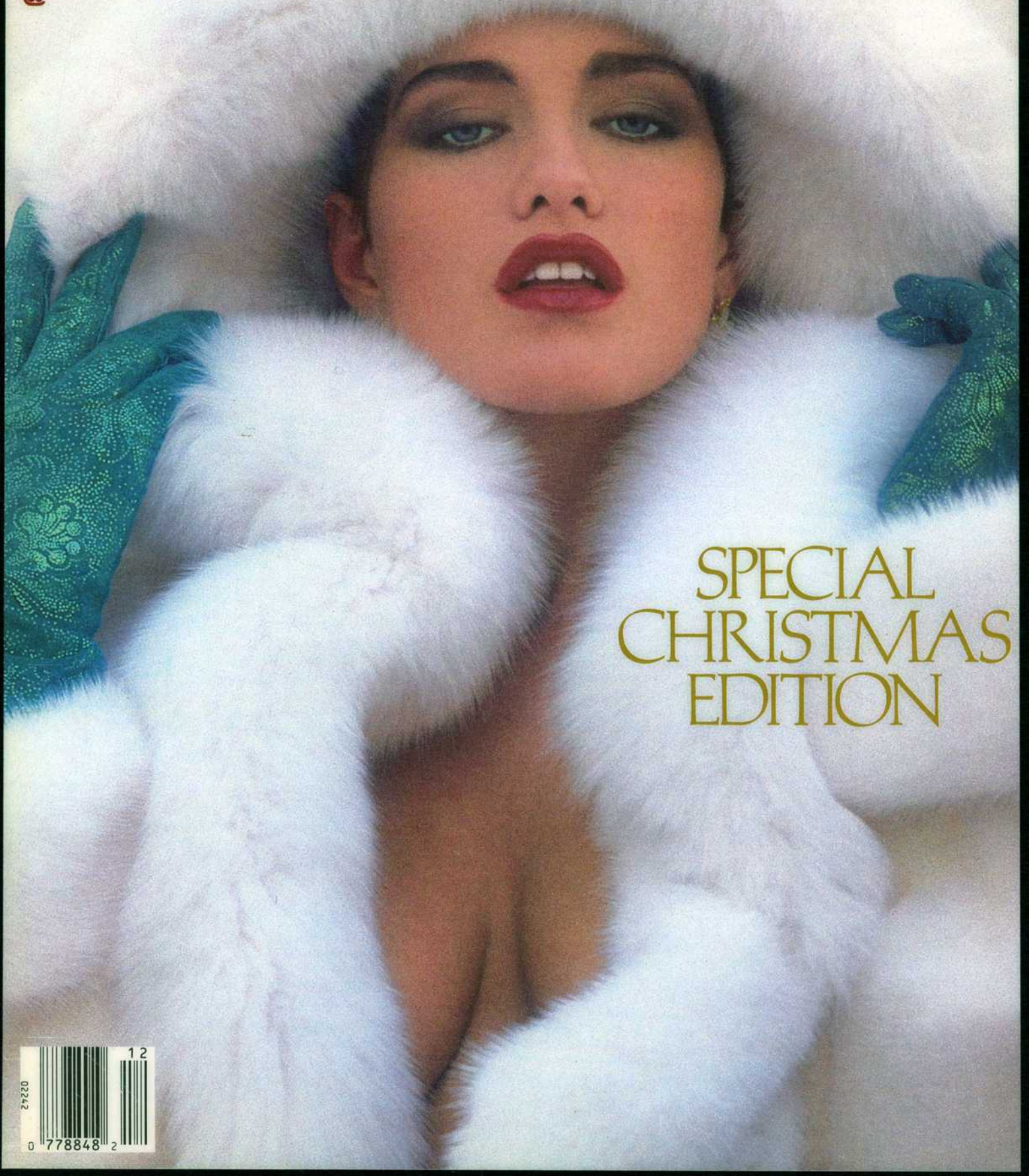


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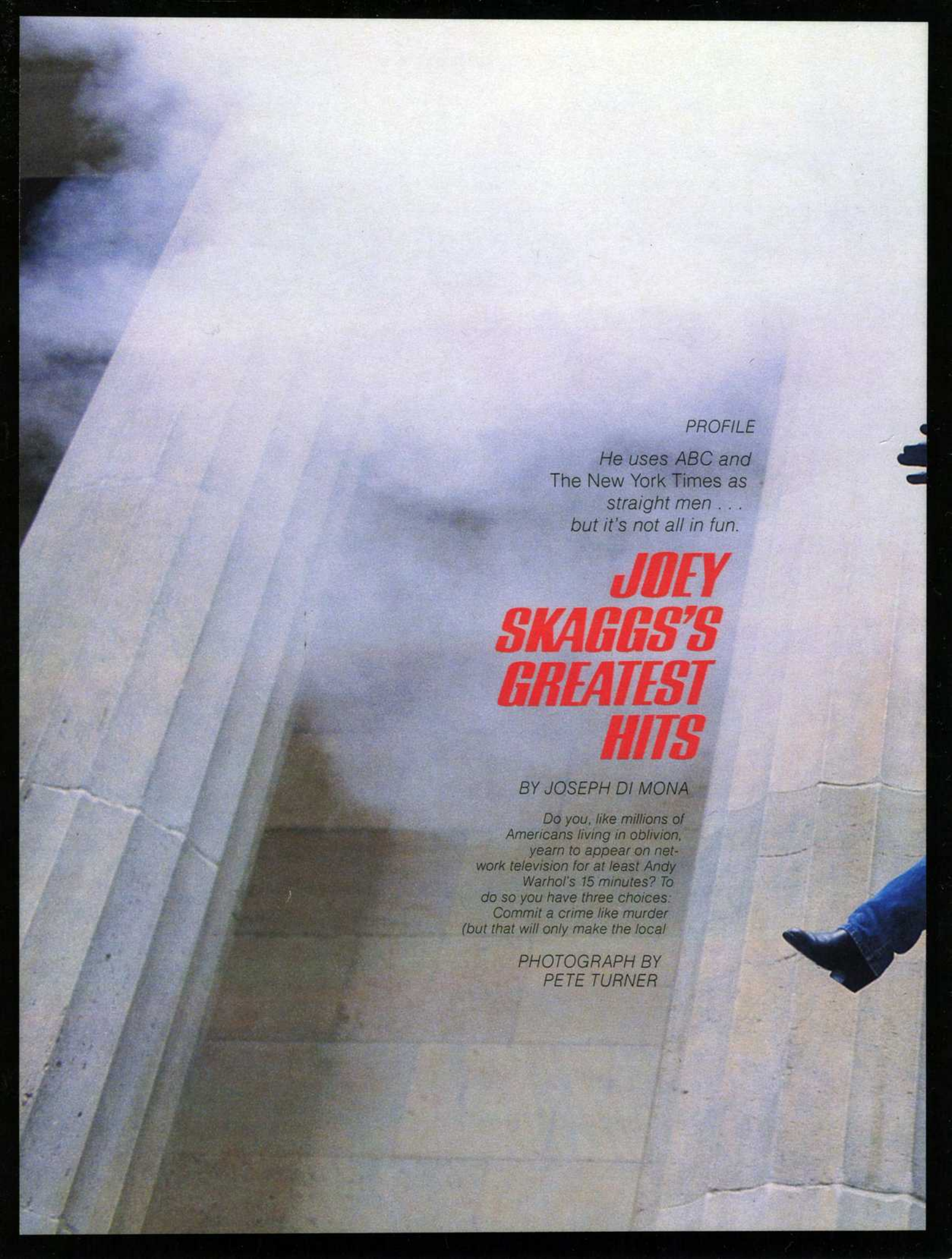
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SPECIAL
CHRISTMAS
EDITION





PROFILE

*He uses ABC and
The New York Times as
straight men . . .
but it's not all in fun.*

JOEY SKAGGS'S GREATEST HITS

BY JOSEPH DI MONA

*Do you, like millions of
Americans living in oblivion,
yearn to appear on net-
work television for at least Andy
Warhol's 15 minutes? To
do so you have three choices:
Commit a crime like murder
(but that will only make the local*

PHOTOGRAPH BY
PETE TURNER



six o'clock news); costume yourself like an idiot and appear on a game show (but that will only be seen by housewives); or option three, emulate Joey Skaggs and produce a series of five-star media hoaxes with actors, props, and stagecraft that will be seen by all Americans on network television and savored in print across the nation as well.

Of course it will help if, like Skaggs, you have a sense of humor. Consider some of the hoaxes that have made him the *bête noire* of both unsuspecting television-news producers and print editors who, believe it or not, reported these stories as straight news: the "Cathouse for Dogs" (a brothel for your pet); the "Fat Squad" (musclemen you hire to stand guard over your refrigerator and tackle you if you approach it); the "Rock Star-Celebrity Sperm Auction" (self-explanatory); the "Sidewalk Commandos" (etiquette teachers for rude pedestrians); the "Bad Guys Talent Agency" (a theatrical agency representing only mean and ugly actors). And there were many, many more media events during a lifetime odyssey that began in the sixties with creative protests against the Vietnam War and continues today as Skaggs plans his newest caper, centering around, of all things, a giant clam.

Who is this man, and why has he devoted so many years to the simple goal of driving the media crazy? Is he on some sort of high-level mission? Or is he simply an exhibitionist, like the chap who dropped out of the sky (option four) on a hang glider into the middle of the World Series? It's a question that brings color to Skaggs's face, and a fist pounding the table. "That's not what I'm about at all. I'm not a party crasher or an exhibitionist either. I produce and stage media events for a *purpose*." But then he smiles. "I'll admit that they're fun."

In short, Skaggs, a lean, youngish-looking man of 42, casually clad in tweed coat, jeans, and boots, insists he is a social commentator, albeit unique. Humorous stunts are his life, and he is quick to describe enthusiastically the comic elements of his future "happenings." But beneath the humor is an anger that sometimes boils into the open, born of a great frustration. No one takes him *seriously*.

I challenge: "How can you treat someone seriously who invents a 'Cathouse for Dogs'?" I am admittedly topped by his response.

"ABC-TV took it seriously. They used it as the major segment of an ultraserious ['Eyewitness News'] documentary on cruelty to animals, not knowing it was a hoax. It was nominated for an Emmy award as the best news show of the year."

Skaggs says that, from the beginning, each of his media happenings had a *raison d'être*. In the sixties it was to make a social statement against one hypocrisy or another, including the Vietnam War. But almost immediately he became a media sensation, and in later years his motiva-

tion encompassed a second goal: to show how the all-powerful media manipulates the news, often without even investigating the facts.

Victimized newsmen have their own word for Skaggs's mission: nonsense. They say that the only difference between him and other exhibitionists is that he has invented a new gimmick that would foil any reporter. He provides the sources for the newsmen to check his stories—and the sources are all friends playing fake roles—so the sacrosanct *Washington Post* Watergate rule of "at least two sources for every fact" goes out the window. In Skaggs's hoaxes, you could end up calling 20 people, even interviewing them on television, and they would all happily confirm Skaggs's "facts" to the puzzled newsmen.

It's an argument that could go back and forth, with Skaggs saying, "If they really investigated the facts, they'd find out it was a hoax in a minute." Implying that

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The show was a big success, but all hell broke loose. The idea of a "Cathouse for Dogs" enraged animal lovers, who called it abusive.

●

they're just too lazy or sometimes blind.

Strangely, *Newsweek*, among other media institutions, agrees with Skaggs on that point and, in doing so, seems to confirm that his hoaxes really do make serious statements—in this case, on the integrity of the press. In the aftermath of the "Fat Squad" story, a lead *Newsweek* article entitled "Skipping Through the News" put it this way: "A lie gets halfway around the world," Winston Churchill liked to say, "before the truth puts on its boots." Churchill never had the privilege of meeting Joey Skaggs, a Greenwich Village media-hoax artist: But the two would have seen eye to eye. Skaggs's shtick is to plant phony stories—bordellos for dogs, sperm banks for rock stars—and see how far they spread. He is never disappointed. In last month's "Fat Squad" caper—a new diet in which strongmen would physically restrain people from food—Skaggs, using the name Joe Bones, appeared on ABC's "Good Morning America." Host David Hartman evidently forgot that a year earlier he had interviewed Skaggs, then using his real name, about his aquatic sculptures, "condominiums for fish." Last week, long after the "Fat Squad" was ex-

posed, Skaggs was still receiving credulous inquiries from reporters worldwide."

Newsweek went on to say that news is often treated with "gullibility and lack of follow-through," and pointed to the exaggerated accounts of death tolls at Chernobyl (the American press said 2,000 had died when only 31 had) and Libya's responsibility for a terrorist attack in Berlin (it turned out to be Syria). Skaggs, it said, had demonstrated the same important point in his prank.

So maybe all of Skaggs's skeptics and critics are wrong. He *is* on to something. Or is he really? A look at his career should be instructive. Skaggs is more than happy to talk about his background.

"I was born in Brooklyn on October 4, 1945, the son of an Italian mother and a Kentucky hillbilly. As a child, I always wanted to become an artist. I went to various art schools, including the High School of Art and Design on 57th Street and Second Avenue, and the Art Students' League, plus a third school which booted me out, and finally the School of Visual Arts, where I got a degree.

"I've always been, and always will be, an artist, first and foremost. I paint imaginary landscapes from large triptychs to miniatures. But early on I found that painting wasn't enough for me. I had other things I wanted to say that couldn't be done through a painting. As a struggling young artist in the sixties, I found a new media: performance pieces. In those days they were called 'happenings' and usually were staged in lofts. I saw hypocrisy and injustice all around me—and I decided to strike out at them."

And so, emerging from art school, he started right in on his secondary career. The time was the sixties. Protest was in the air and on the streets, when Skaggs, an unknown young artist in Greenwich Village, began his stories against "hypocrisy." His very first move shocked and enraged New Yorkers, and brought the police on his head. He created a life-size sculpture of Jesus Christ on a cross, but it was not one that pious Christians preferred to see. Skaggs's Christ was a tortured human, with exposed genitalia. He says the idea was to dramatize the hypocrisy of the Church. But when he is asked to explain how exposing Christ's genitalia accomplished that purpose, he merely looks at you as if you were a religious nut who needed to be pitied.

In any event, his attempt to plant the crucifix on the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral met with platoons of blue-coated policemen, which only made Skaggs happy. He then turned his attention to the Vietnam War. He constructed Statue of Liberties out of "dismembered baby bodies" and set them up all around Manhattan, where they were quickly pulled down by patriotic policemen.

So far Skaggs had been operating as an individual artist making individual statements, but his next protest was a

turning point in his life. For the first time he produced and staged an event, with actor friends, props, and scenery. Skaggs says, "I built a life-size Vietnamese village. It took months in construction. But on Christmas, accompanied by friends dressed as American soldiers, I hauled it up to Central Park. The village quickly drew a crowd of onlookers. They were a bit stunned when I led an attack on the Vietnamese village with my American 'soldiers,' destroying everything, just as was being done in the real war over there."

It was an inventive and creative protest that would seem to be ideally suited for television news, but went uncovered because of Skaggs's ignorance of media manipulation. In fact, at that time, Skaggs says, "I thought P.R. meant Puerto Rican."

Up until this point in his career his events had gone unreported, seen only by angry policemen and random passersby. And perhaps his future protests would have continued in that fashion, had he had not come up with an idea that put him on the front pages of newspapers across the nation and literally changed his life.

In the sixties, "hippies" were gawked at by tourists who came to Greenwich Village on Sunday afternoons, elbowing each other and snickering loudly when they saw them. Skaggs decided to obtain revenge. Once again he called on his friends, and this time they appeared not as soldiers, but as hippies. Skaggs chartered a Greyhound bus, filled it with

those hippies, and drove off on a sight-seeing mission to point out and snicker at the "squares" of suburban Queens. "I called it my 'Cultural-Exchange Program,'" Skaggs says. "But you should have seen the reaction in Queens. The citizens screamed, 'We're being invaded!' They thought it was fine and normal for them to come to the Village with cameras and point them at long-haired people while they laughed, but when I took hippies to Queens and we all snickered at the squares, they didn't like that. We went all through Queens, with its McDonald's fast-food shops and Bowl-o-Ramas, and we saw the people jogging with paunches, and we laughed at them."

"Well, the next day the Associated Press carried it around the country. The *Daily News* front page ran a huge picture of the bus and the headline 'Hippies Trip to Queens.' And I made my first network television show, when I was interviewed on NBC's 'Today Show.'"

From that point on, there was no turning back. Skaggs realized that his technique of staging hoaxes with actor friends was the only way to break through the seemingly impenetrable barrier between media producers and the common man with a grievance.

But he still had time to raise hell by himself, when he deemed it appropriate. One such moment took place on Wall Street in 1969. Nowadays, with the deluge of news about coke-snorting, insider-trading stockbrokers, Wall Street has

quite a different image than it did in the sixties, when the men of the street were considered stuffy and conservative. Skaggs helped to shock America out of this misconception with the following escapade:

Whenever Francine Gottfried, a humble but comely secretary at a Wall Street firm, would emerge from the subway every morning on her way to work, traffic would come to a stop. With her magnificent breasts and tight blouses, stockbrokers and clerks began to hang around the subway exit just to watch her arrive. Eventually hundreds of Wall Streeters assembled every morning, some standing on automobiles for the simple pleasure of glimpsing—and applauding—Ms. Gottfried on her way to work.

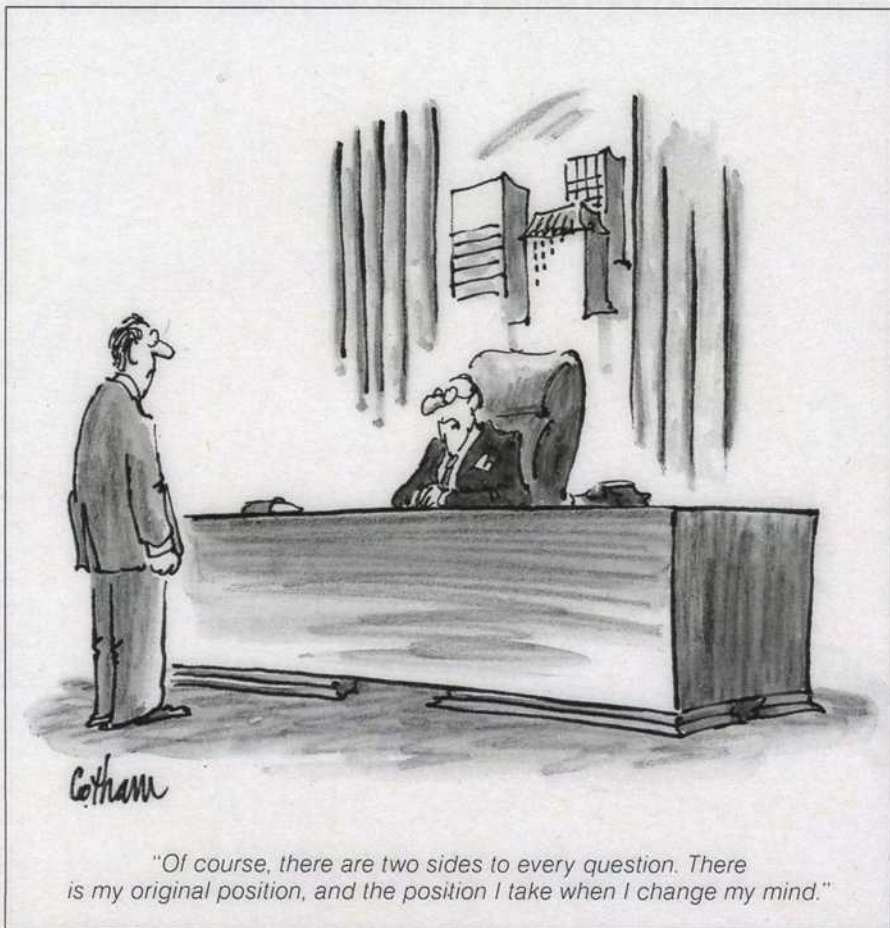
Television cameras filmed the huge crowds, and New Yorkers had a laugh. Skaggs says, "I thought it was funny, too, because it showed the real character of these so-called geniuses who handled hundreds of millions of dollars of our money. They were just horny little guys like you and I. So I decided to give them a real thrill and build the biggest bra in the world, a 50-foot black brassiere with a red heart on each cup for nipples. I first attempted to tie it around the Statue of Liberty, but when I failed at that, I stretched it across the U.S. Treasury Building on St. Valentine's Day. It made quite a sight. And what do you know? The Wall Street workers, now aware of the impression they had made ogling Ms. Gottfried, got incensed, and ripped the brassiere to shreds."

But such individual artistic statements became less and less frequent for Skaggs. By the seventies, his active imagination and his repertory company of unpaid actor friends were ready to propel him into a series of staged hoaxes that have become media classics.

Perhaps no media event symbolized the utilization of all of Skaggs's techniques better than the "Cathouse for Dogs." It began with this legitimate looking advertisement in *The Village Voice*:

CATHOUSE FOR DOGS—Featuring a savory selection of hot bitches. From pedigree (Fifi, the French poodle) to mutts (Lady the Tramp). Handler and vet on duty. Stud and photo service available. No weirdos, please. Dogs only. By appointment. Call [phone number].

Skaggs says he also sent out a press release for his new establishment that stated that if you were embarrassed to come home and find your pooch humping a pillow, or afraid to have guests over because your dog would mount their legs, the "Cathouse for Dogs" was your salvation. "Since there are clothing stores, restaurants, specialty shops, and even cemeteries for dogs," Skaggs said, "[your dog] has all the amenities of life except the one he longs for the most." Now for the first time, for just \$50, you could get



your pooch sexually gratified.

"We told clients we had a wonderful bevy of bitches, and that we used a drug to artificially induce a state of heat into them. Your dog could select any one of the provocative bitches, and she'd be ready for love. Meanwhile, the pet owner could relax, have a drink, and watch the action," Skaggs says, adding that the response was overwhelming. "People were calling from all over to have their pets sexually serviced."

The problem was that there was no "Cathouse for Dogs." It existed only in the ad and the press release. So, Skaggs says, "I decided to stage a 'Night in a Cathouse for Dogs' just for the media. I had to round up not only 30 actor friends, but 15 dogs. And the media was there when we started the show with a beautiful actress holding a saluki hound. The hound and the actress were both dressed in red sweaters and red bow ties. As she paraded in front of male dogs being restrained on leashes by their owners—who were also actors, posing as customers—I, as the emcee, would announce each actress and bitch with nonsense like this: 'This is Debbie and Kara. Kara is a two-year-old saluki hound, with a preference for dobermans. She is not quite a virgin.'"

Skaggs introduced all the bitches that way, then gave a learned lecture on dog-copulation techniques. He recalls, "The show was a big success—but to my amazement all hell broke loose afterward. It seems that the idea of a 'Cathouse for Dogs' enraged animal lovers, who called it abusive. The A.S.P.C.A., the New York City Bureau of Animal Affairs, the N.Y.P.D. vice squad, and all kinds of private organizations came after me, and one of them called me the whoremaster of New York."

WABC-TV heard about the brouhaha and telephoned Skaggs, telling him they wanted to produce a documentary on him and his cathouse in action. But there was no real cathouse, and Skaggs says he certainly wasn't going to try to round up 30 actors and 15 dogs all over again. So he offered them the videotape of the original performance.

To his glee, they used it. In addition, they interviewed Skaggs in Washington Square Park, and then interviewed angry A.S.P.C.A. officials and a famous veterinarian who deplored Skaggs's use of drugs to induce a state of heat in the bitches. (Skaggs, of course, had never used drugs on the animals.) And through it all, WABC-TV producers never realized that the cathouse was a hoax. Instead, they played the story straight on their documentary, making it a key segment in their show, as an example of cruelty to animals. "Not only that," Skaggs recalls, "but the documentary built around my hoax was nominated for an Emmy award as the best news broadcast of the year! And what was my reward? A subpoena from the attorney general for illegally



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maintaining a warehouse for animals. When I brought my actor friends to the attorney general's office and revealed the whole thing was a hoax, they didn't believe us. It was just impossible for them to imagine that the ABC-TV network had been dumb enough to fall for a hoax from a little guy like me." ABC had trouble believing it also, but finally, and reluctantly, withdrew the documentary as an Emmy-award nominee.

But ABC-TV was only one of the media institutions to fall victim to Skaggs. Even the sacrosanct *New York Times*, the newspaper of record, went down the chute when it received a tastefully written press release from a long-suffering ethnic group that had never protested before: the Gypsies. It was signed "Jo-Jo, the King of the New York Gypsies." Skaggs says, "I demanded that the gypsy moth be renamed. I staged a protest in front of the governor of New York's office shouting, 'Rename the gypsy moth!' I had a huge gypsy moth illustrated on my back and an absurd sign which said **RENAME THE GYPSY MOTH!** on one side, and on the other, **GYPSIES AGAINST STEREOTYPICAL PROPAGANDA (GASP)**. I said, 'Call it the Ayatollah Moth, call it the Idi Amin moth, call it the Hitler moth: We Gypsies have taken enough abuse.'"

The *New York Times*, according to Skaggs, swallowed the story whole, and the *New York Post* gleefully headlined its own story: "*Times Falls for the Old Switcheroo*." What possessed the *Times* to do so is a little difficult to understand because Skaggs's press release seemed so tongue-in-cheek: "Gypsies Against Stereotypical Propaganda (GASP) are calling for an immediate city-wide work stoppage, asking all New York-based gypsies to halt all palm readings, tarot-card readings, horoscopes, and ESP readings from July 1 through July 7, to protest yet another defaming slur against our character.

"Is it not enough that historically we have suffered ostracism and distrust among the peoples of the world? Have we not suffered at the Hands of the Media, which has labeled us charlatans, hustlers, and thieves? Will there ever be mention of our finer qualities?" This cry for help apparently found a receptive ear at the humane, liberal *Times*, to their subsequent regret.

Meanwhile, on a similar front, Skaggs was enraging another media institution, *Ms.* magazine. What enraged feminists was Skaggs's "Rock Star-Celebrity Sperm Auction." Skaggs conceived the idea when he saw Sperm Banks listed in the Yellow Pages, and went over to take a look at one.

Skaggs says, "I went to the sublobby of a skyscraper. There was a large waiting room with circular seats and cutouts, like those in a bus depot, so you don't have to see the other guy who was there to masturbate and donate his sperm. Through a glass wall I could see the tech-

nicians and scientific apparatus. On the other side of the reception office were the masturbation rooms. A matronly woman dressed all in white who appeared to be a nurse came over and introduced herself to me. I told her my story. I was writing a movie and wanted to have a scene in a sperm bank, but had never been to one.

"She was nice enough to give me a tour of the facility. I was shown the first masturbation room, an eight-by-ten cubicle with a black leather chair, a nightstand with a box of Kleenex tissues, a wastepaper basket, and, get this, pictures of beautiful girls taken from pornographic magazines. I didn't say a word to the nurse because I was trying not to laugh. She took me around to similar rooms, then I asked a question in my most sincere voice. 'Pardon me, but are you allowed to receive assistance?' She hesitated, and then she said, 'No. On rare occasions we have allowed the wife to

I was shown the first masturbation room, a cubicle with a black leather chair, a box of Kleenex, a wastepaper basket, and pictures of beautiful girls.

enter the room, but we only accept manual ejaculation."

"I was intrigued by the sociopolitical implications of a sperm bank. Surrogate mothers; test-tube babies; gene-splicing; cloning; new life forms; all the religious, legal, and even political issues that would come from technology which challenges and could even threaten morality. So I came up with an idea: Giuseppe Scaggoli's Celebrity Sperm Bank, with 50 actors playing the roles of various people, from teenage groupies to militant lesbians who supported the auction idea because they could become mothers without ever touching a man. And I staged an elaborate auction which eventually made national news. My group of actors was soon enlarged by hundreds of passersby, all excited to be a part of a rock-star sperm auction. And the teenage girls among them were ready to spend every penny their fathers owned, until I announced that all the sperm had been stolen. It almost created a riot."

Once again the media played it straight. Various rock 'n' roll industry publications carried the story as news, including the fact that the sperm had been stolen. But

then the famous Gloria Steinem spoke out on another front: feminism. "On NBC network television she awarded my sperm bank the Earl Butz award for bad taste," Skaggs recalls. "And *Ms.* magazine carried a story on it entitled 'A Star Is (Not) Born,' beginning with this straight news report: 'Celebrity Sperm, a sperm bank specializing in donations from rock superstars, has yet to reschedule its July 24 auction of its product.'"

In 1983 local TV news programs showed a phenomenon that amused New Yorkers. "Sidewalk Commandos" in black uniforms bearing the words **WALK RIGHT** were patrolling the crowded pavements of New York. The TV news shows played it straight, having received a press release headed by these words: "Walk Right: Pedestrians Demand Proper Behavior on New York City Sidewalks."

Of all Skaggs's inventions, this was no doubt the most popular with the public at large. Says Skaggs, "My vigilante group was an ad hoc committee of concerned citizens who were determined to improve sidewalk etiquette. There were 66 rules. No risqué clothing on fat people. No short persons with umbrellas unless they hold the umbrella a minimum height of five feet ten inches. All joggers must wear underwear. No wearing of sunglasses at night. We sent our commandos on the streets in New York collecting signatures from pedestrians, and all of them loved the idea."

The "Sidewalk Commandos" represented a social statement people liked so much they were sorry when it was revealed to be a hoax. And still another idea was so popular, Skaggs found himself momentarily contemplating becoming rich on it, and forgetting his destiny as a hoaxer. That was the "Bad Guys Talent Agency," the first Skaggs hoax that became a reality. Skaggs had a friend named Verne who, for all of his life, had dreamed of becoming an actor. But, poignant to note, he was ugly and mean-looking. In Skaggs's own words, "He looks like the kind of guy you'd fire from a cannon. Shaven head, fierce mustache, barrel chest. His nickname tells it all: Bulldog." An even more fatal drawback was that he had no acting experience whatsoever. Yet Skaggs was undaunted. He told Verne to go down to the post office and steal a "wanted" poster. Then he recreated one with Verne's photo, placed the name Bad Guys Talent Agency on it, and mailed copies out to all casting agencies.

Within three days, Skaggs had a call from a major casting agency. He accompanied the actor to the office of a bemused agent, who kept saying "fabulous" when he saw Verne. In the middle of the meeting, Skaggs, by prearrangement, socked Verne in the mouth. Verne then leaped across the desk into the agent's lap, growling like a mad dog. Skaggs says, "The agent leapt back six feet, landed on the carpet, clutched his

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JOEY SKAGGS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 148

heart as if he was having a heart attack, then sat up and said, 'Fabulous, fabulous. You're hired.' "

Verne, who had never taken an acting lesson, got a lead role in a feature movie, *The Last Dragon*, and has gone on to fame and fortune as Mr. Clean for Procter & Gamble, and through roles in other major movies. "The trouble was," Skaggs recalls, "that word spread. *People* magazine did a huge picture story on my 'agency,' not knowing there was no agency. And what happened? Hundreds of lunatics called me day and night, all wanting to be Bad Guys. I had creeps lined up around the block, real bad guys, wanting to be actors."

And casting agents kept calling. Skaggs found other people jobs. For a while he considered doing it full-time, but then rejected the idea. He still gets jobs for friends, if they're lucky enough to look mean, or at least ugly. Skaggs publicizes them as "Venomous Vixens, Burly Bouncers, and Slimy Sleazes."

Through all of his media events, including his television appearances, Skaggs had somehow avoided real fame (sometimes he wore disguises on TV, as in his appearance as Josef Gregor, the inventor of a cancer cure made of distilled cockroach. NBC's "Live at Five" carried a serious scientific interview with the "doctor"). But the "Fat Squad" caper changed everything, because it was such a phenomenal success. The idea of strongmen in your very own kitchen who grappled with you if you wanted a late-night snack obviously thrilled all women—and TV and print editors as well. The coverage was phenomenal, and in its wake, when the hoax was revealed, articles with pictures of Skaggs were published around the world. Which may cause a problem for him in his career as an anonymous social critic.

To complicate matters, Skaggs is even finding financial success, at long last, as an artist. All of his life he has eked out a living on money he made selling his paintings, which he calls "imaginary landscapes." Now his art has been shown at several galleries, and his sales are more frequent. He is also selling his invention "condominiums for fish," which are aquariums with apartments for "upwardly mobile guppies." And his income is further swelled by earnings as a lecturer on the media.

So will he go straight? Will he stop worrying Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, and other television luminaries who feel they might fall prey to his next hoax? Don't bet on it. In fact, his next media hoax is aimed at them—and this is fair warning. It involves a giant clam with an enormous penis. There's no way such a hoax can work, and yet. . . . Look out, Dan. O+ []