



JOE ENRIGHT'S RECENT STUFF

Brooklyn. Mostly Brooklyn.

60 YEARS OF SATIRE, PSYCHIC ATTORNEYS & MOBILE CONFESSIONALS

Joey Skaggs



SEARCH

OTHER STUFF

The View From Argyle Heights



0 Comments

In the mid-1960s, a Lower East Side artist organized crucifixion performances in the East Village on Easter Sunday, protesting social injustice and the Vietnam War. They created...wait for it...wait for it...controversy! The cops swarmed and he was busted. This inspired some Hollywood filmmakers to option his life story for a movie. To which the young man responded: "What life story? I'm only 20!" Indeed, there would be so much more to his story.



Joey Skaggs went on to become a satirist and prankster with an extraordinary history of accomplishments, only some of which were crammed into the hilarious 2015 documentary, *Art of the Prank*. But many scholars also consider him a progenitor of "culture jamming" and "reality hacking," decades before such high-falutin' terms were invented to describe his sly takeover of the language and visual trappings of American culture in order to subversively critique it. His pranks are never vicious, never illegal, but they do require a deadpan sense of humor, good acting skills, well-crafted press releases, financing for props, costumes, videos and above all, a wonderful imagination with the planning necessary to carry it all forward.

Skaggs is foremost a very versatile artist, but when pressed for a definitive occupational title I could pin on him for this profile, Joey chose "Pataphysician," defined by the 19th century French writer Alfred Jarry as a practitioner of "the science of imaginary solutions." Among Skaggs' long list of solutions that have brought joy to many fellow citizens, and embarrassment to bamboozled reporters and societal gate-keepers, some stand out for their sheer audacity.

In 1968, fed up with tour buses ogling Skaggs and fellow long-haired inhabitants of the East Village, Joey organized a Greyhound Hippie Bus Tour of sedate Queens neighborhoods and invited writer Paul Krassner, artist Yayoi Kusama, the Group Image Band and 60 other counter-culture types who decamped at regular intervals to observe and snap photos of lawn-mowing squares and the plastic eateries they frequented.



60 Hippies in a Bus See the Sights of Quaint Queens

A group of East Village hippies who became annoyed with the increasing number of tourist buses visiting St. Mark's Place turned the tables with a vengeance yesterday.

Sixty of them, camera straps slung with the beads around their necks, paid \$5 apiece and boarded a rented Greyhound bus for a midday sightseeing tour of Queens.

"Is everybody in?" cried Joey Skaggs, a 23-year-old artist who organized the trip and placed others.

"Oh, what?" came the reply from Paul Krassner, editor of *The Realist*, who was feverishly making notes on a scrap of yellow paper.

A Four-Hour Trip
For four hours, the bus cruised along the borough's thoroughfares and side streets as the hippies stared through their dark glasses at housing developments, bowling alleys and supermarkets, the middle-class landmarks they had forsaken but not forgotten.

Bobby Laine, a Short Line Tours guide who said that "my usual circuit is the Empire State Building, St. Patrick's and St. John's," opened his eyes yesterday.

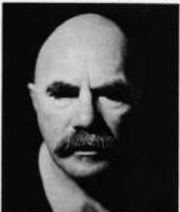
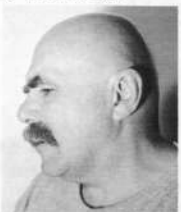


Hippies touring Queens yesterday chatting with one resident on 181st Street off Union Turnpike. They said the tour was to counter tourists making visits to St. Mark's Place.

One of the hippie passengers was a young Verne Williams. After two decades of hard knocks Verne found himself selling bull semen and trimming cow hooves for Virginia dairy farmers. So in 1984 he begged Skaggs to help him launch an acting career from scratch. Joey obliged by creating a "head shot" for Williams in his Waverly Place studio, patterned after an FBI wanted poster, and mailed it around to casting agents. It landed Verne a role as a villain in a Hollywood movie, *The Last Dragon*. And the resultant publicity launched Skaggs' Bad Guys Talent Management Agency. Focusing on the bad and the ugly – forget about the good and the beautiful – it would cater to "bad guys, bad girls, bad kids and bad dogs...venomous vixens, burley bouncers and slimy sleazes." It instantly morphed into a prank so successful that his suddenly booming agency was overflowing with wanna-be gangster actors awash in media coverage. Not being the Hollywood type, Skaggs handed the business off to an associate.

WANTED BY THE FBI

BAD GUYS INC.

IMPOSTOR/MASTER OF DISGUISES

VERNE WILLIAMS

Aliases: TURTLE, BULL DOG, GRUNT, MAD MAN WILLIAMS, STUMPY, BUZZ

DESCRIPTION

Date of Birth: AUGUST 2, 1935

Place of Birth: HOLYOKE, MASSACHUSETTS

Height: 5' 6"

Weight: 100 POUNDS

Built: HEAVY

Hair: BROWN

Occupations: FARRIER, PROFESSIONAL BOXER, ACTOR

Scars and Marks: "SUN" TATTOO ON RIGHT HAND

MCC: 0805T7020307AAA

Eyes: BROWN

Complexion: LIGHT

Race: CAUCASIAN

Nationality: AMERICAN

Remarks: SHAVES HEAD. WEARS DENTURES. PREPARES CATTLE FOR EMBRYO TRANSPLANTS. REPORTEDLY LIKES TO WORK OUT IN A GYMNASIUM.

Social Security Number Used:

Fingerprint Classification: 8 5 1 Ut 3 Ref: U

CAUTION

WILLIAMS, ALIAS "BULL DOG", IS CONSIDERED TO BE AN EXTREMELY GIFTED IMPOSTOR. HE HAS REPORTEDLY POSED AS BRITISH, IRISH, WELSH, JEWISH, GERMAN, FRENCH CANADIAN, SOUTHERN, OLD, A THUG, A HOMOSEXUAL AND A BIKER.

IF YOU WANT INFORMATION CONCERNING BAD GUYS, BAD GIRLS, BAD KIDS, BAD DOGS, CONTACT YOUR LOCAL BAD GUYS OFFICE. TELEPHONE NUMBER AND ADDRESS IS AS FOLLOWS:

BAD GUYS INC. 107 WAVERLY PLACE NY NY 10011 (212) 260-6371 JOEY SKAGGS

In 1992 Joey, purporting to be Father Anthony Joseph, pedaled up to an 8th Avenue street curb in priestly garb towing a large wooden confessional on which had been chiseled "Portofess," offering sacramental ministrations to the Democratic National Convention attendees at Madison Square Garden. Actors in on the prank lined up, but so did others, grateful for a quickie absolution during their hectic midtown workday. The press ate it up, running feature stories about the earnest good-looking Dominican priest.

My favorite Skaggs' creations (select your own at <https://joeyskaggs.com/work/>) belong to a decade when America was becoming increasingly litigious, illogical, and digital. Thus, in 1994 on April Fool's Day (always a special day for Joey), 30 second commercial clips aired on CNN, advertising the services of "Maqdananda, Psychic Attorney" dressed in quasi-swami clothing, sitting in the lotus position, who asked: "Why deal with the legal system without knowing the outcome beforehand?" Maqdananda, played by Joey, then asks whether the viewer has been "the victim of a psychic injustice" (such as psychic surgery malpractice!), reminding us that "there is no statute of limitations in the psychic realm." Extra-judicial remedies were also offered, including jinxing and miracles. And for those who were not into the New Age pitch, a quickly rolling graphic assured everyone that the Psychic Attorney could also handle "Criminal Defense, Divorce, Wills & Trusts, Zoning." Viewers who dialed Maqdananda heard an answering machine that announced: "Hello. I KNEW you'd call!"



A year later, shortly after the O.J. Simpson verdict, Dr. Joseph Bonuso, PhD (aka Joseph Skaggs), founding director of the Solomon Project, distributed a press release to 3,000 government officials, judges and law schools, claiming his computer program could determine the guilt or innocence of any defendant, rendering judges and juries obsolete. CNN covered Bonuso's press conference and expressed doubt about "Solomon" becoming mainstream but acknowledged that many attorneys were likely to use it as a test of their trial strategies. (If you're keeping score at home, CNN has fallen for Skaggs five times. And counting.)



These pranks, like all great satire, draw our attention to larger issues. The "Hippie Bus Tour" pointed to a growing cultural clash in a society that had started to show fissures; the "Portofess" appeared at a time when public confessions, from Jimmy Swaggart to Oprah, had become commonplace; "Bad Guys" erupted at the dawn of the Super Model Age when physical beauty had become the ascendant attribute we all aspired to achieve; and the "Psychic Attorney" and "Solomon Project" held up hilarious mirrors to our increasing drift toward quackery and a desire for assembly-line justice.

Some of these greatest hits are explored in a new documentary that Joey and *Art of the Prank* producer Judy Drosd put together while holed up in Skaggs' rural ancestral homeland. Recently I was able to get a sneak peek of the film (*Joey Skaggs: Satire and Art Activism 1960s to the Present and Beyond*), which will have its virtual (naturally) premiere on February 12th at the New Jersey Film Festival, with screenings of additional footage at the [Oregon Documentary Film Festival](#) in The Dalles (February 28th) and Florida's Bonita Springs Bonita Springs International Film Festival (May 21-23).



Sifting through tons of boxes crammed with Joey's video/audio tapes, press clips and pranky artifacts, Drosd has stitched together the first chapter in an intimate account of the Skaggs saga. With technical support from NYU's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation Program at the Tisch School of the Arts, the archival footage she interweaves with Joey's reminiscences is extraordinarily evocative of a bygone era in New York. The best news is that this 52 minute film will be followed by additional retrospectives to bring the story up to date.

Joey Skaggs belongs in the pantheon of great American satirists. His work reflects back to us our own foibles, and it is astonishing – and not a little sad – how much of it still continues to ring true. The New Jersey Festival site to buy tickets for the virtual screening can be reached at <https://bit.ly/35kFFxL>. (Full Disclosure: As I wrapped up this article, I received a mailed diploma from Joey Skaggs conferring upon me the honorary title of Pataphysician. I'm not sure, but I think it entitles me to make house calls.)



BONITA SPRINGS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL JOEY SKAGGS

NEW JERSEY FILM FESTIVAL OREGON FILM FESTIVAL



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