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Lee Cataluna: Maui's Identity Crisis Is On Display At Kahului Airport

Why glorify rich celebrities who gobble up the Valley Island's real estate?

By [Lee Cataluna](#)

August 18, 2024 · 5 min read



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Nathan Eagle/Civil Beat/2024

Maybe that hotly debated wall display in Maui's Kahului Airport is actually perfect.

No, really. It shows visitors arriving on Maui exactly what the island has become: a place where wealthy entertainers from the 1980s who bought property on the island are seen as better than regular local people.

And it affirms to Maui residents leaving the island that there isn't a way to be successful at home, so they might as well go. The **hard, horrible truth** of that Hall of Fame display that went up earlier this summer is that it is glaringly accurate.

Credit KITV journalist, Maui-born A'ali'i Dukelow, **for first asking questions** about the 32-foot-long display.

Credit Civil Beat investigative reporter Blaze Lovell **for digging up the tangled backstory** of how the wall was funded.

First, a description of the display:

In the area of Kahului Airport near the Hawaiian Airlines arrivals and departures gates, one section of the wall has pictures that include born-and-raised Maui entertainers and athletes, including people like Amy Hanaial'i Gilliom, Eric Gilliom, Kurt Suzuki and Shane Victorino. Nobody is grumbling about those pictures. People are proud of homegrown talent.



This section of the display features Maui's actual homegrown talent. If only the creators of the "Hall of Fame" had stopped there. (Nathan Eagle/Civil Beat/2024)

The second section of the wall bears framed images of actors and musicians who own or owned property on Maui, including Owen Wilson, Oprah Winfrey, Clint Eastwood, Alice Cooper, Jim Carrey and Paul Simon under the heading, "Kamaaina Proud to Call Maui Home."

That's the part that is making people go, "Wait, what?"

Lovell found out the wall was paid for with county money and created by a nonprofit with family ties to Mayor Richard Bissen's economic development director, Luana Mahi.

Her son Keokoa Mahi's nonprofit got \$44,000 to put up the fawning display of misplaced adoration. That's a lot of money for hanging pictures on a wall.

Lovell's story is bigger than that one grant, so make sure to read it if you haven't already. But beyond that, there are bigger questions: What was the purpose of this project? Why put up a wall of mostly past-their-prime celebrities (sorry, but it's doubtful that anyone younger than 35 recognizes all of these names) at the Kahului Airport?

Was it to boost tourism? The people seeing the pictures are already at the airport, having purchased the plane tickets and booked accommodations.



Was it to make the island seem more alluring? Maui is beautiful all by itself without having to list rich people who have acquired their acreage where regular folks cannot go.

The people arriving or departing at the Kahului Airport don't need a reminder of the privileged class that owns property on Maui. (Kevin Fujii/Civil Beat/2023)

Was it to make Maui people feel better about Maui? If so, that's a lousy way to do it. That section of Maui's "Hall of Fame" doesn't lift up those who were born in Maui Memorial Hospital, educated in public schools, and do the work of making the island run.

No, it says, if you're going to be famous on Maui — famous enough to get your picture in the airport as some sort of royalty on the Valley Island — you have to be from somewhere else, have enough money to buy a beautiful house looking out on the water, and have someone else do your shopping at Costco.

Then there's the misuse of the term "kamaaina", which literally means "child of the land," meaning a person who was born there. Over time, the word has been co-opted to mean holding a Hawaii driver's license and being able to get a discount on golf fees at public courses.

None of those fancy people up on that wall are asking for a discount round of golf at the Waiehu Municipal Golf Course.

Worse than the sell-out sensibility and the highly questionable grant for the project is the horrible timing of it all, debuting less than a year after the Lahaina and Kula fires.

Maui has been struggling with an identity crisis for years, but Aug 8, 2023, transformed the need for housing for local residents rather than rich outsiders from an emotional debate to an all-out crisis. People are leaving Maui because they have been displaced by the thousands.

As they say their sad goodbyes at Kahului Airport, there's Oprah grinning down on them, a reminder of who gets to live on the island.

Rip down that section of the "Hall of Fame." Replace it with artwork from Maui keiki, or posters showing where Amy Hānaiali'i and Eric Gilliom are gigging, because they're fantastic and should have overflowing crowds every night.

Or have somebody in the back office make a laminated poster of true kamaaina heroes, teachers and nurses, foster parents and kahus, those who work every day in small but significant ways to make Maui better for everyone. You can make a banner like that for forty bucks.

Or keep it up and view it as protest art; a subversive display of how the wrong things and the wrong people are glorified in gentrified Maui so that maybe it can someday turn back to its authentic self.

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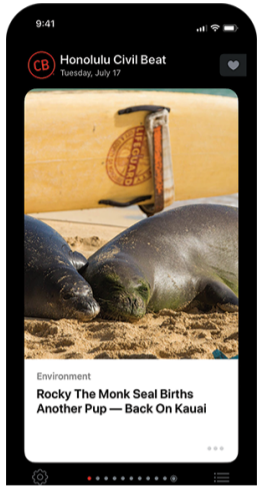
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