

COVER STORY



The Media Manipulator (No, Not Santa!)

Interview view with the King of Punk'd: Joey Skaggs

CHRIS HAIRE | DEC 20, 2006 | [SHARE](#) [f](#) [t](#) [e](#) [...](#)

Mother Earth is having hot flashes. The ice bunny in the noonday sun. The polar bears are buying Speedos and lining up at the local Artic Circle Brazilian bikini waxer. And the penguins are taking off their tuxedos and going au naturale. If it gets any worse, the seas will begin to boil.

But what about the fish? Surely somebody is thinking about them.

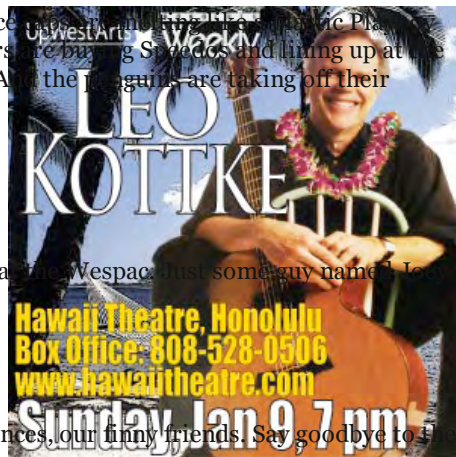
Well, somebody is. And no, not the folks at Wespac, but some guy named Leo Skaggs.

And he's apparently come up with a pretty fair trade.

Say goodbye to cramped coral reef residences, our funny friends. Say goodbye to nasty moray eels down the block. Say goodbye to the overgrown kelp in the front yard. And say home sweet home to the latest in upscale aquarium living - fish condos.

Skaggs' condos—complete with kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms and baths—are just the sort of place that the upwardly mobile guppie would want to settle into and raise a school.

Bollocks, you say. What does a fish need with a sleigh bed, a Cuisinart and a flush toilet, you ask? After all, the idea that a little beastie that can't remember the previous two seconds needs a pimped-out pad is as ridiculous as a cathouse for dogs or a priest peddling around a portable confessional booth or a pill derived from cockroaches that can cure arthritis, acne, anemia and muscle cramps, and, get this, protect you from the fallout if and when Kim Jung Il gets lucky and lobs a thermonuclear at Hawai'i.



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Of course, some folks didn't see it that way back in 1983 when Skaggs first came up with the idea of selling high-end aquariums for snooty fishes. *Life* magazine, *Good Morning America*, CBS News, *New York Magazine*, all took Skaggs and his project seriously. The story even went worldwide. But apparently nobody got the joke. Nobody called Skaggs' commercial venture for what it actually was - shibai.

'It became a phenomenon, and all it was, was a satirical commentary on the gentrification of neighborhoods. Everything was going condo. And I decided we're destroying the planet, the air, the soil, the ocean, so pretty soon the fish will need better homes,' he says.

Oddly enough, the media hoax paid off in more ways than one. Not only did Skaggs get to skewer the Izod-wearing, Huey Lewis-listening, 'Born in the U.S.A.'-misinterpreting, greed-is-good yuppies of the early '80s, the prank gave the prankster a lift for years to come. Museums and art galleries asked to display his guppie aquariums, and after years of nagging, Neiman Marcus finally convinced Skaggs to manufacture fish condos for their customers. They sold for \$5,000 a pop.

It wasn't the last time the master manipulator pulled one over on the media. Hell, it wasn't even the first.

The aforementioned cathouse for dogs, the cure-all roach pill, the peddling priests, each began as an idea in Skaggs' head, and through a lot of careful planning, an assist or two from friends and the ability to keep a straight face when talking to eager reporters, they all became full-scale media hoaxes, the kind that show up in the local papers, the kind that appear on the nightly news, the kind that you and your coworkers chat about around the water cooler.

'I use the media like a painter uses canvas. I use it to create plausible but nonexistent realities that are staged for the media and consequently the public,' he says. 'I even do it in the public. It's like a guerrilla theater-type of conceptual performance.'

Why does he do it? Is it because Joey Skaggs is rat bastard? Is it because he blames the liberal media for all that is wrong in this country? Nope. Joey Skaggs is a prankster because he wants us to be better than what we are. He wants to shake us out of our complacent ways. He wants us to get off our self-absorbed behinds and look at ourselves in the mirror and see the petty prejudices, fears and follies that control us.

'We all pretty much believe what we are told. We are raised that way. We are deceived from childhood on, you know—the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, whatever else you want to feed your kids,' Skaggs says.

Over the course of his career, Skaggs, who now divides his time between residences in Kaua'i and Manhattan, has used pranks to comment on the issues of the day. For him, a media hoax is a biting piece of satire brought to life.

He highlighted the failures of the judicial system and satirized the current wave of celebrity trials with a 1995 prank about a computer program that would make judges and juries obsolete. The program was called appropriately enough Solomon, and it always delivered the correct verdict. To prove the program worked, Skaggs put O.J. Simpson on trial. The Juice, of course, was found guilty. (CNN fell victim to this hoax. In fact, the cable news network didn't even ask to see Solomon in action.)

In 1986 he satirized fad weight loss diets with the creation of the Fat Squad, a weight-loss group that would make sure that you never—and we mean never—cheat on your diet. In order to do that, customers would be followed around 24/7 by a 'commando' who would employ any means necessary to stop its clients from picking up that Twinkie, including beating them silly. (Say 'You've just been punk'd' to the



VITALS

- Born 1945 in New York City.
- Attended the High School of Art and Design and the School of Visual Arts.
- Spent most of his life in New York City, living in the East Village, Greenwich Village and SoHo.
- Visted Lihu'e, Kaua'i, in 1980, and immediately fell in love with the Islands. He now lives in a house he built in Anahola. 'I've always thought that New York represents the most amazing accomplishments of humanity. Traveling around the Hawaiian Islands, I think that Hawai'i represents the incredible power and creativity of nature,' Skaggs says. 'I wanted to have both in my life, so I have made both places my home.'
- Skaggs now divides his time between New York City and Kaua'i.

Washington Post, The Philadelphia Inquirer and Good Morning America.)

A 1983 hoax involving the Gypsies Against Stereotypical Propaganda was one of Skaggs' more superficially silly pranks—but one that in hindsight is one of his more thoughtful commentaries, shedding light on both bigotry and political correctness.

The gist of the prank: Fortune telling gypsies living in New York City were going on strike—giving up their professions as tarot- and palm-readers—until somebody, anybody, renamed the offensively named Gypsy moth. They picketed. They protested. They even marched in front of the governor's office.

The ridiculousness of the group's name, G.A.S.P., and the straight-from-the-Hollywood-supply-closet-of-stock-characters-and-stereotypes that Skaggs and company used in their portrayal of gypsies should have clued in both the press and the public. But that's not how prejudice works. It blinds.

Then again, the group's insistence that the Gypsy moth's name be changed—a rather laughably impossible request—also mocked the protest-everything politics of the aggrieved and easily offended. Heady stuff. (*The New York Times* printed a story on this one, and— this is rare in Skaggs' history—a retraction.)

Hawai'i even got in on the action in 1993 when a man named J.J. Skaggs set off from Kaua'i to California on a sailboard with a backpack of beef stew and little else. Many didn't think twice about the sheer stupidity of the feat.

Skaggs succeeds because people want to believe in the miraculous. 'We tend to suspend critical analysis for wishful thinking. I point that out by creating these absurd, almost fantastical, staged events with obvious clues, and yet I am still able to repeatedly access the media, sometimes even the same news source over and over again,' Skaggs says. 'I'm always scratching my head, 'How did I get away with that?' But amazingly and sadly in most instances, I do.'

One journalist even fell for two pranks. The first was the fish condo story. The second was Skaggs' 1992 Portafess prank at the Democratic National Convention in New York City. While the master prankster pedaled around a bicycle with a custom-built confessional booth attached to the rear, rickshaw-style, Skaggs found himself immediately the center of attention. He actually had to turn people away; the only folks actually allowed to confess were friends of his who were playing the roles of needy sinners.

The media was no less enraptured. Including the reporter he had tricked before. 'Here I am pedaling the confessional booth and I go, 'Oh no. He's going to look at me and go, Joey Skaggs, I got you,' he says. 'The clothes made the man. He did not recognize me. He thought I was priest, and that was it.'

But not every journalist is so inattentive. 'The media of course is irresponsible and gullible at times. There are Jimmy Olsens, but there are journalists that do a fine job of seeking the truth and putting it out there. But my work is not just to illustrate how irresponsible journalists are,' Skaggs says. 'It's a way in which to bring light to issues I believe are relevant.'

Irresponsible or not, journalists are always looking for the sex appeal of any story. Some have it. Some don't. Skaggs' stories almost always do. 'There has to be an element that promises you a great visual, a really good press release. Journalists have to see a pay off. And it's got to be somehow some sort of truism, something that is culturally happening,' he says. 'You have to raise your antennae and tune in to where we are going and how you want to say something very specific about something that is either disturbing or absurd.'

Pulling off a prank is no easy task. Some can be accomplished with a press release and a fax machine, while others, like the Final Curtain or BioPEEP, may take months if not a year or more to pull together. 'It's like doing a film or a theater piece. You have to work it out, write it out, execute it, produce it, direct it. You have to look at what it takes to pull it off, the production. Do I need people? Do I need props? What kind of location do I need? There is a lot of staging to do it. It's not just like *Candid Camera* or an instant prank.'

As much fun as it is to stage a hoax, Skaggs says that when the curtain is pulled back to reveal that the great and powerful Oz is only a crafty man pulling levers and pushing pedals, that's the true magic moment. 'I believe that the revelation of the

hoax is the most important aspect of what it is I do in perpetrating the hoax because that is where consciousness is changed. That is where we go, [poof] everything I believed before isn't true. That is the moment of realization, the revelation that I strive for. 'Oh shit, I believed that?' That distinguishes art from a con. I'm not a con artist,' Skaggs says. 'Ultimately, what my work is all about is who are you, what do you believe, how did you come to those beliefs, do you ever question the source you base your beliefs on? If not, why not?'

And if it's the media on which you base your beliefs on, perhaps it might be a good idea to reconsider. They control the gates through which information passes and they decide what gets through. 'They define it every day, in every way. They define it by how they present it, how it is interpreted, and we define it by how we interpret what they are interpreting. From what's fashionable to going to war, from what we wear and what we eat to what we believe,' Skaggs says.

He adds, 'If I can do it as an individual—access the national news, the national media—with a relatively ridiculous concept, how easy it is for people who have another agenda to manipulate what we think and exploit that.'

Joey Skaggs' greatest hits

Skaggs first came to the attention of the press in 1966 after he unveiled a mock-up of a decaying corpse nailed to a cross on Easter in New York City. This decidedly gruesome and morbid **Easter Sunday crucifixion**, as if there is any other kind, was created to protest 'the hypocrisy of the Church and man's inhumanity to man.' Needless to say, folks got plenty P.O.ed. Other crucifixion protests followed over the years. Skaggs also built a **Vietnamese Nativity**, featuring a Vietnamese family as Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus. He intended to burn the piece as an anti-war protest, but was thwarted by police.

The Cathouse for Dogs hoax (1976) was Skaggs' first proper media-focused prank. **The Celebrity Sperm Bank** followed later that year. In the following 10 years, Skaggs pulled off some of his best media hoaxes—the **Metamorphosis Cockroach Vitamin Pill**, an unbelievable cure-all (1981); the **Gypsies Against Stereotypical Propaganda** (1982), who found the name of the gypsy moth to be offensive; the too-good-to-be-true sports story of J.J. Skaggs and his attempt to **Windsurf from Hawai'i to California** (1983); the Fish Condos, for the upwardly mobile guppie (1983); the anti-crosswalk, ticket-writing Gestapo agents of Walk Right (1984); and the diet-enforcing thugs known as the **Fat Squad** (1986).

In 1986, Skaggs promised to hold an **April Fool's Day Parade** in New York City. It didn't happen. Every year since, Skaggs has announced the details of the parade, and each year the parade doesn't take place. It remains a yearly ritual.

In 1991, he hoaxed both **Geraldo Rivera** and the game show **To Tell the Truth**.

The satirist joined forces with the British television show *The Word* in 1995. The prank centered around a form of therapy in which participants get down on all fours and growl like lions. Several U.K. media organizations were fooled by the so-wacky-it's-got-to-be-real therapy sessions being offered by African-born guru **Baba Wa Simba**, played by Skaggs.

Skaggs went global with his most elaborate hoax to date—**BioPEEP** (1998). The hook: A corporation has discovered a way to addict consumers to its products by using foodborne viruses to alter their DNA. To make it seem real, the prankster built a website for an activist organization, the People for Ethical Evolutionary Practices, with access to top-secret info. The site included links to memos, undercover photographs and computer files. Bogus protests were held in Australia and in New York City. Hands down Skaggs' crowning achievement.

The Final Curtain (2000) captured the imagination of the media, thanks in part to a well constructed website (www.finalcurtain.com) and a grim but funny premise. The prank centered around the construction of a cemetery/theme park featuring such fanciful creations as neon-light tombstones and a grave site that showed a time-elapsed video of the decaying corpse below.

The **Universal Bullshit Detector Watch** went on sale just in time for the 2006 holiday season. As the ad copy says, 'It flashes. It moos. It poops. It also tells time'

([www.bswatch.com]).

In 2006 *Honolulu Weekly* is duped by Joey Skaggs. We're not sure what he did, but we're guessing he fooled us somehow.

(Source: [JoeySkaggs.com]; [Wikipedia.com])

Five great media hoaxes

Orson Welles and the War of the Worlds (1938): Many who tuned into this groundbreaking broadcast were convinced that the Martians had landed in Groves Mill, N.J., and mankind's days were numbered. Needless to say, the show caused quite a stir and Welles became a star. Years after his death, Welles played a key role in a hoax by comic book author Mark Millar, who had uncovered the *Citizen Kane* director's long lost notes for a Batman film starring Basil Rathbone as the Dark Knight and James Cagney as the Joker.

The photo of the Loch Ness Monster (1934). You've seen the definitive photo of Nessie—that blurry black and white image of what could be a hand sticking up out of the water, a branch or Nessie's reptilian head. It's as ubiquitous as Rachael Ray. In 1994, a prankster confessed to the hoax, stating that Nessie was nothing more than a toy sub with a dinosaur-head-like attachment.

Bigfoot caught on film (1967). For years, the fuzzed-out film footage caught of Bigfoot in the mountains of California was touted as the real deal. Years later, it was revealed that it was simply a man in a monkey suit running through the woods. (And frankly, who hasn't done that before?) But what ultimately brought Bigfoot to life was the out-of-focus film. Millions were suckered, and Leonard Nimoy discovered a career rebirth as the host of *In Search Of*.

Paul McCartney leaves the Beatles—for the afterlife (1966). The Paul that played on 'Please Please Me' was not the same Paul that sang 'Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da.' Nope. The real Macca died in a motorcycle accident and was replaced by a look-alike. In fact, John Lennon admits as much at the end of 'Strawberry Fields Forever' when he says 'I buried Paul.' Or at least that's what a few zonked out hippies believed back in the '60s.

Milli Vanilli sings (1988). Neither Milli nor Vanilli sang on their debut Grammy Award-winning debut. They were simply two models who producers thought would look good on MTV. The real singers were simply session singers. After Milli Vanilli was repeatedly caught lip-syncing in concert, the truth was revealed—Rob and Fab were fakes. Truth be told: There's nothing particularly embarrassing about falling for this hoax. The same can't be said of buying the album. (Source: The Museum of Hoaxes)