



## Joey Skaggs: Satire and Art Activism 1960s to the Present and Beyond Premieres at the New Jersey Film Festival on February 12!

By *Al Nigrin*



*Here is my interview with Joey Skaggs: Satire and Art Activism 1960s to the Present and Beyond Director Judy Drosd and Joey Skaggs.*

**Nigrin:** The 2017 documentary film *Art of the Prank* Directed by Andrea Marini, seems like a primer or “greatest hits” on Joey’s life as a performance artist. The four oral histories that are part of *Joey Skaggs: Satire and Art Activism 1960s to the Present and Beyond* seem to go deeper into his career. Was this what you were hoping to achieve?

**Drosd:** Andrea Marini’s film, *Art of the Prank*, touches on many of Joey’s performances and media satires, but he also wanted to follow Joey working on a new media hoax to show in real time what goes on behind the scenes. So, we get to watch Joey in the act of creating a fake documentary film, *Pandora’s Hope*, which he’s making to bring attention to the controversial issue of genetic modification and engineering. There are always limitations to how much material you can cover in a documentary. Any filmmaker will tell you about the heartbreaking and sometimes brutal cuts you have to make to keep the material focused and riveting. Choices have to be made in service of the story, and Andrea was knee deep in Joey’s archival material he wanted to use but couldn’t. Joey’s work is provocative, confrontational and frequently outrageous so it has attracted a lot of media coverage over the decades. His performances are ephemeral, happening in plain sight in everyday life. He collected documentation of his performances as well as the news coverage because otherwise there would be no evidence that these things occurred. Consequently, he has a large collection of film, video, audio and print materials in addition to the physical art works he created to execute the concepts. Now that *Art of the Prank* has been launched into the world, Joey and I decided to dig deeper into the archive and create these new, more detailed and nuanced oral histories using material not included in the film. We don’t have the same limitations Andrea had to deal with. We’re approaching this as an open-ended non-linear project. Each piece is (and future pieces will be) as long as they need to be to tell a compelling story.

**Nigrin:** How did this oral history project come about? You mention in your press packet that you are working with NYU. How are they helping?

**Skaggs:** As I get older, I'm thinking about what to do with my vast collection, which not only includes coverage of my work, but also sheds light on the times, illuminating what was going on that provoked and inspired me. Does it all go into a dumpster when I'm gone? Is it picked apart by people who don't necessarily understand the work? So, I've been seeking a way to preserve it and share it with the public. This is a dilemma all artists face.

**Drosd:** We reached out to NYU Professor Howard Besser, PhD., who founded the Moving Image Archiving and Preservation Department in the Tisch School of the Arts. Howard is a supporter of Joey's work and became a champion in helping us shape the collection for eventual transference to an institution that can care for it in perpetuity. He arranged for us to have an NYU graduate student intern this past summer to start the process, but when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, we had to segue from hands-on to an online-only experience. Our intern, David Griess, created a detailed Collection Assessment of Joey's archival materials as a first step, and also, at Joey's suggestion, began researching the ins and outs of doing oral histories to accompany the collection. We filmed a couple of tests with David, which became the first and second episodes in the *Joey Skaggs Satire and Art Activism, 1960s to the Present and Beyond* film. Joey and I then shot many more stories and I began editing this oral history project. NYU's involvement and support will continue as we move forward. Thanks to the New Jersey Film Festival, the first four episodes will be screened together as a single film on February 12, 2020.

**Nigrin:** You mentioned in the Video Q+A you did for the New Jersey Film Festival that there are more than 50 of these oral histories. Do you plan to release those as well? What periods are these focused on? Are they focused on particular performances?

**Drosd:** We are creating oral histories on a wide spectrum of Joey's life's work and experiences. It's hard to say how many episodes there will be. However, each one transports you back in time to a different era and you get a sense of Joey's challenges and the imaginative and frequently hilarious work that he created over the years, all of which remains amazingly relevant today.

**Nigrin:** The music in these short films seems a bit twee at times. Other times quite serious. Can you elaborate on the use of the music in your films?

**Drosd:** The stories are nostalgic and music is critical to the narrative. It heightens the mood and helps pull the viewer into the time and place of the story. We tried to be truthful to the soundtrack of Joey's life, and we added a little cheekiness, just to underscore the absurdity of some of the stories. Since we can't afford the rights to songs by the Doors, or Deep Purple, or other iconic musical artists of the times, we did the next best thing. We found royalty free music that could, by association, set that tone. Also, we are fortunate to have a good friend, Daniel Pemberton, who is a world renowned movie composer (*Steve Jobs, King Arthur: Legend of the Sword, Molly's Game, Ocean's 8, Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse, Yesterday, Birds of Prey, The Trial of the Chicago 7* and many more), and he has given us access to music to which he owns full rights.

**Nigrin:** Are there any memorable stories while you made this film or any other info about your film you would like to relay to us?

**Skaggs:** Everything I do depends on the talent and generosity of a lot of other people. So far, in this series, I'm so grateful to graphic designer Kaboom J. Schneider, and motion graphics animator Claudio Castillo, both of whom contributed to the titles. And then, there are all the people who appear in the episodes. I want to recognize all of them because I couldn't be successful without them.



**Drosd:** Working on these oral histories has been a trip down memory lane for both Joey and me. Because of the pandemic, we've been confined to one location. But this project has temporarily transported us out of today's divisive political reality and put us back in touch with the incredibly divisive realities of previous eras that inspired so much of Joey's activism and satire.

**Skaggs:** It seems there is always hype, hypocrisy, the mis-use of power, greed, racial injustice, and endless war. We have to continuously resist, preferably in a creative way and where possible with humor. If people get just one thing from this film series, I hope it is the inspiration to use their voices and stand up against social injustice and oppression.



***Here is more info on this screening:***

***Joey Skaggs: Satire and Art Activism 1960s to the Present and Beyond - Judy Drosd (New York, New York)*** Joey Skaggs is a satirist, performance artist, and activist who for decades pioneered the use of the media as an integral part of his artwork. Skaggs' art is both timely and timelessly relevant in that he tackles far ranging cultural, political and social issues, producing works that question and challenge authority and examine societal beliefs in a profound and humorous way. These four short documentaries are the first in a series of Joey Skaggs oral histories produced with technical support from NYU's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program in the Tisch School of the Arts. In ***Joey Skaggs: The Early Years, 1940s to 1960s***, Joey looks back at some of the earliest influences that led him away from the art establishment and into the streets. In ***Joey Skaggs: Art as Activism, 1960s and 1970s***, Joey talks about the roots of his activism and his earliest renegade and inflammatory performance art in the streets of New York City. We see the spark that ignites his life-long controversial relationship with the news media. In ***Joey Skaggs: The Bad Guys Talent Management Agency***, using historical archival footage, Joey tells the hilarious story of this 1984 media performance piece in which he helps his friend Verne fulfill his life-long ambition to become an actor. And in ***Joey Skaggs: The Fat Squad***, Joey enlists his stable of eager actors and unleashes them as Fat Squad commandos, tough guys you can hire to use force to keep you on your diet. With extraordinary archival footage, Joey shows how he hooked the global news media, always hungry for salacious stories, into covering businesses that were definitely too good to be true. Joey Skaggs' work is also the subject of Andrea Marini's award-winning feature documentary *Art of the Prank*, which won the Best Documentary prize at the New Jersey Film Festival back in 2017. 2020; 52 min.

Friday, February 12, 2021 - \$12=General

Film will be available on VOD (Video On Demand) for 24 hours on its showdate.

To buy tickets for this screening go here:

<https://watch.eventive.org/newjerseyfilmfestival2021/play/5faa91d9cbe29a0a49aefc78>

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originally published: 02/09/2021

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