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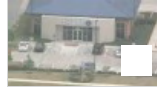
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The Art of Making Fools of the Media

The Pranks of Hoax Artist Joey Skaggs

By **Buck Wolf**
April 1



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Did you see the drooling journalists chase the Raelian Clone Hoax Float down Fifth Avenue? If you've ever gone to New York's April Fools' Day Parade, the joke's on you.

Parade maestro Joey Skaggs worked feverishly to top himself this year, with bigger and better festivities, vowing that war would not break an 18-year April Fools' tradition. One of the most anticipated attractions: the Michael Jackson Dangling His Child Off a Balcony Float.

And, of course, there'd be the annual march of high-profile look-alike fools. This year's bunch was said to include a faux Martha Stewart and a ringer for erstwhile Enron CEO Kenneth Lay, singing a duet of Jimmy Reed's "Shame, Shame, Shame."

But this year's April Fools' Day Parade was just like all the others. It never happened. It's an 18-year-old running gag that's never been more than an elaborate press release. Year after year, Skaggs just likes to see how many journalists will show up, and over the years, he's fooled just about every network and many of the top newspapers — sometimes more than once.

Apparently, The Associated Press hasn't caught on to the April Fools' Day Parade, listing the annual nonevent on its calendar of "major stories we anticipate in the coming day."

CNN fell for the parade ruse one year, so did The New York Times. ABC never fell for it, but Skaggs pulled over another gag on Good Morning America.

In 1986, Skaggs talked his way on to the morning show by posing as Joe Bones, a former Marine Corps drill sergeant who had started the most aggressive diet company in America — The Fat Squad. For \$300 a day plus expenses, Bones and his hired commandos would guard dieters against their own lack of willpower, forcibly disarm any client who tried to sneak a cookie before bedtime.

"We were had, in spades," Good Morning America's then-host David Hartman told the press. But GMA wasn't the only one; the Philadelphia Inquirer also fell victim to The Fat Squad.

After playing journalists for fools for nearly 40 years, Skaggs now looks back on an illustrious career as a "hoax artist" who shows the world just how easy it is to pass off the most outrageous claims as the truth.

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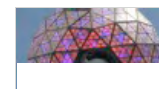
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In the mid-1970s, he emerged on various news reports as the proprietor of a dog bordello — what was otherwise called a "cathouse for dogs." Several years later he emerged as a would-be Sy Sperling with an outrageous plan to restore the hairline of balding men — follicle transplants from cadavers.

Skaggs also has appeared in newspapers and TV as the proprietor of a celebrity sperm bank, the inventor of a health drink made from cockroaches and the first man to windsurf from Hawaii to California.

You can call Skaggs just about anything. But he insists he isn't a scammer.

"A scammer is trying to do someone out of money," he says. "That happens all the time. I'm using humor to show the system for what it is."

Just how easy is it to perpetrate a hoax? Take a look at some of Skaggs' greatest hits:

Skaggs at Work

Hair Replacement From the Dead Hair Today Ltd. gleaned a substantial amount of air time and ink in 1990 as a firm specializing in a cure for baldness through hair transplants from the dead, much the way doctors would transplant a kidney. Skaggs said the ideal recipients would be salesmen or TV news anchors who needed to "look their best" and could afford the \$3,500 price tag. The Boston Globe was among the news organizations fooled on this one.

The Miracle Roach Hormone Cure Remember Kafka's Metamorphosis? Skaggs emerged in 1981 as Dr. Josef Gregor, an entomologist who extolled the virtue of consuming cockroach hormones as a cure for colds, acne, anemia and menstrual cramps. WNBC-TV's Live at Five featured an interview with the doctor, who claimed to have graduated from the University of Bogota in Colombia. Skaggs says no one checked his credentials. The newscasters only seemed to become suspicious when Skaggs played his organization's theme song — "La Cucaracha."

Gypsy Moth Anti-Defamation League

In a 1982 New York Times article, Jo-Jo the Gypsy protested the political incorrectness of the term "gypsy moth" at a time when the little critters were devastating trees in the Northeast. Jo-Jo, another Skaggs incarnation, railed against the injustice of associating the pesky moths with Gypsies, a downtrodden minority that has long suffered from discrimination. Jo-Jo suggested the annoying insects should be called "Hitler Moths." The New York Post gleefully reported the esteemed newspaper's mistake, in an article headlined "Times falls for the old switcheroo."

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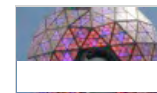
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Celebrity Sperm Auction Attention ladies: Interested in "certified and authenticated rock star sperm"? Posing as Giuseppe Scagolli in 1976, Skaggs appealed to women who wanted children with sperm provided by the likes of Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Jimi Hendrix.

The point is rather apparent. We ask so much from the news organizations we trust. If a poor artist with few resources can fool the media into believing outrageous lies, what hope do we have against a well-funded, malicious liar?

In a time of heightened fears of terrorism, Skaggs thinks it's even more important to examine the media and its vulnerabilities. Still, he keeps in mind that people are in no mood for surprises. "Of course, I have to be more careful," he says.

Hoaxing surely isn't a traditional way to make a point. But it's as American as Ben Franklin, according to Alex Boese, author of The Museum of Hoaxes (Dutton).

In 1747, Polly Baker became a media sensation in Colonial America after she was hauled into a Connecticut court and punished for having out-of-wedlock sexual intercourse five times.

It was hard for Baker to argue otherwise. She had five children and was unmarried.

Twice the courts fined Baker. Twice she was subject to corporal punishment for her promiscuity.

At her fifth trial, she made an impassioned plea to the court that turned her into one of America's first feminist heroes. She argued that she supported all her children on her own. Worst of all, the father of these children had never been punished, while she became a convicted criminal.

Far from a whipping, Baker told the judges that they should erect a statue in her honor. The next day, one of her judges proposed to her, and she lived happily ever after.

Too bad this feel-good story was purely the invention of Franklin, who confessed late in life that he fabricated the story. "I think you can tell where Franklin stood on this issue, and that he saw hoaxing as a way to prove a point," Boise says.

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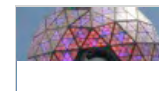
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