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The Boy Who Cried 'Fool'

Joey Skaggs Is Organizing New York's April Fools' Day Parade ... And This Time He Really Means It

By **BUCK WOLF**
 March 29, 2005



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Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me 20 times, and your name might be Joey Skaggs.

You may know Joey Skaggs as the proprietor of the world's first bordello for dogs or the inventor of a balding remedy that involves transplanting hair from cadavers onto the heads of exceedingly desperate men.

Then again, you may remember Joey Skaggs as the first man to windsurf from Hawaii to California.

In reality, Skaggs is none of those things. That's just some of the ways he's been identified in news reports over the past 40 years -- highlights from his career as a media hoax artist, a life's work devoted to showing just how gullible the press can be.

Just after the O.J. Simpson murder trial, Skaggs convinced CNN that he was head of "The Solomon Project," a mission by a computer scientist at New York University to replace juries with computer software that would determine a criminal defendant's guilt or innocence. Guess what he told CNN? The software found O.J. guilty.

Another time, Skaggs convinced "Good Morning America" that he was leader of "The Fat Squad," a group of former U.S. Marines who would help you lose weight by physically restraining you from eating.

Now, it's time once again for Skaggs' longest-running gag -- New York City's annual April Fools' Day Parade. Every year, Skaggs sends out thousands of press releases promising a star-studded parade down Fifth Avenue. But the only fools who ever show up are reporters and camera crews. To Skaggs and his buddies, it's a joke that never gets old.

Last year, the parade impresario promised an April Fools' gala march of celebrity lookalikes, including Paris Hilton handing out free sex videos, Rush Limbaugh dispensing prescription pain killers and Michael Jackson riding the Giant Bed Float, where parents can hand off their kids to ride down Fifth Avenue.

Now, it's time for the 20th annual April Fools' Day Parade, and this time Skaggs is promising something completely different. This year, he says, there really will be a parade.

Yeah, sure, Joey! Would anyone in their right mind trust this guy? Anyone, I mean, besides me?

Indeed, let it be known, I am going to this year's April Fools' Day Parade. I spoke with Skaggs several times this week, and I am now a believer. Of course, I just may be his next sucker. We'll

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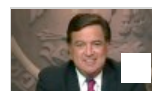
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"Buck, I know it's hard to believe me," Skaggs said. "Any journalist worth his or her salt wouldn't trust me. But mark my words -- on my honor as a prankster -- this time, it's going to happen. New York will have what it always deserved -- an April Fools' Day Parade."

It all seems so crazy. After 20 years of organizing New York's most infamous annual nonevent, why would Skaggs actually follow through this year with a real parade? I spent about a half-hour on the phone cross-examining him.

"Don't make me go out on a limb, Joey, and then make me look like an idiot," I said.

"Buck, this is really happening this year. I'm making calls. I've got commitments," he said. And then, like a school kid trying to get out of a homework assignment, he added, "I'm going to make every effort to be there."

With Skaggs, there's really no way to be sure of anything -- even when you're paying the guy a compliment.

When "Entertainment Tonight" interviewed Skaggs in 1988 for a segment about media hoaxers, Skaggs hoaxed them by sending an impostor for an on-air sit-down with host Mary Hart.

"How could I resist?" Skaggs later told The Associated Press. "I mean, who did they think they were dealing with?"

Over the years, I've written several stories about Skaggs and we've become friendly. Two years ago, he lent me one of his bizarre fish tanks -- a \$5,000 "Fish Condominium," which he was selling through the Neiman Marcus catalog -- for an event to celebrate the publication of the "Wolf Files" book.

Like everything else about Skaggs, the fish tank has to be seen to be believed. It's larger than many New York City apartments -- and the fancy decor would impress Paris Hilton, not that that's necessarily a compliment.

Would Skaggs lie to me? Perhaps. The press release for this year's April Fools' Day Parade is just as outlandish as those in the past, promising, among other things, another army of celebrity lookalikes, including Donald Trump handing out pink slips while wearing one, and a Mud Wrestling float featuring Michael Moore, who will take on all challengers.

"It's time to make this thing a reality," Skaggs said. "We're pulling something together that you definitely don't want to miss. Be there."

Skaggs was so emphatic, I just had to believe him. For 40 years, he's been showing just how gullible news reporters can be. I may just prove him right once again, but now, our friendship is



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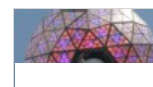
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A few months ago, Joey and I got together. I returned the fish tank to him and I did something a journalist rarely does -- I picked up the dinner check. Maybe it was only a plate of spaghetti, but take this as a warning, Joey: If I'm buying your lies, I'm certainly not buying you dinner. And yes, that's a threat.

So while I can still enjoy it, here's a look back at some of Joey Skaggs' greatest hoaxes.

1. The Miracle Roach Hormone Cure

Remember Kafka's "Metamorphosis"? Skaggs emerged in 1981 as Dr. Josef Gregor, an entomologist who extolled the virtue of consuming cockroach hormones as a cure for colds, acne, anemia and menstrual cramps. WNBC-TV's "Live at Five" featured an interview with the doctor, who claimed to have graduated from the University of Bogota in Colombia. Skaggs says no one checked his credentials. The newscasters only seemed to become suspicious when Skaggs played his organization's theme song -- "La Cucaracha."

2. Celebrity Sperm Auction

Attention ladies: Interested in "certified and authenticated rock star sperm"? Posing as Giuseppe Scagolli in 1976, Skaggs appealed to women who wanted children with sperm provided by the likes of Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Jimi Hendrix. When "Scagolli" claimed his sperm bank had been robbed, several wire services and Ms. magazine picked up the story.

3. The Dog Bordello

Finally, a place for frustrated pooches -- a cathouse for dogs! Skaggs planted an ad in New York's Village Voice newspaper in 1976 that promised "a savory selection of hot bitches" for your sexually deprived mutt, with the warning: "dogs only." Skaggs posed as a dog pimp, promising every Rover satisfaction for only \$50. The media lapped it up, and the story hit all the wire services and local cable shows. Even ABC's New York affiliate covered the event.

4. Gypsy Moth Anti-Defamation League

In a 1982 article in The New York Time, Jo-Jo the Gypsy protested the political incorrectness of the term "gypsy moth" at a time when the little critters were devastating trees in the Northeast. Jo-Jo, another Skaggs incarnation, railed against the injustice of associating the pesky moths with Gypsies, a downtrodden minority that has long suffered from discrimination. Jo-Jo suggested the varmints should be called "Hitler Moths." The New York Post gleefully reported the esteemed newspaper's mistake in an article headlined "Times Falls for the Old Switcheroo."

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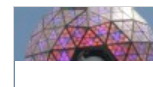
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5. Hair Replacement From the Dead

Hair Today Ltd. gleaned a substantial amount of air time and ink in 1990 as a firm specializing in a cure of baldness through hair transplants from the dead, much the way doctors would transplant a kidney. Skaggs said the ideal recipients would be salesmen or TV news anchors who needed to "look their best" and could afford the \$3,500 price tag. The Boston Globe was among the news organizations fooled on this one.

6. The Fat Squad

Skaggs assumed the role of Joe Bones, a former Marine Corps drill sergeant determined to wipe out obesity. He told ABC's "Good Morning America" in 1986 that for "\$300 a day plus expenses" his commandos would disarm any dieter who tried to sneak a cookie before bedtime. Host David Hartman later told the press: "We were had, in spades." The Philadelphia Inquirer was also duped.

7. The Final Curtain

Talk about the art of dying: What if cemeteries could be turned into theme parks for conceptual artists who want to go out in style, like Kim Markegard, who wanted her headstone to be a jukebox, so that not-so-well-wishers could dance on her grave. Markegard, of course, was a product of Skaggs' imagination. In 2000, he whipped up "The Final Curtain," an alternative cemetery. Among the customers who supposedly purchased plots were writer Julia Solis, who wanted her body fat rendered into fuel for an eternal flame.

Skaggs conned some 39 newspapers, six TV stations and 10 magazines into believing in The Final Curtain, including the Los Angeles Times and The Associated Press. Two European TV crews inquired about shooting a documentary, and a student at the University of Chicago asked to use The Final Curtain as the basis of her graduate thesis.

Buck Wolf is entertainment producer at ABCNEWS.com. "The Wolf Files" is published Tuesdays.

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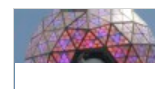
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