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In Praise of a Liar

Toyota Comedy Festival Features Retrospective of Hoax Artist Joey Skaggs

By Buck Wolf
June 12, 2001



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Joey Skaggs says journalists are simpleminded, easily manipulated and will print almost any outrageous story you tell them. As one more simpleminded reporter, I guess I'll just write down everything he says and print it.

Skaggs is a self-described hoax artist. Over the past 35 years, he's fooled various newspapers, TV stations and wire services with outrageous fabrications. 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.

"I've never had a hoax that failed," says Skaggs, a man famous for his lies.

While The Wolf Files questions such boasting, it's certainly true that, at times, Skaggs has made monkeys out of many of us in the media. Now, the Toyota Comedy Festival in New York included a retrospective on his work at this year's fete.

Skaggs also claims he's never played a hoax as a for-profit scam. "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."

For most of these pranks, Skaggs says he merely sends out a simple press release or makes a few calls. Journalists simply never bothered to verify their facts, he says. Here, then, are 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 of 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.

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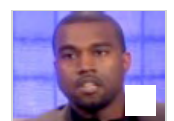
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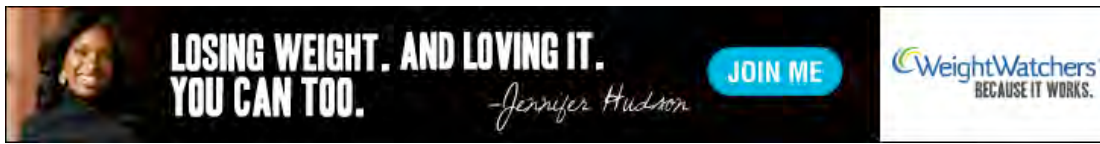


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The Fat Squad Skaggs assumed the role of Joe Bones, a former Marine Corps drill sergeant determined to wipe out obesity. He told ABC's Good Morning America in 1986 that for "\$300 a day plus expenses" his commandos would disarm any dieter who tried to sneak a cookie before bedtime. Host David Hartman later told the press: "We were had, in spades." The Philadelphia Inquirer was also duped.

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 buggers 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."

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. Several wire services and Ms. magazine picked up the story of a sperm bank robbery.

The Dog Bordello Finally, a place for frustrated pooches — a cathouse for dogs! Skaggs planted an ad in New York's Village Voice newspaper in 1976 that promised "a savory selection of hot bitches" for your sexually deprived mutt, with the warning: "dogs only." Skaggs posed as a dog pimp, promising every Rover satisfaction for only \$50. The media lapped it up, and the story hit all the wire services and local cable shows. Even ABC's New York affiliate covered the event.

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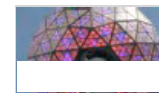
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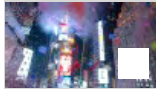


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The point is rather apparent. We ask so much from the news organizations we trust. If a poor artist with few resources can fool the media into believing outrageous lies, what hope do we have against a well-funded, malicious liar?

Buck Wolf is a producer at ABCNEWS.com. The Wolf Files is published Tuesdays and Thursdays. If you want to receive weekly notice when a new column is published, join the e-mail list.

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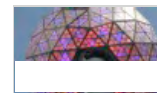
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