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In the offshore business world, the Bahamas are the place to live. The rich can live tax free in high style and rub shoulders with celebrities.

And there's no one better at living the good life than Yank Barry. He is a Canadian businessman from Montreal who made it big in the food business.

His mansion is situated in one of the most sought after locations in Nassau. It is the house that VitaPro built. VitaPro is a soya-based product that's used as a meat substitute.

Barry sells VitaPro as the perfect institutional food. It keeps for months and can be turned into everything from curry to burgers to chicken salad. It's sold in bulk to prisons, the military and hospitals.

VitaPro may be gruel for the masses but for Barry it was a gold mine. He says he makes millions selling it to institutions that buy it to save money and time.

"When you look at the man hours saved and the utility costs... You're freeing up man hours for people to do other things."

But there is a secret ingredient to VitaPro, Muhammad Ali. Even with the physical affects of his Parkinson's Disease, Ali is still a presence and is loved by millions of people around the world. For Barry, the champ was the key that unlocked the door to untold riches.

"The best person to see is the pen, the CEO. Who is the CEO of every country? The president, the prime minister. If you want to see the president... [I say,] 'I've got Muhammad Ali with me, would you like to see me?' It didn't take rocket science to figure that one out."

With the power of Ali's celebrity, Barry could draw a crowd in any country. At the unveiling of VitaPro in Morocco, the product was launched in a packed football stadium.

Barry is a smooth operator, maybe even the best. But he's not just another fast talking salesman with a product to sell. He claims to be on a mission, to stamp out world hunger.

"There's no shortage of food in the world... If we can just shift the distribution and start convincing governments that you don't maintain power by keeping people poor and hungry... If Muhammad stays healthy for the next eight or 10 years... we can really wipe out world hunger. A lot of people are starting to come on board."

With that in mind Barry created Global Village Champions. They are a group of celebrities who endorse Barry's humanitarian goals. And the champion of the champions is Ali.

But Barry says he's not content with just giving to the poor. He wants to take from the rich. And once again he calls on his famous friends to help out. In Hollywood he's got actor Jon Voight and Ali entertaining executives from the Young Presidents' Organization, a club for corporate presidents under 40 who earn over one million dollars, in a celebrity auction.

"You know who came up with this idea? Muhammad. Until around 10 months ago, all of our meals, some 270 million came from us alone. He said, 'Hey let's start getting corporate America to ante up... So we said, 'Okay whatever you raise, we'll match it in food,' says Barry.

He's raising money by auctioning off pieces of Muhammad Ali, starting with framed boxer silks that sold for \$18,000. But he doesn't stop there. For \$1,500 the Young Presidents' can have their picture taken with Ali.

There's more of Ali to sell. Barry has been hustling Puerto Rican businessmen for the price of a dinner date with the champ. Barry never misses an opportunity to make his pitch.

"Here's a message to all Canadians... Pick a charity and we'll bring Muhammad Ali to it and match it with food."

SAINT OR SINNER?

While Barry rubs shoulders with the rich and famous in Hollywood, in Texas he's known simply as file number H208. Last August he was convicted of conspiracy, bribery and money laundering and could face a prison term of as much as 65 years.

Last year Barry was convicted of bribing the head of all Texas prisons. The courts found that Andy Collins took a \$20,000 cheque from Barry to get a \$33-million dollar contract for VitaPro.

"The naysayers who don't like me claim I'm very sharp and I'm witty and I know what I'm doing. Would I bribe somebody with a \$20,000 cheque? I live in the Bahamas. Ever heard of cash? No. I definitely didn't bribe anybody in Texas," says Barry.

He is now out on bail awaiting a jail sentence in Texas but that doesn't slow him down. In Phoenix, Arizona at another celebrity fundraiser, Barry belts out the classic sixties hit *Louie Louie* with pop icon Alice Cooper and superstar David Foster.

He claims to be a misunderstood philanthropist. But he's also a convicted criminal.

He has a long history in the music business, starting at age 15 when he was known by another name.

"I was born Gerald Falovitch and my Jewish name was Yankel... My mom and all my friends called me Yank and when I went into the music business everybody I knew had their names changed... I took my middle name and dropped the last name and just made it Yank Barry."

In the early sixties Barry hit the road, auditioning for bands in New York City.

"I went to two auditions in New York City in early 1964, one audition was for the Kingsmen and another was for the group that would become the Association. I passed both auditions and thought *Louie Louie* was really cool, made the wrong decision and ended up with the Kingsmen."

But there's a problem. There's no official record that Barry was ever a member of the band, neither in rock encyclopedias nor on the official Kingsmen website. But Yank maintains he joined a splinter group also called the Kingsmen after the original band broke up.

AN ASSOCIATION WITH THE MOB

But some facts about Barry's past are indisputable, like his association with Montreal mobster Frank Catroni in the early seventies.

"At the time it felt pretty cool rubbing elbows with these people. I wasn't involved in their business; it was just being able to know them. It was almost like hanging out with superstars. I knew Frank Catroni. I knew Vince Catroni. You'd go to clubs and they give you free drinks."

While Barry hung out with the mob, he gravitated towards organized crime. In 1973 he was charged with extortion.

"The record company I was involved with at the time was McConnell Records, which was owned by John McConnell and I was president and he was chairman of the board."

"I flew down to Jamaica and my ex-wife was there with a prostitute who was supposed to be one of the Don's girlfriends or mistresses. [The prostitute] met John at a bar... He picked her up, took her home to sleep and the next day got a phone call that said, 'You were sleeping with the Don's mistress'."

For sleeping with the Mafia boss's girlfriend, Barry told McConnell to pay \$82,000 cash or he'd be killed.

"John came to me for help and I helped him, told him how much it would cost and he paid it... I easily could say it was the drugs. I was young; a lot of it was drugs. It was wrong. It was definitely wrong. I'm not proud of it, but I did it.

Barry served 11 months of a 6-year prison term at Laval Penitentiary. His charm even worked behind bars. Within a month he was head of the Inmates Committee and he doesn't regret doing the time.

"It probably saved my life. I stopped doing drugs, and started realizing there's got to be something better than this."

OFFSHORE VENTURES

Barry then went after the better life with a vengeance. Today as a member of the ultra-exclusive Ocean View Golf Club, Barry claims he makes his money from VitaPro and managing offshore investments. But many people say that's just a cover. They think Yank Barry is just a smooth talker with questionable business practices.

Investigative journalist David Marchant is one of the few reporters keeping an eye on the world of offshore banking.

"If you mention his name to a legitimate offshore businessman he would laugh. The only people really who are going to do business with him are suckers who live in the United States, Canada and elsewhere who are looking to get rich quick."

Investors found out the hard way when Barry created a multi-level marketing company called Global Village Market International. Barry wanted to sell VitaPro to the public and he enticed over 400 people to invest thousands of dollars in a pyramid-style company.

It sounded so appealing, helping hungry children and making money at the same time. So when investors saw the promotional tape with celebrities praising Barry, they were convinced.

A grocery store owner in Montreal invested \$7,500 US and was told she could double her money.

"We saw the tapes. Him among these people and they were praising him, saying that what you are doing is incredible, we are going to help you and we are helping you and this beautiful idea," says Tina Papathanakos.

When investors across the country started to complain, Barry was ordered before the Quebec Securities Commission. It ruled that Global Village Market International was an illegal investment and told him to close it down.

But the fantasy continued. Barry had listed the company on what some experts say was a phony stock exchange that was part of an equally fraudulent bank.

Both the stock exchange and the bank crashed in 2001 and took hundreds of companies with them, including Global Village Market International. But Barry says he was a victim.

"We saw nothing wrong. I don't feel bad about it today either. We never got any of the money and it wasn't a lot of money raised."

CONVICTED IN TEXAS

It wasn't a lot of money for Barry, but to Papathanakos it was a small fortune.

And then there's Texas, where the jury took only 45 minutes to convict Barry on charges of bribery, conspiracy and money laundering.

Assistant prosecutor Gary Cobe says he had never seen a jury make up its mind so quickly about anything.

"Usually when there is a verdict that comes back that quickly, it's not in favour of the government. Normally, in my experience, it's meant as an acquittal. In this case, however, it was a guilty verdict, on all accounts on both defendants."

Barry feels he was the victim of Texas politics and the new governor at the time, George W. Bush.

"Without a doubt. I was caught in the crossfire. A political crossfire... I'm basing it on the fact that the number one campaign contributors to Bush's campaign as governor were the Cattlemen's Association. How unhappy they were about having a vegetarian meat replacement product in the beef capital of the United States."

An interesting conspiracy theory but Barry doesn't have any proof. Just like when you take a close look at Barry's company, VitaPro. He says it's a \$300-million dollar company and yet his North American headquarters is a postbox in a drug store in Montreal, an unlikely threat to the tough Texas cattlemen.

Barry claims to have given away 280 million meals of VitaPro. But there's no way of proving that because he doesn't keep records.

CELEBRITY CONTACTS

In spite of all of Yank Barry's problems, the champ is still on his payroll and in his corner.

"He's a good guy and really wants to help people," says Ali.

The most tangible asset of the company appears to be the contract with Muhammad Ali and what the Ali reputation brings to Barry.

"I'm in the top ten on the charts in the king of schmooze. That one I'll agree with, not a saint but the king of schmooze," says Barry.

And with Ali in tow he can schmooze just about anybody. Ali is a magnet for other celebrities who want to be part of the champ's mystique.

So much so that many of the Global Village Champions ask few questions about VitaPro or Barry. With Ali by his side, Barry became a celebrity magnet himself. Even superstars, like Celine Dion, lined up to sing his praises.

"Yank is such a great guy," said Dion in a 1997 promotional video.

Barry's chorus of admirers also included sports legends, such as Guy Lafleur.

Lafleur never met Ali but he did meet Barry and was won over by the smooth talking charmer.

"He was impressive. Well dressed and he had all kinds of pictures on the wall about his background. So I thought he was somebody who really succeeded in what we was doing at the time."

But since Barry's trial in Texas, the spokesperson for Dion and her husband Rene Angelil told W-FIVE that she was just supporting Muhammad Ali and starving children, not Barry.

Remember the YPO auction in Los Angeles? They raised about \$150,000 to feed hungry children in Russia. The trouble is the Russian Children's Relief Fund doesn't exist. It's been out of business for over a year.

W-FIVE contacted a number of charity supporters listed on the website and some had never even heard of the charity. But the head of the charity was a close friend and business associate of Yank Barry's.

YPO organizer John Bendheim, told W-FIVE that he never checked out the charity because if it was good enough for Ali, it was good enough for him.

No questions asked. That's what Ali has done for Barry, although the partnership may be coming to an end. Barry could be behind bars in a Texas jail cell eating VitaPro for breakfast, lunch and dinner.