

MEDIA

18 MARCH 2013

Joey Skaggs: novelty silliness and well-packaged rebellion

Josh Lowe meets Joey Skaggs, the man who prides himself on being able to prank the media over and over again.

BY JOSH
LOWE



In July 1976, prankster and satirist Joey Skaggs, calling himself Giuseppe Scaggoli, appeared before a rabid crowd, dressed in sharp-labeled finery. He had some unfortunate news: that day's planned auction of rock star sperm was cancelled due to a mysterious theft. All

he could offer in the way of comfort were his assurances that more donations were to be sought as soon as possible. His business, the Celebrity Sperm Bank, only benefited from the publicity. It was inundated with calls from potential clients, and the story of one plucky capitalist's mission to sell spunk "from the likes of Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Paul McCartney" was picked up by the music press and, ultimately, televised on cable and national TV. The only problem? The whole affair was faked. Skaggs, by this time a legend of the New York underground, chalked up another victory over the bullshitters.

Skaggs still looks every inch the guerrilla culture warrior when we meet. Decked out in a hefty leather waistcoat and black Levis and sporting a wild wizard's beard, he greets me first with a handshake and then a hug, booming a hello in gravelly tones. Yet Skaggs is no spaced-out crusty. His welcome gift to me – a Joey Skaggs brand "Bullshit Detector" watch-cum-alarm – is a piece of novelty silliness designed by someone with a keen sense of the modern consumer's appetite for well packaged rebellion. Skaggs's work has been so successful because he understands the systems he exploits and is comfortable working within them.

This much should be obvious, in any case, from the reason behind Skaggs's first major appearance in

London since 1995 (when he hoaxed UK media in the guise of experimental therapist and self-styled “Lion King” Baba Wa Simba). This week, Skaggs will speak at ad industry conference Advertising Week Europe.

Skaggs is aware of the contradictory aspects of this. “It’s kinda interesting to be invited to this conference. I think Mark [Borkowski, a publicist instrumental in bringing him to the event] has the biggest pair of balls.” However, he isn’t interested in laying into the ad men and women he’ll be appearing before: “I can’t really say that I’m the fox in the henhouse, because I’m with some brilliant creative minds.” He says he doesn’t plan to preach to his audience, instead preferring to present them with “an entertaining history lesson” and wait and see what conclusions they draw.

Skaggs’s relative ease with the ad industry might stem from his belief in the value of propaganda as an artistic medium. “The reality is that what I am doing is selling something, because everyone is selling something. You’re selling a product, you’re selling a service. What I’m trying to sell is a way of looking at things.” The ideas he concocts are persistent in the way the best advertising is. Cleaning brand Vanish, for instance, recently ran into a dispute with Skaggs as to which of them had created the “world’s largest bra” after Skaggs challenged their record with a bra he hung

across the US Treasury building on Wall St in 1969. What distinguishes Skaggs's work, he says, is its intent. His performances are often political, and always intellectually provoking.

Yet he is uncompromising in other areas. Skaggs's best known recent works are his annual April Fools' Day Parades – chaotic affairs held in New York's Washington Square park, where revellers crown a King of Fools from a parade of lookalikes. Last year, the crowd chose Mitt Romney, and figures appearing in this April's parade will include Lil Wayne and Chuck Norris. His last parade took "Occupy Washington Square Park" as its theme, though he isn't associated with the Occupy movement in any deeper sense than a sharing of certain ideals. "I'm all behind making the kind of changes that I think they represent, it's just that I think organisationally they fight amongst themselves," he says. "When I do a prank, I tell my volunteers... I want to make sure that we're all on the same page, because I don't want you to bring an agenda that is different from what I am attempting to do."

The central function of the parade is to allow Skaggs to unleash his rage upon individuals. "During the course of the year I have my asshole file," he says. "I either clip out articles or write notes or print something from the internet and stick it in the folder, and a month or

so before it's time for the parade I construct and organise what's happening. I try to keep it limited to one page because it's virtually impossible, there are so many assholes.”

In this, it is distinct from his media pranks, whose targets are systemic. Most of his stunts rely for their impact on the false and often hilarious press coverage they generate. The Baba Wa Simba stunt resulted in a particularly excellent piece on *London Tonight* in which a bespectacled ITV reporter finds himself splayed on the floor next to “Baba”, releasing his repressed trauma in a primal howl. It is a signature move of Skaggs's to send imposters along to interviews, even where the resultant pieces are celebratory.

He talks about himself almost as a campaigner for accurate reportage. “If you make those kinds of stupid mistakes, you don't do your job well, you fucked up,” he says. When I ask whether hoaxing has got harder in the age of Google, he unleashes a demonic cackle: “Is that really a serious question?” He is, however, dismissive of press regulation when I bring up Leveson. Those calling for press regulation, or alterations to the First Amendment in the US, “go into my asshole category. Gee, if I allow that to happen, they're gonna throw me in jail.”

While I can't help but feel that there is something a

little too gleeful in his reaction to press mistakes, the uncertainty Skaggs sows, and the frantic fact checking it leads to, is powerful. To interview Skaggs is to be reminded of one's personal responsibility to readers as distinct from the wider system in which one works, and that can be no bad thing.

As our interview draws to a close, Skaggs cagily suggests that he is planning a new prank for London. He is guarded on the details, but asks politely that the *New Statesman* not use a recent photo to illustrate this piece in order to keep his visual profile in the UK as low as possible. As for me, he has just one request. "If you recognise me... call me first, OK?" he says. His eyes twinkle as he fixes me with the full force of his jester's grin: "I won't fool you."

Joey Staggs as Dr Josef Gregor, the world leading entomologist famed for his "discovery" of a cockroach hormone than can cure all common ailments known to man. Photograph: Joey Staggs Archive

Josh Lowe is a freelance journalist and communications consultant. Follow him on Twitter [@jeyylowe](https://twitter.com/jeyylowe).



Try it from just £1 an issue

SUBSCRIBE