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Informant

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By DENNIS HARVEY

The unreliable-narrator docu develops a new wrinkle or two with "Informant." Jamie Meltzer's engrossing portrait lets Brandon Darby tell his own story -- of a self-proclaimed far-left, anti-government activist-turned-FBI snitch now feted at Tea Party gatherings -- while fellow travelers cast doubt on that testimony every step of the way. It's an absorbing puzzle with the potential to intrigue viewers all along the political spectrum. Arthouse theatrical prospects are decent, broadcast and home-format sales a lock.

After an initial blitz of comments calling him everything from "the symbol of what radical activism could do" to a pathological liar, misogynist and paranoid, we meet Darby himself, who gives off an oddly studied vibe even as he's supposedly flubbing an initial direct-camera address.

Spending very little time discussing his earlier life, beyond a murky reference to possible trauma suffered as a teenage runaway, Darby says he developed a strong disdain from a young age for people abusing power. Moving to progressive Austin, Texas, he met Robert King Wilkerson, a former Black Panther, and others who shaped his notions of radical social change and revolutionary government overthrow. But when Darby recalls plans to break political prisoners out of lockup, former close ally Scott Crow (interviewed separately) exclaims, "That's a total fabrication." He says Darby often fixated on heroic-fantasy scenarios, while refusing to participate in the more tedious, consensus-based aspects of social-justice organizing.

While Darby's Alpha-male approach irked many, no one belittles the work he, Crow and others did in post-Katrina New Orleans. Shocked by TV footage of stranded residents, floating corpses and looters, and concerned that Wilkerson was MIA there, Darby and Crow co-founded Common Ground Relief, which played a major role in orchestrating assistance and rebuilding communities in the disaster's wake.

Those efforts won Darby praise and some curious opportunities, notably a trip to Venezuela (to "study revolution") that fellow activists considered bizarre. He returned from that odyssey depressed and withdrawn, questioning his ideals. Back in Austin, he gained an FBI handler upon deciding to reveal his knowledge of money being funneled to Hamas, possibly funding suicide bombers.

But the now 33-year-old Darby was still a renowned militant activist to many, and he was welcomed with awe by a group of younger Austin anarchists planning to protest at the 2008 GOP National

Convention in St. Paul, Minn. Many of those interviewed concerning the subsequent arrests of anarchists at the convention suggest Darby as the instigator of the actions.

Today, Darby is vilified as a turncoat in leftist circles, while celebrated as a patriot at Tea Party events. At one of these functions, he is seen drinking in the adoration, inflaming and pandering to this new audience's biases. By the end, viewers may agree with others here that whatever beliefs or personal history Darby currently adheres to, he at least believes he's right -- after all, he's the hero of his own story.

Pic is deftly crafted in all departments, with T. Griffin's original score a notable plus.

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