

In 1970, a 21-year-old 'hippie millionaire' focused worldwide attention on Scarsdale

Robert Brum For The Journal News

For one week in January 1970, a quiet street in Scarsdale came under siege by a horde of desperate fortune-seekers and a pack of newspaper and TV reporters.

Michael James Brody Jr., the 21-year-old heir to a margarine fortune, had become an overnight sensation by pledging to give away his inherited millions to anyone who asked.

Throngs of people responded to his largesse by showing up at his home, snarling traffic in the village; others sent telegrams and letters, thousands and thousands of letters.

Who was Michael J. Brody and what happened to all those letters is the subject of a new documentary, "Dear Mr. Brody," which begins streaming on discovery+ on April 28.



Scarsdale under siege

After his announcement — Brody claimed his wealth at anywhere from \$25 million to \$1 billion to unlimited, while a friend said it was closer to \$1.2

million — his rented ranch-style home at 31 Paddington Road in the Fox Meadow neighborhood was mobbed by crowds hoping to cash in on the generosity of the “hippie millionaire” and his wife, Renee Dubois.

The couple had just arrived home from their honeymoon in Puerto Rico on a 707 jet Brody had chartered for just the two of them.



The local citizenry was not amused. The Scarsdale telephone exchanges were out of service because of the avalanche of long-distance calls; the local Western Union office was forced to hire extra operators to handle all the telegrams, and the post office had sacks of undeliverable mail.

The Scarsdale Inquirer “was besieged with long distance calls from 8:00 in the morning Monday until the office closed at 5:00 P.M. - people begging for help to reach this presumed benefactor,” it reported in its Jan. 22, 1970, edition.

Brody, a Scarsdale High School graduate (“I play the game with a strong heart,” reads his yearbook entry) was the grandson of John F. Jelke, the so-called “oleomargarine king” who founded the Good Luck margarine brand.

With the Vietnam War raging, he pledged millions to North Vietnam toward a peaceful end to the fighting, and tried to get a helicopter to land on the White House lawn to spread his message — and his money — to President Nixon.

“It’s the only way to find peace,” Brody tells a TV interviewer in a scene from the documentary. “Money’s the least of what I’m giving away. Right now, I’m giving away good feelings to mankind.”

Brody’s claims won him a spot on the front pages of newspapers around the globe (“Brody Sets Off a Gold Rush,” appeared in The New York Daily News) and landed him on The Ed Sullivan Show, where the fledgling folk singer performed a Bob Dylan tune.



‘It was craziness’

Thom Pernice, a high school friend who often crashed at Brody’s place on weekends when he came home from college in Boston, had no idea what was unfolding that January day when he drove into the village shortly after word got out about his friend’s beneficence.

“I pull down the road and see lines of people for blocks, with police and barricades, all the way down the street, going up his driveway,” Pernice said. “I managed to get up there, and eventually someone came up to the door and let me in, and then I found out that he offered to give away his money and everyone was looking to get it.”

Pernice continued: “It was craziness. There were ministers, just regular people, Hare Krishnas. There was a lot of stuff going on.”

Within days of his heady claims, Brody’s plans — and his life — began spiraling out of control. His checks began to bounce, and it's unclear how much money he actually gave away. “I’m a big phony,” he yells into a microphone during an impromptu press conference. He was subsequently treated for drug abuse and institutionalized for mental illness.



Three years after capturing the world's attention, Brody committed suicide in Ashoken, New York, near Woodstock, where he had moved with his wife and young son. Renee Brody, who is interviewed in the documentary, still lives in the Woodstock area.

Unopened letters



In "Dear Mr. Brody," filmmaker Keith Maitland stitches together archival and live interviews, interspersing the narrative with the discovery by producer Melissa Robyn Glassman of thousands of unopened letters addressed to Brody, and subsequent efforts to track down some of the desperate correspondents.

The filmmakers opened nearly 12,000 letters, all full of heart-wrenching stories, some accompanied by photos, newspapers clippings, art, even poetry, according to a press release about the project. They then attempted to track down about 1,200 of the letter writers for the documentary.



"The letters are very much a cross section of humanity at this very specific moment in January of 1970; it's like a time capsule of details and personal history," Maitland is quoted in the release. "Some are so specific to the time; people showing their medical bills, receipts showing how much things cost, and what's going on in the news that very week in Vietnam or Nigeria."

The filmmakers have donated the entire collection of letters to Columbia University's Rare Books & Manuscripts Library.



Who was Michael Brody?

Brody's high school friend Pernice was back at the Paddington Road house the night Brody appeared on Ed Sullivan, but lost touch with him not long afterward.

“He was kind of emblematic of the youth of the day who got overwhelmed by the reality of life in his attempt to do good,” said Pernice, a retired video producer who founded Scarsdale Rocks, which chronicles the village's local bands starting from the 1960s. “He was a nice guy, he was a friend. I never had a bad word to say about him.”

Richard Clark, who lived in Scarsdale at the time and showed up unannounced at Brody's door just as the money madness was unfolding, agreed that the hippie millionaire's heart was in the right place.



“Michael wasn’t as crazy as everybody thought,” said Clark, a Pleasantville resident who’s retired from the film business. “He had this vision of utopia where he thought he could help people because he had come into this money and he felt like he didn’t need it.”

The ranch home on Paddington Road that for one week a half-century ago became a mecca for the hopeful and the curious is gone; a Colonial valued at \$2.7 million now sits on the half-acre property, according to the village website.

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