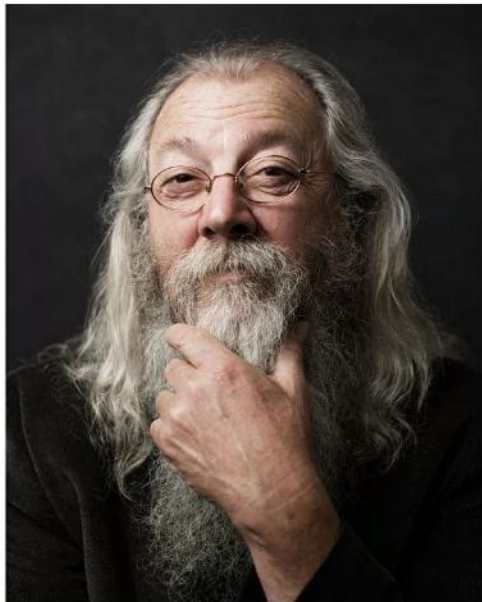


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Watch Out, New York City: Hoax Master Joey Skaggs Is in Town

By [Vida Weisblum](#) • 06/08/16 1:18pm



Joey Skaggs. Photo: Sam Ortiz for Observer Media

You may not have heard of Joey Skaggs, but you've probably seen him disguised as one of his various aliases like [Doctor Schlafer](#) or Father Anthony Joseph. Skaggs, 71, is a satirist and performance artist notorious for pulling off innumerable media hoaxes of impressive proportions. Skaggs' pranks began as a form of protest in the 1960s in response to the war in Vietnam and continue to use culture jamming tactics to deconstruct social and political issues.

New Yorkers best beware because Skaggs is back in town, although he claims not to have any tricks up his sleeve—at least for the time being. Tomorrow, [Art of the Prank](#), a new documentary about Skaggs' extensive and ever-thriving career, will open the Lower East Side Film Festival. The Festival, which got its start in 2011, marks an appropriate setting for the film, as the Brooklyn-native performed many of his first pranks on the Lower East Side.

Art of the Prank, directed by budding Italian filmmaker Andrea Marini, details the artist's life story from his early years working in New York City, his time spent living in Hawaii, to a present day Skaggs, who now resides in Kentucky.

The film also features a humorous sampling of Skaggs' most famous pranks. In September of 1968 Skaggs gathered an entire [tour bus full of hippies](#) eager to snap photos of suburban life in response to tour buses surveilling the Lower East Side's hippies. In a 1992 performance piece called "Portofess," he disguised himself as a priest and, outside of the Democratic National Convention in New York City, opened a "portable" confession booth, which he rode around on the back of his tricycle. His persona, Father Anthony Joseph, was quoted saying: "If people can confess on Oprah, Phil and Geraldo, I don't see why they can't confess right here on Eighth Avenue." Journalists swarmed. In "Cathouse For Dogs," Skaggs put out an ad for a brothel for canines; he called on actor friends to help him stage a fake "cathouse." The story garnered mass media attention and even caused him a subpoena.

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To this day, a Skaggs prank has never failed. He has managed to fool major broadcast and print media outlets including the AP, ABC, CNN and likely the *Observer*. In doing so, he continues to shed light on flaws and holes in the media, journalists' sometimes lackadaisical approach to telling true stories; he also manages to accrue a new generation of multitalented artists, skeptics, activists, actors and pranksters to follow in his footsteps.

The *Observer* sat down with Skaggs to discover more about the film's conception and the history that inspired it.

How did the documentary come about?

Joey Skaggs: The short story is I was lecturing in Milan and Rome.

Right, I heard the director—

—is Italian. It's kind of interesting that an Italian director would do this film, with English as a second language. And I was so impressed when I met him, that he grasped what it was that I was about, and was a young person who had never done a feature, and he reminded me of myself when I was a young artist. No one took me seriously, and it's really hard to be young and be taken seriously, so I wanted to give him a chance. In 1966 when I did the crucifix in Tompkins Square, I was presented with a contract option for my life story. I said, "What life story? I'm a young guy!" But this has been happening to me my entire career, and usually when you get a contract, you have to get an attorney to go over the contract with you, and it ends up costing you money because...they want to own everything about you...you give away your life and I didn't want to do that, so with [the director] Andrea and the production company it was more of a family relationship...He was brought over by the executive producer who I met in Rome after I gave a presentation. We went out for dinner [after the presentation], which is the most intimate time after you do something because it's one on one, and he says, "I wanna do a documentary," and that's how it began.

So you were lecturing in Rome?

I was invited to speak at a University—communication students, journalism students, art students—which is what I do. I do these things around the world.



Joey Skaggs, as Dr. Josef Gregor, fooled the media into believing cockroach extractions could cure the common cold and shield nuclear radiation. Photo: Courtesy Relight Films LLC

Can you speak a little bit more about what you're doing now in terms of traveling and lecturing?

Well, we're about to go on [the Southern Circuit Tour of Independent Filmmakers] which will entail screenings in North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia —which will be a great opportunity for

the filmmaker and for myself because people will see the film, and then we'll do [a] presentation afterwards. Before the film, I had archival videotapes and I could show my work, and discuss what I do, why I do it, what it means, what I hope happens as a result of it. The film now has made it more complete. It's easier to make a presentation. It's playing at the Lower East Side Film Festival and that will be the first official screening in New York. We had a screening for cast and crew and friends, and that's all we've done so far. So this is it. It's for people who don't know anything about the Lower East Side 50, 60 years ago, and for people who will be there and remember it and maybe even have partaken in some of my performances.

You've been pranking since the 1960s. How has the relatively new digital age of media has affected your work? Does it become more difficult to pull off pranks since there's much more accessible information? Or easier because you, too, can use the internet as a tool?

Really what you're talking about is social media and the internet. I did the first internet hoax. A sexual virtual reality hoax. It's not in the film, but many things that

I've done are not in the film because [the director] Andrea just had too many pieces to choose from. But I've used the internet to be a voyeur, to see what's going on, I've put something out there to see if it's getting hits. I've picked up Google alerts—that kind of thing. I use it because I can communicate with people around the world with different time zones, in different countries, and coordinate a bigger performance...so I use the internet like most people use the internet, and really it gets down to telling a good story.

“I’m a satirist. I’m not just doing a prank, I’m making a satirical commentary, shedding light on things. And there’s no death for satire.”

But you’ve never run into problems with people fishing out the truth online?

I have had for the last 31 years a [fabricated] annual April Fool’s day parade and it “marches” from 59th Street and Fifth Avenue down to Washington Square Park, where we choose who we think should be the king of fools for the year. And it’s a celebrity look-a-like parade as well because we boast the world’s largest collection of celebrity look-a-likes, and we have floats, and it’s thematic, and we have bands and we have parties—all kinds of crazy shit. And each year I put together an elaborate press release [for the parade], and it’s been 31 years, okay, and you figure, “well, I’ve fooled ABC, CBS, AP...”—you name it they’ve all been burned by it. They’ve shown up at the parade, and people still show up at the parade, and it’s kind of long in the tooth. You know, how can people still fall for that? Nowadays you can google and see what’s going on. So I got an email from a producer for [a] Chinese television [program called Sinovision]. And they wanted to come and do a behind-the-scenes story on the annual April Fool’s Day parade before the parade launched so that they could show this in advance of the parade...and I said “Certainly.” So I get on the phone and I call numerous people...and we met here [in New York], probably 14 of us, I had T-shirts printed up for the annual April Fool’s Day parade, I had scripts for everyone...And here’s the kicker: They wanted historical, archival footage of previous parades. So we put together, using my clips, an edited piece that Judy [Drosd, producer of Art of the Prank] put together...but [the footage] was [from events in] July. [On] April 1st in New York there are no leaves on trees ... so we put together a piece that, if you were really looking, you would’ve noticed they’re wearing shorts, that this is not April 1...[the television program] did a four-minute feature which would blow your mind. Millions of viewers.

I’m wondering how you’ve managed to fool the same sources repeatedly.

Because you’re not a person, you are just a subject. And they have a very busy schedule, and they don’t care to know you. They want the story, what are they saying, what are the answers, done. Get it out. Next. And they don’t want to remember, and they don’t want to question the story. The story is good, they don’t want to question it.

Have you ever fooled the Observer?

I’m sure I have. And, I think you profiled me.

“I tell the truth. My stuff is really about that ‘aha’ moment, not the ‘haha I got you’ moment.”

You’ve spoken on how media outlets sometimes copy other media outlets. How does this affect your work?

Well the simple thing is if you make AP, it’s picked up everywhere. Because other sources think, “Well they’ve done their due diligence,” and they’ll just take it and [figure] the blame won’t fall on us if they’re incorrect.” So that’s how misinformation circulates ... I tell the truth. My stuff is really about that “aha” moment, not the “haha I got you” moment.

Do you think the media can change systemically?

Probably not because the media is really just people. And people bring to the table their own biases, their own prejudices, their own concepts of reality, so it's never going to change...The whole half-hour format of the world news, national news, regional news, sports, weather and the fluff, that was conceived of by an individual and put into practice and that's the format that we use around the world. How do you deliver all this information in a half an hour and then take it out to commercial time? 22 minutes, or whatever it is...it's inherently going to be full of mistakes, so how do you change that?...If you only look to one source for information, then you're only gonna get that information. Basically, my work is about this: What do you believe in?; How'd you come to your beliefs?; Do you ever question the source of your beliefs?; If not, why not?... I'm a satirist. I'm not just doing a prank, I'm making a satirical commentary, shedding light on things. And there's no death for satire. No matter what happens to the technology and delivering the information, there will always be artists and there will always be satire.



Art of The Prank debuts tomorrow at the Lower East Side Film Festival. Photo: Sam Ortiz for Observer

Has your approach to the hoax evolved at all?

Sure, I've learned a lot about accessing techniques. If you look at the film, you'll see that I had a 30-second TV commercial [posing] as a psychic attorney. Well, I actually produced the television commercial, bought up TV time, [no one ever] questioned the content of those 30-seconds. So then you see that [in "Portofess"] I just appeared with a confessional booth, so I didn't have to put out an announcement, I just showed up, where there were thousands of journalists waiting for a story. Then you see "Cathouse for Dogs" was an advertisement in the paper. Then you see... brochure, questionnaire, survey, which is another technique...so I've learned how to make it challenging for myself as a creative person. I have to make it interesting for myself so I think of different ways of doing it. You look at me now and go, "How could you ever get away with this?" But the fact is I am currently getting away with it...it doesn't matter that they've seen me before.

How did you keep getting out of trouble every time? Wasn't that exhausting for you?

That's a good question because I try to avoid being caught up in the legal loop...They will take your money, they will make you go to court, have appearances and drain you, because really what they're trying to do is deter dissent as much as they can. They do not want people like us making waves, rocking the boat, questioning the status quo. I try to toe the line legally but even if you are legal, they can [arrest you] for whatever.



Joey Skaggs as a priest pedals his Portofess. Photo Courtesy of Relight Films LLC

It seems your real name is present in a lot of your pranks...

I use silly versions of my name as well...I'm weird names, I'm giveaway names. I'm saying "Catch me."

Why do you think the media chooses not to retract their stories when they've been had?

Because I've made people, in hoaxing the media, question the credibility of the media, and so what do you have besides credibility? When your credibility as a journalist is questioned, you're defunct and you're just infotainment. So they don't like bringing attention to the fact that they were irresponsible.

They bring me pleasure and are successful on different levels at different times. The first pleasure is coming up with a concept. The first question is, "How do I address this issue?" So you do 10 sketches of it, then you develop three, and then you pick the final one and you work it out. It's like doing a film or a theater piece. You have to budget it time wise. Is it going to be one time only? Is it gonna be repeated? Do I need props? Do I need a location? What are the production elements of it? And you get pleasure from thinking about it and doing it. Then you get pleasure when you fool someone. Then you get pleasure when you fool a second or a third or a fourth. Then you get pleasure when you reveal the truth and you see what happens with that. So the whole process is an ongoing series of successes or failures.

How do you get funding for all these projects?

I pay for it. No one's charging me to act and perform. I tell people, "If you only had black and white as a painter, you'd make do with black and white and a lot of grays." You make do with what you have to work with, and if you want to be an artist you make do with what you have to work with, no matter what that is. And the more creative you are, the more creative you'll be with making do with what you have. It's overcoming adversities. So I try to do things that aren't going to cost a lot of money and that I can pull off. If I had money, I'd be truly dangerous.

You might rule the world in some capacity.

Right.

Given the election, what would be your ideal prank?

I can't tell you what it is, but I have something in the works.

What's your agenda now?

[Sarcastically] I'm retiring, I'll never do this again.

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