

# Film upsets Berkowitz and families of Son of Sam's victims

By BLAINE HARDEN  
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NEW YORK — David Berkowitz, the serial killer known as the Son of Sam, wept in prison last week, grieving over the upcoming Spike Lee movie called "Summer of Sam."

Gone was the Mona Lisa half-smile that spooked the nation after his arrest 22 summers ago. Gone, too, was the stare that unnerved detectives when the pudgy postal clerk cheerfully confessed how he shot six people to death and wounded seven others. He took orders, he said then, from a black Labrador retriever owned by a neighbor named Sam.

Now 46 years old, still pudgy and going gray, Berkowitz walked briskly last week into a visiting room in the Sullivan Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in southeastern New York state. He carried a Bible. In a green polo shirt, white tennis shoes and blue prison pants, he had the crisp, slightly officious bearing of a camp counselor — until he began to cry.

"This madness, the ugliness of the past is resurfacing again — all because some people want to make some money," said Berkowitz, who



David Berkowitz terrorized New York in 1977 as the Son of Sam. He is shown as he appeared in 1979. Now 46, he works as a peer counselor in a prison mental health unit.

agreed to be interviewed because of his distress over Lee's movie.

**THE DEPUTY** superintendent for security at the prison describes Berkowitz as an "exemplary" inmate who is a role model for other prisoners. The murderer who once taunted police with notes about hunting in Queens for "tasty meat" says he is a born-again Christian. He works as a helper and peer counselor in the prison's mental health unit.

Berkowitz said he monitors "everything there is" about Spike Lee and his family. "I pray for Spike Lee and his family, his wife, Tonya, his two children, Jackson and Satchel," he said. "God does not want me to be angry with anybody."

Although Walt Disney's Touchstone Pictures will not release the movie until next month, "Summer of Sam" is already reviving memories among New Yorkers.

Some parents of young people killed by Berkowitz are enraged by the movie. They accuse Lee of callously cashing in on their misery.

Again and again, the movie shows a corpulent Son of Sam character stalking the boroughs of New York at night, firing his .44-caliber revolver into the faces of young people, most of them women in parked cars. The murder scenes are unflinching, blood-splattered and harrowing.

**BERKOWITZ SAID** the movie will cause needless pain for families of his victims, while reminding America of what is better forgotten.

"I am just so sorry that this movie is coming out," he said. "I am so sorry that, you know, this pain doesn't seem to end. I am disappointed in Hollywood and the Walt Disney company."

"Summer of Sam" zeroes in on what Lee has called an "insane" season in the history of New York. "I was attempting to put madness on film," he said at the Cannes Film

Festival last month.

The summer of 1977 was maddeningly hot and sticky. An electrical blackout triggered looting. The city teetered near bankruptcy. Police seemed powerless to stop a mysterious killer who teased the city with chillingly-literate notes.

"Don't think that because you haven't heard from me for a while that I went to sleep," Berkowitz wrote to Jimmy Breslin, then a columnist for The Daily News. "No, rather, I am still here, like a spirit roaming the night. Thirsty, hungry, seldom stopping to rest; anxious to please Sam."

Breslin, who appears as himself in Lee's movie, said, "Berkowitz is the only murderer I ever heard of who knew how to use a semicolon."

People unable to move out of the city devised ways to elude the Son of Sam, who was rumored to prefer long-haired brunettes. Hundreds of young women had their hair cut short and dyed blond. Thousands more simply stayed home at night.

The hunt for the Son of Sam was ghastly, soul-crushing work. Hordes of detectives and reporters periodically spent long nights inspecting the bullet-mangled bodies of innocent

young people and then weeks hounding heartsick families.

**SOME OF** those families remain heartsick. They are also furious about the movie.

"Spike Lee feels that murder is entertainment, which, No. 1, it is not," said Michael Lauria, 67, a retired bus mechanic in the Bronx. His 18-year-old daughter, Donna, was Berkowitz's first murder victim.

"Spike Lee is making the families relive this all over again," said Lauria. "He is making money off my sorrow and my family's hurt. He has got no compassion. They should have come to the families and asked for permission."

**AT CANNES** in May, Lee told reporters: "I feel deeply for the parents of the victims of Son of Sam. At the same time, I'm an artist, and this is a story I wanted to tell. Even if I didn't make this film, that was not going to bring their daughters, their loved ones, back. They got buried by a psychopath. We do not feel that the film is a glorification of David Berkowitz."

Berkowitz is serving six consecutive life sentences. An inmate at Attica slashed his throat in 1979, and the

wound required 65 stitches. For fighting with the many inmates who taunted him, he was often confined to his cell in Attica and other prisons. The fights ended with his transfer 12 years ago to Sullivan Correctional Facility, where he says he converted to Christianity.

"I will never be released from prison," he said last week. "I deserve to be in prison for the rest of my life. I can accept that."

When pressed, he blames the murders on Satan. In a television interview two years ago, he said he belonged to a satanic cult when he was the Son of Sam. He committed only three of the six murders to which he pleaded guilty, he said, while other cult members committed the rest.

But some detectives who worked the case said the cult theory is ludicrous. They said Berkowitz's confession had details only the killer could know.

These days, Berkowitz is eager to talk about his two Christian videos, which have been distributed to schools and prisons around the country and which warn young people to avoid his satanic mistakes. One video is called "Son of Sam/Son of Hope."