



Documentary looks at the 'Art of the Prank'

Marini got to the soul of Skaggs

Scott Iwasaki, *The Park Record*

POSTED: 01/22/2016 05:01:53 PM MST

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Joey Skaggs is an artistic practical joker.

He lives by the motto. "Mundus vult decipi, ergo decipiatur," a Latin phrase meaning "The world wants to be deceived, so let it be deceived."

Since the mid 1960s, Skaggs has created elaborate hoaxes and statements that have fooled a vast majority of the public and various news outlets, including the *Village Voice*, the *Miami Herald* and a slew of televised newscasts that didn't dig a little deeper in their research.

Some of the jokes he is known for include a cathouse for dogs, celebrity sperm bank auctions, a portable confessional, a cockroach vitamin pill and condominiums for fish, to name a few.

His latest hoax took aim at film festivals, and was documented by Italian filmmaker Andrea Marini in "Art of the Prank," which was accepted by Slamdance and will premiere on Sunday, Jan. 24, at Treasure Mountain Inn. An additional screening will be held on Wednesday, Jan. 27.

"Interestingly in 'Art of the Prank,' the current narrative is an ongoing prank," Skaggs said during a telephone interview from an undisclosed location. "The film is the exposé and it will be interesting to see how film festival people will respond. Slamdance, on the other hand, tuned right in, gleefully, I would imagine. They got it."

A friend introduced Marini, who is known for his short films, commercials and music videos, to Skaggs.

"At the time, my next project would have been a feature narrative and my producer came to me and said he met this guy named Joey Skaggs and there may be an opportunity to do a documentary film about him," Marini said during a phone interview from New York. "I wasn't into documentaries at that time, but told him to show me something."

Marini was given a "20/20" news segment about Skaggs and was "blown away."

"I decided to put everything else on standby and do a documentary," he said. "I thought it would be a quick project."

It took three-and-a-half years to finish.

"The main reason was because there were so many different ways I could have approached this film, and I wanted to capture Joey doing a contemporary hoax," Marini said. "I wanted to do something more than just edit archival footage. I wanted to do a film that included my own styles and [one that would challenge] my own abilities."

Unfortunately, Skaggs isn't one to do what he's asked to do.

"However, he trusted me quite immediately, which was really nice," Marini said with a laugh. "I was very determined to do a film, which I think he liked. In fact, the first time I met him, I was already pointing a camera at him."

Eventually, Skaggs came up with the film festival hoax, and that's when Marini's work really started.

"When you follow someone like Joey when he's coming up with a hoax, you never know what to expect," he said.

During the shoot, Marini found how meticulous and careful Skaggs was to cover his bases so the



Joey Skaggs, known for his elaborate media hoaxes, is the subject of filmmaker Andrea Marini's Slamdance film, "Art of the Prank." For 50 years, Skaggs has taken advantage of some media outlets' lack of due diligence in announcing such pranks as a cathouse for dogs, a fish hotel and a portable confessional. (Relight Films)

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hoax could come off as being truthful.

"I also admired the way he was willing to transform and adapt to different situations," Marini said. "He was doing something that was very different than the other things he had done throughout his entire career, but he had no fear. He just knew this was something he wanted to do. And he followed his gut feelings."

Marini also noticed how simple the joke was.

"That was key for him," the filmmaker said. "If the essence of the story is strong and you have a few elements that are necessary for the story, you're good to go. A lot of filmmakers could learn from this as well."

When coming up with any kind of hoax, Skaggs said he just tunes into things that make him mad.

"There are things in the news that upset me and it's never been a problem coming up with subject matter," he said. "It's how you go about tackling an issue creatively that is the challenge."

"If you look over my work, I have addressed the war in Vietnam, Equal Rights and all the '-isms' of the '60s that still exist today," Skaggs said. "The problem that artists face today is how to tell a story and keep people interested."

Other than being topical, another challenge is swearing his accomplices to secrecy.

"I have to depend on everyone who works with me to keep secrets and these secrets are sometimes kept for years," Skaggs said. "That may not sound like a lot, but if anyone spilled the beans at one point, everything I had done wouldn't have been done."

He also depends on the generosity and creativity of his friends and strangers.

"It's a big collective and people like them make these hoaxes possible," he said. "If I had to pay people to help, I couldn't afford it because these things are big productions. It's like structuring a reality that is false, but there is a lot that goes into it."

Skaggs was taken aback when Marini approached him with the documentary idea.

"I was, of course, flattered and very interested in the fact that here he was, this kid who was not even living in the United States, but had tuned into me in such a profound way," Skaggs said. "I was impressed and happy to have a creative young team to work with."

To get things started, Skaggs presented Marini with a vast archive of hoaxes.

"I knew that what I was doing in my career was ephemeral, really, and the only evidence would be saving what the news did with it," Skaggs said. "I made a point to try to protect the archive, which meant that I had to haul it around wherever I went."

Over the past 50 years, Skaggs collected the film and videotapes, news clippings, whatever medium that reported his hoaxes, and put them into portfolios and files.

That was a logistical nightmare for Marini.

"I had access to 150 hours of archival footage and another 150 hours of what I shot," he said. "Then you have to consider each hoax he did could be a story in itself. So, my first [puzzle] was to find my main story line and [decide] what I could use that would take the narration forward."

When that was settled, Marini went back to the archives to gather information that would help the audience understand Skaggs's art and techniques.

"It was frustrating because I was humble enough to think I had to stick to a three-act structure, but when doing a documentary, you deal with reality," he said. "So, you constantly try to feed what you have that is not scripted into a structure that needs to be appealing."

Skaggs is looking forward to audience reactions to the film.

"This film, to me, is about my ability to share what I've been doing for all of these decades," he said.

Reflecting on his career, Skaggs would have liked to say he was surprised at how well the hoaxes worked, especially when reported by the media in straight news segments or articles.

"Then again, look who we have running for the President of the United States," he said with a wry laugh. "I'm just the messenger and the message is 'You've Got to Be Kidding Me.' We deceive ourselves and are constantly being deceived."

Marini is happy Slamdance selected the film this year.

"It means a lot to me, and as you see in the film, Joey focuses a hoax on film festivals, which [probably won't] make things easy for me," Marini said with a laugh. "So, being accepted into the Slamdance, which is THE festival for me, is perfect for us."

Slamdance will screen Andrea Marini's "Art of the Prank" Treasure Mountain Inn Gallery Screening Room, 655 Main St. on Sunday, Jan. 24 at 8 p.m. An additional screening will be held





screening room, 255 main st., on sunday, jan. 24, at 8 p.m. An additional screening will be held Wednesday, Jan. 27, at 10:15 p.m. For more information, visit www.slamdance.com. For more information about Joey Skaggs, visit www.Joeyskaggs.com.

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