

2001 Interview with Joey Skaggs

by Tom Tenney on April 4, 2010

Digging around in my virtual shoeboxes to find material for a paper I'm writing on Culture Jamming, I found this interview I did with media prankster [Joey Skaggs](#) in 2001 for a tiny little short-lived zine called *VIM*, published by the artist [Faith Pilger](#). Skaggs had just presented *PRANKS: THE ART OF JOEY SKAGGS* at the UCB Theatre as a part of the 9th Annual Toyota Comedy Festival. I was interested in talking with him about the relationship of his work to comedy. Full text is below:

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Joey Skaggs

Joey Skaggs, is a storyteller, performer and artist who uses mass media as his canvas to reach audiences around the world. He has duped the world's most respected news outlets with his fictional news stories for over 35 years, and shows no signs of stopping. I spoke with Joey at a cafe downstairs from his

Soho apartment, a few days after his performance in the 9th Annual Toyota Comedy Festival.

TT: You began your presentation by saying “I’m not a comedian”, but in a sense, you are. You’re a satirist.

JS: (laughs) Well, but I don’t do ‘stand-up’

TT: Well, sure... but I thought it was an interesting idea to include you in the festival. It’s like the producers are finally starting to realize that comedy means more than standup.

JS: I thought it was a brave and radical departure.... and I’m glad there was a turnout. I was really impressed with the range of artists that were there [in the audience] because I think it shows the audience are all kinds of possibilities. And there were all kinds of possibilities there... that were presented. It was totally cool.

TT: For people who don’t know your work...what do you do? How do you sum it up?

JS: It depends on what I think about the person who’s asking me (laughs). What I do is what I’ve always done and that is... I’m an artist, and I felt restricted by the way that the art scene, or the art world, is run, and I didn’t want to be limited to the censoring... and the acceptance, the timing... you know you have a show, or maybe a group show or maybe it’s going to be a theme show where you have to produce a work of art that goes along with that. It’s all bullshit, so I didn’t want to be limited to that. And there were so many social issues when I was growing up that I thought were really important and I felt that as a creative person, I could express what I thought about those issues creatively. I didn’t want to just throw rocks through windows or do destructive things like that, because I didn’t think that was effective. So, as an artist, I used the media as a medium, and I use deception, a lie, as a means of communicating. And if you think about what art is... art is a lie. Art is an illusion, art is a creation that is meant to deceive.

TT: You were trained as a visual artist?

JS: Yeah, I went to the high school of art and design.

TT: So, when you did your first hoax, or prank.... was it the crucifixion?

JS: Yeah. That was the first one that I intentionally went out into the street to make a statement.

TT: So, was that a conscious choice? I mean, did you say to yourself “As an artist, this is the way I want my career to go?”

JS: Well, you know, I made the choice that I was not going to be limited by what I perceived to be the hypocrisy of the art world, and I was going to make my own mark my own way, and whether I succeeded or not, I was going to communicate, and that’s what art is to me. So I decided that I would go public in a way that was not... you know, having a happening that’s going to be a dollar or a contribution to get into this...church...to see a happening. It’s not going to be someone playing a violin in the street wearing a tuxedo... I wanted to be political, and I wanted to make statements that I thought were relevant.

TT: It seems that whether you are an artist or a comedian or an actor... so often you’re just ‘preaching to the converted’. But with what you do... you’re really fucking shit up!

JS: Exactly right. And the use of people who are not EXPECTING art...to involve a stranger in a scenario and to provoke response, reaction, contemplation... is what I do...

TT: Reverend Jen, at one point, made reference to your “friends in Slovenia”....

JS: Yeah, we're going on Monday!

TT: How is your work received/perceived outside of the United States?

JS: Well, that's a good question. I have a number of ways of gauging response, and I owe it all to the internet. I have a website that has a stats program, and I can access the stats and see, literally, where in the world people are looking at me. From Slovenia, I'm getting a lot of hits right now... Brazil because it's connected to the Slovenian incident...all English speaking countries. Literally, around the world. China, Russia... places I never even heard of. Also, the internet allows me to have an eavesdropping, voyeuristic capacity. I can go to newsgroups, chat groups, and I can do an ego-search and I can see 'oh, they're talking about something that I've done' and in what context they're referring to it. It gives me some indication that at least I've provoked discussion. Like the dog-meat soup thing... it was very provocative. But, as far as other countries being appreciative, I think that there is probably a greater appreciation in European countries, in Spanish speaking countries for political activists, for satire for sure... the French love satire... situationists and other groups around the world. They have a longer history. I think that what I do specifically... when I humiliate the pomposity of American news media, the foreigners really like that because we have infiltrated the news concept and the news marketing. What I mean by that is the whole half-hour format... you know the international, the national, the regional, the local, the sports, the weather, the fluff-story. That whole format was conceived and sold in America and has been exported. Also the whole adoption of commercial infiltration into the news. When I make fun of it, I think they like it. I think there's a sense of everyone outside of America looking to us to be the raw juice of producing creative ideas, and people take bold chances and we can do that here which is one of the great things about it. So there's envy and admiration, but there is also contempt. It's a double-edged sword. A lot of times I've run into journalists from other countries who feel that it's incredible that the American media would fall for... "WE would never fall for this!" and I go, "Excuse me, but here's how easy it is for you to fall for this".

TT: Speaking of commercialization in the news.... so much of what I see today on the news seems to be just PR being spit back at us. Do find that this makes it easier or harder to get the media to fall for your pranks these days?

JS: It's hard to say whether it's easier or harder. On the surface, looking at what I do, it's easier because I'm successful. But it's harder because there are so many other people in competition for that attention. And they are willing to do so many things to get it... spend money, gifts, influence. That, coupled with the fact that so much of what the media reports on is so self-serving... their advertisers may be a drug company advertising a new remedy for cold or flu, so of course they have to do a story on colds and flu. So it's difficult to have a meaningful discourse on the news, which is why I don't attempt to do it that way. I attempt to give them something that is so over the top, so outrageous, that has a meme encoded. Something where I am the buffoon, where I am someone that they can be contemptuous of. So when I'm on as the roach guy... "Where did we get him from?!?!" They are mocking me, they are contemptuous, they are cynical... which they are because they've seen it all. The fact of the matter is, they put people on who say "put this crystal up your ass and it'll cure AIDS or colon cancer"... you know, "give us your money". So they promote these kinds of charlatans, and whatever wacko thing it is. Or, the other end are the companies like Merck, you know, the advertisers product. I think you have to have a concept of what they're looking for but, beyond that, you have to have something with meaning, otherwise why are you doing it? If you don't have a passion, then spending all the time, energy and money... No one's going to do what I do because there's no money in it, so there just going to do it to get attention, and... how many times do you need attention?

TT: You use your real name over and over again in your pranks. In fact, you've even duped the SAME journalists 2 or 3 times without them remembering you. Has a journalist EVER realized it was you and blown the whistle on you?

JS: No. Well, let me clarify that. I have always succeeded in accessing the media and getting on. Here's an example, though, of when I wasn't the one who blew the whistle on myself, which is what I always do. My focus is to always bring attention to the deception, otherwise you don't know. I was on Good Morning America [as Joe Bones, for the Fat Squad hoax] and I didn't want to reveal to Good Morning America, after I had been on, that it was me because I had other fish to fry. And this story was just going, literally, around the world. And you could say 'when do you reveal.. when is it time to go GOTHCA!' It's kind of how you feel. Do you have something else going on? Is someone dying at home? Are you running out of money? Are you so aggravated that the phone is ringing and these racist idiots are calling up? You know, whatever it is... when do you pull the plug? And I wasn't ready to pull the plug because I had other shows to go on. I had been on Good Morning America before [for another prank, Fish Condos] and it was pretty much the same people. Hoaxing Good Morning America itself was a major coup, but I wanted it to go on. Then a number of people called up Good Morning America and said, "That's not Joe Bones! That's Joey Skaggs!" So they called me early in the morning and said, "People are saying that you're Joey Skaggs, you're not Joe Bones". And I said, "Well, unfortunately for you, it's true." "SON OF A BITCH!" [makes gesture of phone being slammed down. laughs] I get that a lot. It's all they CAN do, you know. Then they'll make a retraction and not mention my name, or put me down, or make me into a scammer...

TT: Did Good Morning America offer a retraction?

JS: They did, but they didn't mention my name, of course. "Yesterday, on Good Morning America, we were had... in spades. A man who called himself Joe Bones..." You know, and they also said "We weren't the only ones, many other people were hoaxed..." My point is that I am totally ready, willing and able to go, "It's a hoax, it's me". For that particular hoax, I wasn't the one who blew the whistle. I had already fooled everyone, so it was successful. But part of my process in my art is to talk about the deception and to talk about why I did it and what it means. If you leave it up to them, they're going to do what Good Morning America did. "Well, some guy fooled us... some idiot who gets his pleasure out of embarrassing serious journalists." That wasn't the intention! That's why I'm always prepared to do it, and I'm not always the one... because of name recognition at this point, or because I've fooled the same people so many times, it's harder and harder to get away with it. That's why when I did The Final Curtain, you know, Disneyland for the dead, it was predominantly a web-based hoax, in conjunction with press releases, snail mail, fax and email to news organizations. I did ads in about 20 underground publications, The Village Voice, San Francisco Weekly, LA Weekly, that said "Death Got You Down? A Lasting Alternative. www.finalcurtain.com" I wasn't a person, I was an organization, a website, I was all of those people... I played many different characters. So when they called on the phone, they called from California, they called from Chicago... I could play all those different characters and I didn't have to be there visibly. But when a journalist called from a New Jersey paper, he was only 10-20 minutes away from my office and he could have driven over there and found that the whole thing was bullshit. But he didn't take the time to drive the 20 minutes.

TT: How often do you encounter that, that journalists just spit back your press release and don't take the time to investigate a story.



The Fat Squad, 1986

JS: Well, journalists do do that and other journalists are more under the schooling that we need to get a second or third confirmation. But it doesn't matter to me, because I've already planned them getting a second or a third or a fourth or a fifth. I've already laid out the trap because I know how they operate, I know what to expect and how to prepare for it. The Good Morning America handling of the Fat Squad hoax is a good example. When they read about it, it was already a syndicated story and had already been printed in the Washington Post and the Philadelphia Inquirer, 2 Pulitzer Prize winning publications... photographs, you know...."Joe Bones"... totally absurd, way over the top. And it was picked up by wire services. When Good Morning America called they said, "Who are your clients?" and I said "I'm not at liberty to discuss that with you, but I can tell you that we save lives of people who are obese, people who are diabetics..." and they said "Ok, well we're not looking for that, we're looking for something sexual, do have a sexual angle?" and I said, "Well in fact... we have Stephanie, who's husband hired us for her birthday..." and they went "YES!". They wanted sex. I was going to send Norman to be the client, he is a diabetic, and he was going to tell about how the Fat Squad changed his life, and Norman got bumped for Stephanie for the sex story. Because THAT's what they want. You always have to have an open ear when you're doing these kinds of things because they usually dictate... they concoct, they contrive, they stories. You could be telling them one story about something, and they will totally spin that story to be about something else. You won't even recognize your story. I think that I've withheld using my own name for recent pranks because... I give them enough clues. There's always some clue to who it is anyway. I have a signature to my work. There's always a fine line between how far do you go in concocting a story that you think they're going to go for... the plausible, the clues, and just so over the top that you think they're going to see through it. Then you're just wasting your time. I see a lot of amateur pranksters doing that, and I get a lot of emails from people who are like "I want to do this..." and it's like, well, "if you're going to do that, then don't do it THAT way, it's too obvious." So I think that a need to understand what they're looking for, not to give them so many clues that... even if it smells fishy there's enough substance there and enough people to back it up that this must be a bunch of wacky people. They DO get on the ground and they DO howl in a circle and eat raw meat, you know.

TT: Was The Final Curtain your first internet based prank?

JS: No. I've used technology as a vehicle because we're all conditioned to think that technology is such a radically changing science that it's quite possible that this new medicine will cure cancer. Or this little box can send a Mars mission, you know? Technology has always been a part of what I do and I used the internet when I did Sexonics [a virtual-reality-sex prank] and I was brazen at the time... I said I was DOCTOR Joseph Skaggs and that was eventually caught. It was an obvious clue. But I had already succeeded in fooling a lot of media.

TT: It seems as though using the Internet as a delivery system for what you do might make it harder since there are already so many hoaxes and scams to wade through on the net. How do they find you?

JS: Yeah, well I don't rely on it totally. Did you hear the news today? It was kind of a sad story and was connected to an internet story.... they guy who said they took his wheelchair, that they jumped him and beat the shit out of him. They called it a hoax, which is the wrong usage of the word. It was a scam. It was a criminal act, he lied to police and is probably going to go to jail for it. And these people that voluntarily, out of kindness, gave him a new chair want it back to give it to someone who is more deserving. It touched the hearts of so many people... here's a guy, he's a hero, he's been victimized, how do we show him that there's humanity here? That there's hope, that there's kindness. Now for the internet connection to this. A few months ago there was a New York Times story of a 19 year old girl who was dying of cancer. For a period of two years, she had carried on correspondence in chat rooms and told everyone her story, and made all these friends... probably thousands of people she touched, via the chatroom, hundreds for sure.

People wanted to meet her and everything else.. so she had to die. Someone put it out that she died, or she did herself. Then they found out that the whole story wasn't true. Everyone was totally outraged. There's a lot of significance to this story, more than just a person using the internet to run a scam. That's the first clue... its the fucking internet, are you going to believe anything out there? I remember when I was attacked by Brock Meeks for Sexonics. He was an investigative journalist who got on the case when people on the Well [a SF based internet BBS] said "hey Joey Skaggs.. that's the guy who did Cathouse For Dogs!" so Brock Meeks started calling the Canadian Border to find out if my equipment had been confiscated and he declared it was a hoax. He says he 'outed' me. His position was that... he had everyone flame me and their comments were "How dare you come into our space...when you're on the internet, you're real!" and I'm going, "What?! WHAT!?!?!?" And I was so blown away by their naivety. To me it was just astounding that they were so gullible. And the same thing is true for their responses to this girl who totally milked their emotions... and this wheelchair guy. These are sociopaths.

TT: What was their point in perpetrating these hoaxes?

JS: Well, they're calling it a syndrome, like when you kill your baby, but they're calling it 'something-something Online'. It's pretty funny. Oh, Munchausen Online, that's it. [laughs] Whoever coined that one... There are probably psychiatrists studying this. Why are people telling lies? But I think your point was that so many people are lying, how does anyone believe anything? I think a healthy dose of skepticism, not cynicism, is necessary. I don't want people to be cynics, I want them to be skeptics, and there's a difference.

TT: Have you seen tangible change in the media as a direct result of what you do?

JS: I wouldn't profess to having any visible knowledge of tangible change other than the fact that people have told me things I've done have had an impact. Some journalists that I've hoaxed have written back and... usually it's out of pain and vengence [laughs]. But something is to be learned out of pain and vengence. What's funny is that they personalize their attack at me, when I'm the one that's going "it's bullshit here, it's bullshit there, it's bullshit there..." I'm showing you it's bullshit. Their focus is always at the messenger.

TT: Have you had angry reactions from the American public as well as from journalists?

JS: Oh sure. To the point where you think they're going to kill you. They threaten to kill you. I mean the Dog-Meat Soup hoax...

TT: Yeah, was that your most vitriolic hoax?



Crucifix Performance 1966

JS: Well, I think any time that you... It began way before that, I mean, the crucifix. I mean, we're talking

1966 and I take a dead, decayed figure on a cross with a skull... and put that into the context of what was happening. Back then there weren't punks and there wasn't the whole scene where social discontent was expressed so in-your-face. That was the most profound icon in a ethnic area on Easter Sunday... it was hard to not get my message. It was just like what happened to Jesus. People were screaming "Kill him! Kill him!"

TT: I was amazed at how angry people got when you hung a giant bra on Wall St.

JS: [laughs] Yes! You see, there are elements of danger when you attack the sensibilities, the fundamental beliefs that people have. Because they are NOT tolerant, they are NOT open-minded, they are SO chickenshit to embrace other ideas. We had a heated discussion the other night with some people from Atlanta who were very religious. Now, I don't care if you're religious or not, but at least be open to have a discussion about it. That consciousness as we know it, and it's different for everyone... you're you, I'm me, I know me and you know you... we come to a realization that we're going to die. It's part of growing up, understanding these things... you lose your pet, you know, you lose friends, you lose loved ones, and we have to deal with that inevitability. So we create philosophies, religions, illusions, fantasies, beliefs, to protect us from a harsh reality. We're going to die. That's it. End of story. So, you want to have a soul? You want to continue? You want to be part of a giant cosmic consciousness? All knowing? Do you want to have a God, be it a male God or a female God? A bisexual God? Whatever the trip is, we get this shit laid on us as soon as they can give it to us. And all they're doing is trying to make you a part of their tribe and force THEIR beliefs because they're all CHICKENSHIT. We gotta justify this shit somehow. So, when I go, "Examine this, because this is potentially...you're deceiving yourself. You've been deceived and now you're deceiving yourself, and you're perpetuating the deception. What about looking at it another way? Why do you think it's such a terrible thing to die? Look at it another way." And that, fundamentally, is the most challenging thing you can say to a person. I challenge your faith, your beliefs, your intelligence. They take it all very, very personally. It's an assault on them. If you want to write an atheist book, I don't have to read it, fuck you. But if someone presents something in your FACE, like I have, well, you as the artist have to be prepared for the consequences of your actions. You have to be prepared to deal with whatever comes your way. And I have pissed off a LOT of people. The Cathouse for Dogs morally offended a lot of people. The Vietnamese Nativity burning offended a lot of people. The Porta-fess [a prank where Joey dressed as a priest and rode a portable confessional around NYC on the back of a bicycle] offended a lot of people. And there were a lot of people who were on the opposite side of that... the lesbian feminists... I mean to them I was the CLERGY, the fucking enemy. The point is that it's all meant to be provocative, whether you play the buffoon and there's a hidden, serious message in it, or whether you're just confrontational, in-your-face, 'think about THIS!'... it's meant to be provocative. And my feeling is that that's what art and communication is. I don't want to be with nice people, I want to be with people who are going to have something interesting to say. I don't have to like them, but I'd rather have a conversation with someone who's.. "you're an irritating motherfucker but that was interesting!" Fuck nice.

TT: You recently staged a "Doody-Rudy" in Washington Square where people got to throw elephant dung at a picture of Giuliani in protest of his condemnation of the Sensation exhibit in Brooklyn. How was that received?

JS: It was great, I think it was received really well. I was amazed that I was not arrested. There were a lot of police there, I didn't have a permit, and I intentionally did not apply for a permit because if I applied for a permit they would have denied it and then they, most likely, would have HAD to arrest me, because then I was knowingly defiant. The fact that there was a lot of media there, I think was a part of the reason they didn't bust me. Also the fact that a black guy in a wheelchair was the one to throw the first ball of shit... an old lady threw a ball of shit... so it wasn't just a bunch of young, discontent fucked-up kids going "Fuck Rudy!", you know. It was a cross-section of New York. I made a statement about the issues, his stance on

the homeless -you know 'if you're not working then go stay in a shelter, and if you're out in the street you'll get arrested' - his stance on corporations and lawyers defining what art is and what it shouldn't be - the black Madonna and all that. It was in the village that is probably a predominant Democratic populace.

TT: Were there any Giuliani supporters on the sidelines getting pissed?

JS: Yes. And there were cops that were, I'm sure, itching for the word to bust me. But I went to great pains to make sure that I was responsible in what I did. I bought a tarp and placed it underneath the picture, and we had shovels and brooms. After the event was over and the media went back to put it on, and the people dissipated, I cleaned it all up and swept up the ground. I wasn't going to walk away leaving my elephant shit there. I'm not a graffiti artist, I'm not saying "fuck your house, fuck your property, fuck you." It was a commentary that I wanted people to get, and I wanted the media to get to give to the rest of the people who would watch it on TV. I wasn't going to be irresponsible. I thought the mayor, and his policies, were irresponsible. That's what I was showing.

TT: I think that many of the NYPD may be more sympathetic to the anti-Giuliani cause than we might think.

JS: Oh yeah.. but he's a pro-law, pro-police-enforcement, clean-up-the-city... and on the surface it looks like he's done that. But you know, where are these junkies now? They're not over there, they're down on the next block. Where are the homeless? They're not on that street anymore, they're on some other street. It's all about perception, illusion, rappin' the rap, and he's a very good.... politician. Except he's a lousy lover. [laughs] Which would you rather be, a good politician or a good lover? He's getting his rewards right now... his just desserts.

TT: When you get an idea for a prank, what do you do? Do you wake up in the middle of the night and go "Oh my God!"....?

JS: Sometimes. Sometimes I get goosebumps. [shows me him getting excited about an idea] "oh oh oh oh oh! I can't wait to tell someone!!"

TT: And what's the process from there?

JS: Well, I have to think about it. It's an evolutionary... even the concept is an evolutionary process. I go through it, I change it, I tweak it, I change it, I tweak it. Then it comes down to production, and that adds another dimension to changing it, you know. It's complicated. You're producing a theatrical, Public Relations, advertising event. It's got to be a work of art that's got to say something. I'm using all the ingredients of PR, advertising, photography, writing, designing, acting, and the whole fucking nine-yards. Timing, and where, are all part of the ingredients. Like the Porta-Fess, it was the Democratic Convention and was a perfect opportunity. I didn't even have to put out a press release for that. It would have been to obvious if I had announced myself. Just showing up there was the way to do it. But if there hadn't been the convention I could have just as easily peddled down to Wall Street and hung around outside the Stock Exchange and waited to hear the confessions of the big manipulators of money and power. It would've had the same impact. So you have to take into consideration those elements and then worry about, "Am I doing a one-day event? And what happens if it's pre-empted?". So, my concepts are not dedicated to a date because then you're really in competition with a lot of people for a limited amount of time. When you have a broader concept you can do something that has a longer life. Like Dog-Meat Soup, you know they were all getting these letters, calling the media, calling their congressmen, writing to the President... this can go on. Porta-fess I did for 2 days and it was over. Bingo. I did a protest at the United Nations on the DAY the Monica Lewinsky story broke and there was no bigger news, there was no OTHER news! The president got a blowjob, I can't compete with THAT!

Aaron: And that wasn't your prank!

JS: [laughs] I wish it was! The President deserves a blowjob! Not by me.... [laughs]

Aaron: I have a question. There's a desire in your work to arouse contempt.

JS: I wouldn't say contempt, I would say consciousness. Sometimes I'm very sincere. Sometimes I EXPECT them to be contemptuous because they ARE contemptuous. Because they've heard every wacko fucking story, because they are cynical. Because they go from one horrible disaster to some other fluff story, just like that. To some traffic story! They have been desensitized by the same process that makes them. I don't want to arouse their contempt but I know that they certainly are capable of it, and I'm willing to deal if they are, I'm willing to be the recipient of their contempt. I think that's what makes me more accessible and more desirable, because I'm willing. They want to take someone and just say "Well, what the fuck is THIS person?" because they are the police of morality, the ones that tell you what's good and what's not good.

TT: Well, have fun in Slovenia. How long are you going for?

JS: 2 Weeks or 10-20 years, depending on their sense of humor!



Me: **Tom Tenney:** producer, performer, writer, digital & social media professional, and student. Yeah, I wear a lot of hats, and spend a lot of time thinking about the complex relationships between art, culture, media, consciousness, education... I currently work at **VH1**, and have a rich and varied (albeit somewhat checkered) past as a producer of underground performance.

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