CHARLES AND DIANA: THE TRAGIC LEGACY • JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

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Gotcha!

by Robert Hough

In June, 1992, *Saturday Night* published my profile of media prankster Joey Skaggs, whose epic-scale hoaxes have long been a razor-sharp pain in the gluteus of the American news media. In the article, I smugly insinuated that *we* – meaning me and other Canadian-journalist types – needn't worry about Skaggs because we are so much cannier than our hyper-commercialized American cousins. It took Skaggs about a month to prove that my premise was grotesquely misinformed: on July 14 *The Globe and Mail* ran a front-page photo of a priest riding an overgrown tricycle with a confession booth grafted to the rear axle. The photo's cutline read: "Father Joseph of Carmel, Calif., sets up his travelling confessional near Madison Square Garden in New York, site of the Democratic Party's national convention." Though the priest's face was caught in profile only, I recognized the padre's barely contained smirk. It was Skaggs, all right. He'd snared Canada's national newspaper, despite the fact that the *Globe* had run its *own* Focus-section profile of the man and his oeuvre a year earlier.

Five months later, Skaggs was deftly planning to deflate my article's subtext yet again. Posing this time as the president of a company called Sexonix, Skaggs sent press releases to various Canadian media touting his company's product: a new headset apparatus that permitted "the world's first interactive, computerized, fantasy sexual experience." He then rented a booth at the Metro Toronto Christmas Gift Show and Sale at SkyDome; when his stall remained empty throughout the exhibit, it was announced that $300,000 worth of Sexonix equipment had been seized at the border by morally chagrined customs officials.

Sexonix would let Canadians make love with their fantasies. It was fantasy all right



In Toronto, a female spokesperson for Sexonix was interviewed on CHUM FM and 1430 The Fan. Dr. Joseph Skaggs – yes, he used his real name – then became one of the subjects of a Citytv series entitled "Sex in the Nineties," in which the good doctor soberly described the infinite possibilities of human/machine congress to a reporter named Natalie Pujo.

"It *is*," he stressed, "masturbation of the mind. With Sexonix you can make love with your fantasy."

"And what," inquired a riveted Pujo, "if your fantasy was making love with Kevin Costner?"

South of the border, the prank breathed life into numerous computer bulletin-board systems, making it the first Skaggs prank to utilize E-mail as a method of dissemination. In a note posted on the San Francisco-based BBS known as the WELL, Dr. Skaggs lamented that "the narrow-minded Canadian government, trudging along under the weight of Victorian so-called morality, has taken upon itself to deny a nation the pleasures of the future." This sparked a rabid bout of cyberspatial Canada-bashing. "As one who's spent over twenty years in Canada," wrote one respondent on the WELL, "I can say that Canada has nothing like the legal protection of free speech that the U.S. does." Wrote another: "It is important to understand that Canada is an Iron Curtain country." Opined yet another subscriber, this one with a flair for simile: "Canada is like an American prison with a real big yard and a classy commissary."

As with all of Skaggs's pranks, a non-reality was accepted as reality because it jibed with the public's preconceived notions. In September I phoned Skaggs to ask why he had exploited the Canadians-as-timid-and-repressed stereotype for his latest endeavour. His answer came in the form of a letter, along with several hundred pages of biographical material, two videos, and three cassette tapes. In typical Skaggs fashion, his response was partly facetious, partly satiric, and partly candid. "It's all about baseball," he wrote. "We southern North Americans can't stand the fact that the Blue Jays won the 1992 World Series. This is our revenge." SN

VIDEO STILLS COURTESY JOEY SKAGGS