

## Interview

# Hoax us, poke us

Media satirist Joey Skaggs sets up scams in order to send a message to the masses **By Billie Cohen**

**D**on't bring confetti. Don't pack a camera. And by all means, don't hang out on the corner of 59th Street and Fifth Avenue on Sunday 1, waiting for the 16th Annual April Fools' Day Parade. Unless, of course, you want to be one of the fools.

The "parade" is actually a hoax perpetrated annually by media-satirist-artist Joey Skaggs, whose authentic-looking press releases and official-sounding "New York April Fools' Committee" answering-machine message convince a few news outlets every year to attempt to cover this nonevent.

Equal parts performance artist and prankster, Skaggs has been staging hoaxes since 1966, and in 35 years, he's never put out a hook that didn't get a bite. He calls himself a media activist, and his art consists of using the tools of the press to expose its own gullibility. In the process, he hopes to stimulate social awareness, question authority and encourage people to develop their own ideas about things like racism, prejudice and social hypocrisy. His pranks have included a 1982 campaign, staged by an angry Gypsy group, to rename the politically incorrect gypsy moth (*The New York Times* fell for this one, but retracted the story five days later); and an event during the Brooklyn Museum of Art's "SENSATION" scandal in which New Yorkers were invited to throw fake dung at a painting of Mayor Giuliani for a buck.

Although Skaggs enjoys watching the mayhem he sets in motion, he's not in it for the laughs. "There are very serious issues underneath the humor," he says from his West Village office. "[The point is] to make people—whether they think about it, laugh about it or get angry about it—realize. Wait a minute, there's something going on here."

To help people figure it out, Skaggs outlines on his website the three phases of each scam: the hook (the information he sends out to the media), line (documentation of what he calls "the phenomenon of miscommunication: where it goes, and who does what with it")

and sinker (what happens when he reveals the truth, which he does every time). "I always do a press release or make an announcement, because it's important for people to realize what the intent is," he says.

But is it art? "Well, a hoax is art because I make it art," he says. "It's not a burning bag of shit on the porch, and you ring the doorbell and somebody stomps it to put it out,



**MERRY PRANKSTER** Skaggs's media gags aren't just for laughs.

and then you laugh. It's far more complicated than that." Skaggs compares his capers to theatrical pieces because they require similar production, direction and staging. He prints up flyers, buys newspaper or radio ads, and in some cases hires actors to add another level of reality, as he did when he enlisted someone to impersonate him on *Entertainment Tonight* and when he employed thespians to work his Celebrity Sperm Auction event.

A New York native with a background in painting and sculpting, Skaggs graduated from the School of Visual Arts and taught at Parsons. Unsatisfied with letting galleries determine when and where he could show his work, and wanting to focus on social issues, Skaggs started doing things his own way. His first effort was a protest against the Vietnam War, for which he built a life-size Vietnamese village and hired actors to dress up as soldiers. "Numerous people were arrested,

and *The New York Times* covered the piece, but [the article reported] 'the hippies were arrested for littering.' It didn't quite convey my intent," he recalls with disappointment. That was when Skaggs realized the power the media wields in public opinion. "People use the media to get attention for themselves or for a product or a service," he explains. "As an artist, you send out an announcement: Please come to my show and give me a review. That's not proactive—it's waiting for the media to come to you and letting them decide if what you're doing makes the cut. So I decided that I would make the media the work of art."

One of Skaggs's most infamous stunts was the Cathouse for Dogs affair. In 1976, he placed an ad in *The Village Voice* offering sexual gratification for dogs for \$50 a pop. After sending out press releases, Skaggs set up a phone line and hired actors to bring the cathouse to life in a Soho loft. People were outraged. WABC TV even ran a story on the animal atrocity as if it were real. Skaggs wound up with a subpoena, and when it came time to answer it, he revealed that the whole thing was a hoax.

As scams go, however, the April Fools' Day Parade is a little more playful. According to the press release, the parade—led by the Marching Los Alamos Forest Rangers, who will be backburning trash in an attempt to stave off accidental flash fires—is a way to put people back in touch with their inherent foolishness. The public is invited to march with celebrity look-alikes, including Al Gore, who'll be collecting missing ballots, and Dubya, who'll be handing out tax rebates, but participants are advised to exercise caution, since many of the floats use pyrotechnics (and ride on tires donated from Ford Explorer SUVs). Last year, CNN and Fox affiliate WNYW both showed up to cover the parade, but, of course, found nothing. But what about the people who get manipulated along with the press? "A tear just ran down my leg," jokes Skaggs. "I think it's great that they're there—the more the merrier! This should be the most attended parade in all of history, and I hope that someday it does become a legally sanctioned parade, and we can actually do it." Is this guy serious?

**The 16th Annual April Fools' Day Parade is not on Sunday 1. For more information, visit [www.joeyskaggs.com](http://www.joeyskaggs.com).**

*Broadway (212-631-8706). Subway: N, R, S, 1, 2, 3, 9, 7 to 42nd St–Times Sq. Through Apr 29. Fri, Sat noon–6pm; Sun 10am–2pm. [16+] This performance-art series, brought to you by the Faux-Real Theatre, takes place in the window of 135 West 42nd Street and dovetails with the Oasis experimental-theater festival (see Thu 29). The series presents works by 85 local performance artists, whose works all include the word *box* in the title. On Saturday, Vereni the Great (Escapist)—an alter ego of artist Chris Verene—demonstrates that he can pass through solid wood, chains and handcuffs. Topping the list of his other special talents, which often involve audience participation, is his incredible ability to hold out piping-hot pastries just out of the toaster oven. Seeing is believing.*

### Utopian Artists Festival

*Context Studios, 1 North 12th St at Kent Ave, second floor, Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-384-5677 or [www.contextstudios.com](http://www.contextstudios.com)). Subway: G to Nassau Ave, L to Bedford Ave. Through Sun 1. Fri 7–11pm; Sat, Sun noon–11pm. [16+] Context Studios celebrates its reopening by inviting 100 artists, musicians, poets, filmmakers and dancers to participate in a three-day arts festival and open-house party. Among the revelers are Claude Wampler, Ravi Coltrane, Robbie McCauley and Imani Coppola.*

### Chippendales Dancers

*Exit, 605 W 55th St between Eleventh and Twelfth Aves (212-582-0700). Subway: A, C, B, D, 1, 9 to 59th St–Columbus Circle. Fri, Sat 8pm, doors open at 6:30pm; \$35–\$50. The new Chippendales—hand-picked for your viewing pleasure from more than 700 candidates—are back! These bare-chested, bow-tie-boasting boys hope to whip their audience into a titillated frenzy as they bump and grind their way through 11 original high-impact dance sequences. Happily, they're just in time for the slew of bachelorette parties that'll be hitting the streets for all those June weddings.*

### Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus

*Madison Square Garden, Seventh Ave at 32nd St (212-307-7171). Subway: A, C, E, 1, 2, 3, 9 to 34th St–Penn Station. Through Apr 15. Fri 7:30pm; Sat, Sun 11am, 3, 7:30pm; Mon 7:30pm; Tue, Thu 10:30am. \$10, \$17, \$23, VIP \$45. The Greatest Show on Earth returns to the New York area for its 131st year with an all-new attraction: Bo and Bello. Bo, the world's smartest elephant, performs with aerial daredevil clown Bello, who boasts the world's highest crewcut. Wait a minute—doesn't Don King hold that title? Of course, the circus also features the traditional blend of high-flying acrobatic wizardry, clown hilarity and amazing animals.*

### People's Poetry Gathering

See Books.

### Walking Tours

#### Harlem Jazz Bar Hop

*Harlem Heritage Tours (212-280-7888). Meet in front of the Starbucks at the southwest corner of 125th St and Malcolm X Blvd (Lenox Ave). Subway: 2, 3 to 125th St. Fri, Sat 7:30pm; \$40 plus one-drink minimum at each bar. Stumble through the doors of three diverse Harlem bars, before you end the night with a jazz show.*

#### Greenwich Village Club Crawl

*(See Thu 29.) Tonight, visit jazz, blues and stand-up-comedy clubs.*

## Saturday 31

### Urban Affairs

#### April Fools' Bonanza

*Local, 351 Kent Ave at South 5th St, Williamsburg, Brooklyn (917-532-5771). Subway: J, M to Myrtle Ave. 3pm, \$5. It's no joke: The community organization called These Are the People in Your Neighborhood truly wants everyone to get along and express themselves. That's why this anything-goes festival plans to feature magnetic massages, live bands, open turntables, a clothing-porn video-merchandise swap, magicians, hula lessons and plenty of other activities. The most exciting segment, however, is "Five Minutes of Shame," an open stage where anyone among us can share secret talents. Those*