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You're Shittin' Me!

Veteran prankster Joey Skaggs covers Rudy with crap

by [Lex Lonehood](#)

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Throwing a wad of elephant dung in Mayor Giuliani's face was a real thrill: the windup, then the pitch, followed by the soft splat. And then the intoxication of seeing the brown-gray sludge dribble off his toothy smirk. Alas, this was only good clean fun; the shit was artificial and the mayor a cartoonish painting. But fakeness is the legitimate medium in which the organizer of this past Saturday's "Doody Rudy" event trafficks. Meet Joey Skaggs, mindfucker: the man who sculpts the media like putty, leaving a trail of hoaxes and provocations spread out over 30 years.

It was high noon in Washington Square Park when Skaggs and his soldiers arrived toting a large canvas tarp gleaming in the sun. Hanging on poles, the canvas depicted Giuliani 's face on the body of the Madonna, which was painted to mimic Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, the **dung-laden portrait** that made Giuliani mad enough to pull the Brooklyn Museum's funding.

People paid \$1 per shot to throw the ersatz dung (with donations going to Housing Works, an agency for the homeless). Disappointingly, the crap initially slid off the canvas, as if Giuliani were the Teflon ex-president himself, but the brown slime slowly started to stick, as a beefed-up police force calmly watched from the sidelines. Perhaps the NYPD had decided to tone down their response -- that morning, *The New York Times* ran a story about a police raid on Steve Powers, the graffiti artist who painted the Giuliani /Madonna image. Powers had his apartment

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searched as part of an unrelated "vandalism investigation," which coincidentally took place just hours after he and Skaggs appeared on a radio program promoting the dung toss.

Sporting a shit-eating grin, Skaggs was pushing a wheeled recycling bin filled with supposed elephant dung. But the largest contingent of the procession was his orchestra: the swarming media from a multitude of TV outlets, their bulky Betacams obscenely protruding every which way and barking for 30-second sound bites. With no dramatic buildup or megaphone rabble rousing, the event grew a little dull in person, but it played well for the cameras. It was the lead story on some New York TV stations, and all the evening newscasts featured raucous footage of Rudy getting doodied, punctuated with participants' terse bursts against the mayor's policies.

As the event proved, Skaggs is a savvy provocateur, but his true genius lies in foisting hoaxes upon the gullible media, as he has **for the last three decades**. As he became better known as a prankster, Skaggs began giving lectures on the university circuit, but in 1988, when *Entertainment Tonight* invited him to appear on their show for an episode on hoaxes, he sent an imposter who went undetected by them.

Skaggs keeps a complete online retrospective of his hoaxes and their subsequent exposures, documenting works like the hilarious Cathouse for Dogs (1976), where he created phony video footage of a Manhattan bordello for servicing horny dogs; and Cockroach Vitamin Pill(1981) which featured Skaggs posing as a crackpot doctor touting a miracle cure made from ground-up cockroaches.

On the eve of "Doody Rudy," I had the chance to chat with Skaggs about his illustrious anti-career and the current state of prankdom.

GettingIt: Joey, Given your propensity for hoaxes, how do I know this is really you?

Joey Skaggs: You don't. Good question. Now you're safe. We can continue.

GI: Tell me a bit about your methodology and if your work has become more extreme as the media has become increasingly tabloid-oriented.

JS: My work is done on a whole lot of different levels. In some instances we have to create a whole advertising campaign, have it lying around waiting for months or longer before anyone stumbles on it. I'm dependent on other people to help me pull it off. In the Solomon Project there were 25 computer designers. When I did the Cathouse for Dogs, there were 25 actors and 15 dogs. I'm always amazed that I'm able to keep that kind of secrecy for so long and have so many people actually be involved in it.

There's all kinds of art and art has a different meaning for everyone. There's a wall decoration that's nice and there's something that screams at you and provokes you into outrage and hopefully thinking about an issue, whether you accept it or not. That's the nature of my work and that's what I do and I don't think I've had to become more extreme, I just think that I'm surrounded by more people that are extreme but far less creative or thoughtful.

GI: Your fake appearances on TV shows, like *To Tell the Truth* and *Entertainment Tonight*, could be thought of as meta-pranks -- pulling off a hoax on a show whose topic was hoaxes. Have these programs ever offered retractions after finding out about what you did?

JS: No, absolutely not. They don't want to admit their own lack of credibility or their own irresponsibility. Giving it more attention would have a negative effect in their audience's mind. They're not going to want to have to do that unless they feel it's in their best interests to control the spin that they put on it by revealing it themselves. And what I mean by that is they can say this guy is a real sick person. He's a needy person; he needs attention so he does these stupid hoaxes.

GI: Has the Internet changed the way you work?

JS: Well, the Internet has greatly helped me as far as being able to have a central command post and correspond with people in different time zones. I can have international teams like I did with **Stop Biopeep**, with fake companies' correspondence and emails, and all of that because of the computer. It's opened up a whole new world for me.

GI: But has the Internet with its free-flowing mis- and disinformation made people more

skeptical?

JS: I think they are, but we're also just as gullible as we've always been. And I'm good proof of that. I'm still doing it. It's actually wonderful -- it's actually pathetically sad. I have a major hoax out there right now and I've already been enormously successful. No-one even knows it's me.

GI: So that's being perpetrated right now?

JS: It's perpetrated right now. Sooner or later I will reveal it, or someone will stumble on it and put it together and go, "Wait a minute..."

GI: Can you give us a clue as to what it might be?

JS: Fuck, no! [*laughs*] But when you find out, you will die laughing.

GI: Joey, you're a master media manipulator, but how would you react if you found out that you were part of a mind-control experiment and that some of your pranks had actually been fed to you?

JS: That's actually what's happened to me, and I've been faintly aware of that. But now that you mentioned it, it's starting to gel. Oh no! [*laughs heartily*] Thank you.

Lex Lonehood lives in New York and writes for Citytripping.com and Art Bell's "After Dark."