

H O N O L U L U

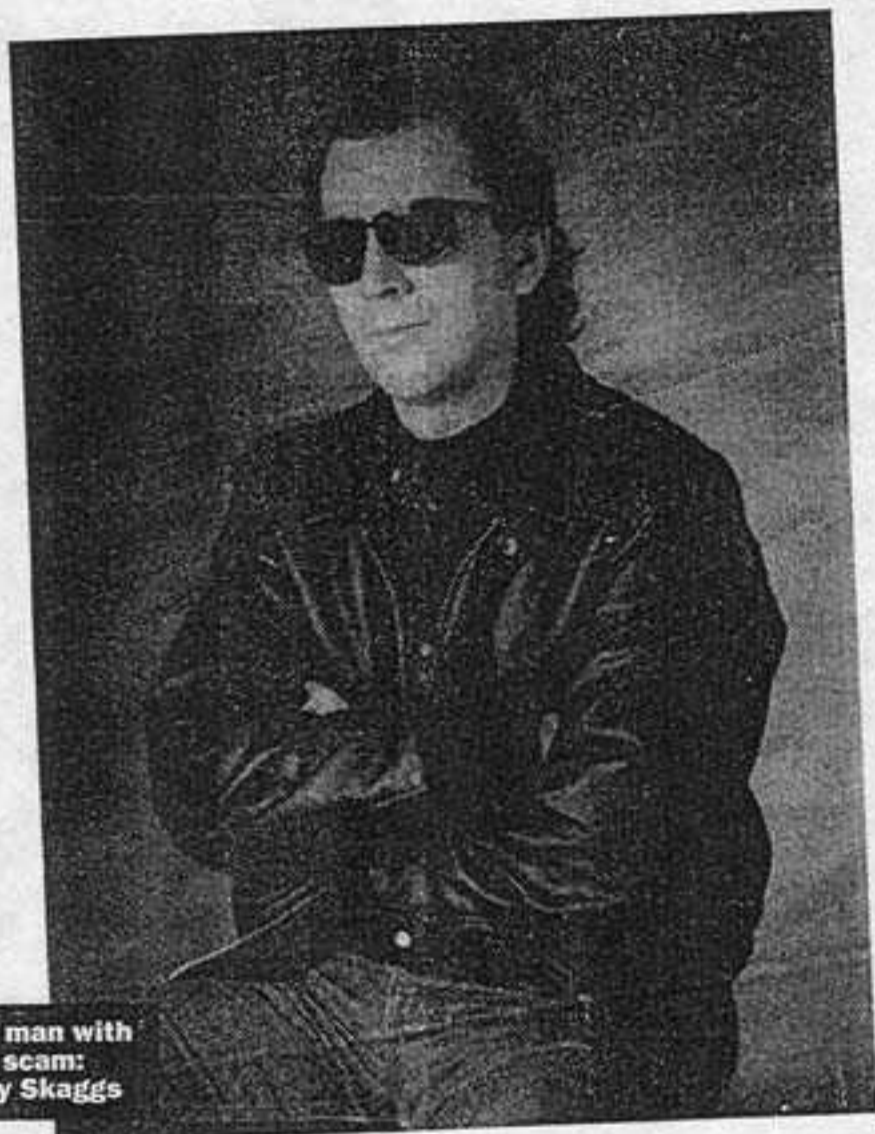
Weekly

Volume 4, Number 29, July 20, 1994

FREE

Prank Art

A reliable source, hoax artist Joey Skaggs has just confirmed — the news media suck!



The man with the scam: Joey Skaggs

Scoopin' 'n' Dupin'

JULIA STEELE

Five years ago, around 3 in the morning, I was sitting in a warehouse in Kakaako trying to edit an underground paper, and a friend was doing his best to keep me awake by reading aloud from a copy of *ReSearch* magazine that someone had left lying around. The cover of the magazine showed a great white shark — like *Jaws* on steroids — looming out of the water, a terrified bikini-clad woman in a life raft and, in the foreground, a serene, smiling clown. The issue was devoted to “Pranks!” and it chronicled the “devious deeds and mischievous mirth” of some of America’s great non-conformists, including Abbie Hoffman, Timothy Leary and Paul Krassner. But the one who really got us that night was Joey Skaggs.

Skaggs is a conceptual con artist (with the emphasis on “artist”) who, in the name of proving how irresponsible the press is, has spent decades coming up with bizarre and brilliant fabrications and convincing the media to report them as fact. Even at that wee hour of the morning, we couldn’t believe the stories he’d actually gotten the press to fall for. Consider this one: In 1976 he dreamed up The Cathouse for Dogs, a bordello where you could get Fifi the French Poodle or Lady the Tramp to sexually service your dog for \$50. He ran an ad in the *Village Voice*, got together a few friends and a few dogs and staged a night in the canine brothel for the press. ABC, among other mainstream news agencies, was totally taken in and did a straight-ahead

news piece on this wholly fictitious establishment; the report even got nominated for an Emmy. Then there was The Fat Squad, a group of thugs you could supposedly hire for \$300 a day to follow you around and make sure you didn’t cheat on your diet. David Hartman took the bait on that one and had Skaggs — posing as Joe Bones, the leader of the squad — on *Good Morning America* to discuss the outfit. Then, too, there was Giuseppe Scagolli’s Celebrity Sperm Bank, which purportedly auctioned off the seed of rock and movie stars. It fooled Gloria Steinem, who awarded it her annual bad-taste award — though the “bank” actually didn’t have a single spurt of liquid asset.

In Skaggs’ work the media are both the subject and the object, both the medium in which he creates and the reason for his art in the first place. They give him the rope, and he helps them to hang themselves. With the press as his enthusiastic and all-too-gullible audience, Skaggs has played a cast of barely credible yet widely covered characters: Dr. Josef Gregor, leading world entomologist from Bogota, whose Metamorphosis vitamin pills, extracted from cockroach hormones, help ward off everything from acne to radiation sickness; JoJo the Gypsy from Gypsies Against Stereotypical Propaganda (GASP), who called for the renaming of the gypsy moth and urged a daylong strike on fortune telling to emphasize the issue’s importance; a fearless windsurfer who set out, replete with a “Cal or Bust” sign on his board, from Kauai’s Hanalei Bay (Skaggs is a part-time Kauai resident) to windsurf to California.

Over the years Skaggs has gotten

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numerous such fabrications printed as fact, all clever and effective at illustrating the central point of Skaggs' work: that media are hypocritical and irresponsible and people should be very wary of believing the things they read in the paper, hear on the radio or see on TV.

"Anyone can be a practical joker or a hoaxer or a scammer or a con artist. I'm not any of those — I'm a sociopolitical media satirist," said Skaggs by phone from New York last week. "Hopefully there's an educational message here: that people should question authority in all its forms. I am the messenger and the message is that we're being lied to constantly. It's inherent in the nature of the medium. The news will always be a distortion of reality."

As important to Skaggs as getting the media to print his hoaxes is getting the media to reveal that they've been had and print retractions. His goal, he says, is to get the press to be more discerning about what it reports and the public to be more discerning about what it believes.

To drive the point home, he often fools those who are doing stories on his work. When *Entertainment Tonight* did an interview with Joey Skaggs, hoaxter extraordinaire, he sent a friend along to pose as him. The *E.T.* host blithely asked questions about the gullibility of the media, unwittingly proving Skaggs right again. When Geraldo had Skaggs on the show, an AP reporter in the audience described, to Geraldo's obvious delight, how Joey had put her on — only she wasn't an AP reporter at all but a friend of Skaggs, and it was Geraldo who'd been had.

And of course, *this* story may all be *shibai*. For all I know, the piece we read in *ReSearch* all those years ago was a total fabrication and the guy I talked to on the phone was Howard Stern. For all you know, Julia Steele is just another Joey Skaggs alias (note the initials) and we're fooling you right now. There is, as Skaggs points out, a great danger in believing a reality that has come to you entirely through the media. There's an old saying in journalism that every story you read in the paper is true except for the one you happen to know about firsthand.

To see Skaggs pure and unfiltered rather than through our hazy lens, head to the University of Hawaii this week, when Skaggs will be on campus to talk about his art and the media's seemingly infallible fallibility. He'll give a free talk titled "Cultural Jamming: The Fine Art of Media Hoaxing" on Wednesday night, and on Thursday afternoon he'll lead a "creative thinkshop."

Is there any hoax Skaggs has planned that he thought was just too unlikely for even the media to buy? "Are you kidding?" he asks incredulously. "I can't even compete with reality." ■

Joey Skaggs: "Cultural Jamming"

UH Art Auditorium
Wed 7/20, 7:30 p.m.
Free

Creative Thinkshop
Kuykendall 206
UH Manoa campus
Thur 7/21, 2 - 4 p.m.
\$20

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