriented development benefits ... should be vigorously pursued.***

— Ron Menor and Ernie Martin — and budget chairman Joey Manahan, who recently steered the successful passage of a critical vote authorizing the city to float bonds to pay for the construction of rail.

Both Manahan and Menor are former state legislators, and Martin has strong ties at the State Capitol, especially with the new leadership in the House. It's time to bring players to the table who can get the job done and not get hung up with position and protocol and who is going to get the credit.

The special session now

poised for mid-July or August will give us an opportunity to reassess the leadership of this project, introduce new ideas on achieving our goals, renew our commitment to completing the line to Ala Moana via the airport, and ensure the long-term viability of this much-needed part of our transportation infrastructure.

The bottom line is, let's commit to getting it done once and for all.

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President Barack Obama and his 'homie' mayor meet up at the White House.  
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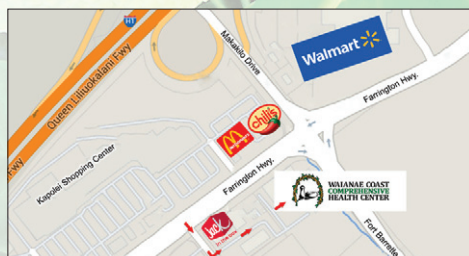
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