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THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER – "Straight Outta Jakarta: Indonesian Rapper Rich Brian Makes His Big-Screen Debut in Park City" by Patrick Brzeski

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HOME > MOVIES > MOVIE FEATURES

## Straight Outta Jakarta: Indonesian Rapper Rich Brian Makes His Big-Screen Debut in Park City

After a homemade hip-hop video went viral in 2016, Brian Imanuel landed a record deal and toured the world. Now he has his own music biopic, 'Jamojaya,' bowing at Sundance.



Brian Imanuel stars as a young rapper recording his debut album while grappling with an overly controlling father. COURTESY OF ANTE CHENG/COURTESY OF SUNDANCE INSTITUTE

The broad strokes of Indonesian rapper Brian Imanuel's improbable life serve as the framework for his big-screen debut in director Justin Chon's coming-of-age drama *Jamojaya*, premiering Jan. 22 in Park City. Imanuel, better known to global hip-hop fans by his stage name, Rich Brian, gives a convincing performance in the film as a fish-out-of-water musical sensation very much like his real-life self.

Born to a middle-class family in West Jakarta, Imanuel was home-schooled and taught himself English by watching YouTube videos and listening to American rappers. After experimenting with various forms of internet content creation, Imanuel began recording hip-hop at age 15 as "Rich Chigga" (a name he later said was invented out of naïveté and regrettable, prompting the change to "Rich Brian"). He quickly became a global sensation after the video for his debut single, "Dat \$tick," went viral in 2016 (it now has 209 million views on YouTube). Aboard this rocket ship from obscurity, Imanuel/Rich Brian has built an enduring global career. He's released two albums, toured the world and played major festivals, including Coachella.

*Jamojaya* begins as a viral Indonesian rapper named James (Immanuel) is at work on his debut album for a major U.S. label at a swanky resort in Hawaii. With him is his father and self-styled manager (Yayu A.W. Unru), who is still mourning the death of James' brother and is unwilling to surrender control of his son's career. While James sinks deeper in debt to the label, his unworldly father insists on making himself present at meetings and events, causing embarrassment for the young artist. Caught between the music industry's commercial demands and a power struggle with his dad, James is gradually forced to find his own voice.

Chon, who made his directorial debut in 2017 with the Sundance audience award winner *Gook*, tweaked Immanuel's story for the film — the rapper turned actor has a positive relationship with his own father, an attorney who largely stayed out of his son's career — but Immanuel says he deeply relates to the inner turmoil of his character. "For me in real life, it was a super crazy experience," he says. "If I was asked when I landed in America, 'Do you feel culture shock?' I would have been like, 'No, not really,' because I felt like I was prepared."



Justin Chon, director of *Jamojaya*, an official selection of the Premieres program at the 2023 **Sundance Film Festival**. COURTESY OF SUNDANCE INSTITUTE | PHOTO BY JORDAN STRAUSS.

Looking back, however, Immanuel says it was undoubtedly "very jarring" as he, like his character, tried to find his footing while also grappling with the emotions involved in moving between two radically different worlds — and as a teenager, largely on his own, while also trying to seize the opportunity to launch a career.

Immanuel adds: "I was home-schooled and didn't have a crazy social life, but then I was going on a tour for the first time in a bus across the U.S. with all of these new people. I'm very grateful for everything music has given me, but there were just so many crazy things to adjust to."

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