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Interview with Donny Moss

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **DONNY MOSS** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 237.*

ALESSANDRA: This next TV guest has long been a powerful voice for animals in New York City. Donny Moss is the filmmaker behind *Blinders: The Truth Behind the Tradition*, a documentary that sheds light upon New York City's inhumane and unsafe horse drawn carriage industry. In this segment, Donny will update us on the politics surrounding what has become one of the biggest hot button issues for Mayor de Blasio's administration. You can find Donny's work at blindersthemovie.com.

JASMIN: Welcome to Our Hen House, Donny.

DONNY: Thank you for having me.

JASMIN: Horse drawn carriages, it is everywhere!

MARIANN: We're glad to have you, such an important issue.

JASMIN: You are going where not enough people are going, but you are doing it in such a big way that people are looking and they're noticing. And this is a hot button issue in the media in New York City and well beyond New York City too.

MARIANN: Yeah, it has really exploded of late. Before we really start talking about the political issues though, can you give us a snapshot into exactly what is wrong with the carriage industry in your opinion, from the point of view of the horses?

DONNY: Horses are living, breathing animals, but by forcing them to pull carriages in the congested streets of Midtown Manhattan with aggressive taxi drivers and double decker tour buses and ambulances, we're treating them like inanimate objects, like motor vehicles. It's inhumane, it's unsafe for the horses, and it's unsafe for us 'cause horses are prey animals. When they spook and bolt down a busy street, they become weapons.

JASMIN: Well, so many people, especially tourists, think that they live in Central Park. But where do they live, Donny? What is their housing situation?

DONNY: There are four stables on the Far West Side of Manhattan which are up to two miles away from 59th Street, which is where they work.

JASMIN: Two miles, wow.

DONNY: And they are commuting through rush hour traffic twice a day. It's completely insane, it's totally anachronistic. How is it possible that we have beasts of burden pulling carriages in the 21st century streets of New York City?

MARIANN: Yeah, I think it's even worse than it used to be. People think it harkens back to those days, but we didn't have all these cars on the streets in those days. And people knew how to take care of horses. I think you're exactly right. People just think of them as another form of transportation. Back in the day people knew they were horses and they knew they had to be taken care of. But why can't they be in Central Park?

DONNY: Central Park is, first of all, it's a public park, and secondly it's a landmark. And the idea that the city of New York is gonna turn over public land, many, many acres of it, for stables and pastures and a hack line for a private, all-cash business, it's never gonna happen.

MARIANN: No, and it shouldn't happen. That's not what Central Park should be used for, I don't think. They shouldn't be out there. But can you talk a little bit about this idea that they would graze -- if they're not grazing in Central Park, where are they grazing?

DONNY: That's one of the issues that makes this industry inherently inhumane, which is there is no pasture in New York City. They're either stuck between the shafts of their carriages for nine hours a day breathing car exhaust, or they're confined to their stalls on the second and third story of these warehouses. They never have the opportunity to graze, run, roll, or interact physically, which is what herd animals do. They've been stripped of everything. For what?

JASMIN: Yeah, for what? Exactly. Do they get into accidents, Donny?

DONNY: There have been so many accidents over the years. And it's only in recent times when people have mobile devices that we've been able to capture so many. But when I was making *Blinders*, I spoke to so many people who live in Hell's Kitchen, which is where the horses have to travel through, who told me of accidents where horses collapsed and died, spooked and crashed into cars, and they were cleaned up before any even press got there, so we don't know how many accidents there have been over the years.

JASMIN: Wow, it's unbelievable. And the media is not reporting this the way they should be. The media has been just --

MARIANN: Yeah, there was an accident just a few weeks ago I think that really got very little coverage and yet the horse and carriage industry is getting a lot of coverage from some of the papers, but not exactly the coverage we would want. Can you talk a little bit about that, especially what's going on at the *Daily News*?

DONNY: The *Daily News* is supposed to be a news organization but they have become an advertorial for the horse drawn carriage trade. And people don't understand why because they're compromising their own journalistic integrity. One can surmise that they're using this issue to discredit and cripple Mayor de Blasio, who they did not endorse in the primary and don't want to have a second term. And because this is such a complicated issue with all of these alleged real estate connections, they've been able to confuse the public into thinking

that they really care about the horse drawn carriage industry when what they're really doing is trying to take down the mayor.

MARIANN: Trying to take down the mayor, yeah. They try to make it a complicated issue, but it really isn't that complicated an issue. But Mayor de Blasio did promise that this would be one of his objectives during his first term, to get rid of this horrible, horrible industry and move on. What's going on with that? Is that gonna happen?

DONNY: The mayor consistently conveys his point of view that horses shouldn't be working with cars in Midtown Manhattan, that they don't belong there, and we appreciate that as advocates. The problem is the media has run away with a narrative and the mayor hasn't attempted to take control over it and as a result the public support for a ban has diminished greatly. So now the job of implementing a ban is much greater now than it would have been if he had done it right when he became mayor and he had so much support for whatever he was gonna do.

MARIANN: It really is extraordinary how much power the papers have to change people's attitude. But the stories that have been coming out of all of the New York papers, all of the major New York papers, has really been anti-horse.

DONNY: I should just point out that the *New York Times*, which should be on the right side of history here, is not, and we learned recently that there's a conflict of interest. The head of the editorial board has a brother who is a competitive horse drawn carriage racer.

MARIANN: Like, who even ever heard of competitive horse drawn carriage racers? Like, who are these people? It's craziness.

JASMIN: We have a lot of opinions on animal issues.

MARIANN: I have to say, the horses, I can't walk in Hell's Kitchen, I really can't. It upsets me so much to see those horses and to see how people don't see them.

JASMIN: Yeah, but there's a great deal of organized opposition to the animal rights crowd from a lot of industries that exploit animals, many, many different industries. But the carriage horse industry, it can be a little scary. And they just seem so powerful. We're talking about the media outlets, and it's sort of inexplicable what's going on. You've been out there fighting this for a long time. Does this ever scare you? Are you ever intimidated by them?

DONNY: I've received physical threats on a number of occasions in writing, so I choose not to allow it to scare me. And they've also threatened to sue me for making *Blinders*, but they never did because everything in *Blinders* is factual. I think part of the reason they have accumulated so much power is because they have the Teamsters behind them now. Why, we don't know, because it's really a small industry and most of the carriage drivers aren't members, so it's another mystery.

MARIANN: There are so many complex political mysteries around this issue, but when it comes to the horses it's really not that complicated. One of the things that's claimed is that if we end the industry, these horses will all end up in slaughterhouses. Can you address that? None of us want that to happen.

DONNY: Of course not. And the people perpetuating the threat that these horses will be slaughtered are the very people who claim to love them, the carriage drivers. But the truth is that many of the organizations who are working to take these horses out of harm's way have been approached by rescuers who have volunteered to take these horses. So these horses will actually be rescued. I think a more important question is what happens to all of these horses now when they can no longer pull carriages in the streets? The Department of Health, from the rolls of the Department of Health, each year 71 horses vanish. There is no way the industry's paying for humane retirement for 71 horses a year. They're being sent to auction.

MARIANN: Yeah. Presumably if they were doing that, they would be telling us about it.

JASMIN: Right, exactly.

MARIANN: And establishing it, yeah.

JASMIN: There's reportedly a difference of opinion among horse advocates as to whether they should be replaced with retro electric cars. Can you explain what the issues are?

DONNY: Sure. Well, there are two alternatives that have been proposed. One is an electric vintage car, and one is simply motorizing the existing carriages. And either of these options would be fine for the advocates. Our priority is taking these horses out of harm's way. Whatever they're replaced with is really of no concern to us. But what's interesting here is never before in a campaign to help animals have you seen advocates actually trying to help the people who will be displaced, and that's what's happening here. But there's been no acknowledgement of that by the industry.

MARIANN: No. Yeah, things happen, laws change. Are we never to reform anything? People are employed doing all sorts of things. And I am all for employment and helping people get jobs and full employment. I want that to happen, but why should these horses be held hostage to that idea? People should have jobs, but they don't have to have this job.

DONNY: Jobs are never an excuse for the inhumane treatment of animals, nor is tradition, which is the other excuse being thrown around. If Barcelona can ban bullfighting, which one could argue really was a tradition there, then New York City can take these horse and buggies out of Midtown.

MARIANN: Well, can we talk a little bit about what is going on in other countries? Because we've heard that horse and carriages have been banned in major cities around the world, and then we've heard recently from the *Daily News* that that's not true.

DONNY: Consider the source.

MARIANN: Can you address that?

DONNY: Sure. The *Daily News* specifically said that Paris and London have horse drawn carriage trades. But they don't. I lived in London, and there is no place in London for a tourist to go to hop on a horse drawn carriage ride. They're used for state functions, so on occasion you might see one in the street. And in Paris, I actually called the company online that claims to have horse drawn carriages. And when I spoke to the proprietor he said they have one carriage. The rest were taken out of the streets years ago. And it has to be hired

in advance and they're limited to very specific areas. And it just goes to show how manipulative and deceptive the media is.

MARIANN: That's a very different situation. So they're not banned from being in the city if somebody hires them, but they don't have a business where they're lined up waiting for tourists to get in and be driven around.

DONNY: There are 68 carriages riding through Midtown in Times Square, Rockefeller Center. You cannot go to London, Paris, or the other cities that we've claimed don't have them and find these carriages, horse drawn carriages in the streets.

MARIANN: That really is deceptive. Can you talk a little bit about the limitations on when they can work? Because there's quite a bit brooded about that, "Oh, there are these laws in effect and their working hours are limited." What are those limitations?

DONNY: Well, they are supposed to only work nine hours a day, "only."

MARIANN: Yeah, nine hours straight. No break.

DONNY: They shouldn't be working any hours a day. And the law requires them to have 15-minute breaks every two hours. But who is enforcing that law? It's not like there are people from the Department of Health or the Department of Consumer Affairs monitoring the activities of the horse drawn carriage drivers.

MARIANN: Really, how would you enforce that law? That's just impossible to think about enforcing that law. It's one of those laws that's there just for effect.

JASMIN: Well, I'm curious about where the ASPCA stands on all of this. Where is their position on horses?

DONNY: The ASPCA unequivocally opposes the use of horse drawn carriages in Manhattan. The last time I checked it was on their homepage, and they have said that we will find homes for these horses.

MARIANN: Oh, that's great, I wasn't aware of that.

DONNY: The media doesn't report on that, though.

MARIANN: That's why I wasn't aware of it!

JASMIN: Exactly, they don't report on quite a lot. It's just crazy.

MARIANN: Yeah. So what about the cruelty law? That applies to these horses. Is it ever applied?

DONNY: The state cruelty laws?

MARIANN: The cruelty laws that ban cruelty to animals, 'cause some of this certainly is cruelty.

DONNY: We would hope that our elected officials would tap into state cruelty laws to take these horse drawn carriages off the streets but it hasn't happened. I guess they can be interpreted in different ways. There should also be -- look, the tourists who are taking these

rides are in open vehicles in the streets with motor vehicles, and they don't have seatbelts, they don't have helmets. When a horse spooks and bolts down a street and dumps people out of a carriage --

JASMIN: Yeah, but it's so romantic!

DONNY: Right.

JASMIN: It's just so sweet.

DONNY: But the reason I bring that up is to say you would think there would be liability and public safety issues that could be used to shut this down, not just humane issues.

MARIANN: Enormous ones. It's so inexplicable that this still continues.

JASMIN: Do you think that people have a blind spot, so to speak, when it comes to carriage horses because it just harkens back to our past and it seems so innocent? Do people really still think it's that innocent?

DONNY: Look, I think they're lined up there on 59th Street, and I'm sure many people make the assumption that if they're there, right in public view, then they must be okay and they must live in Central Park and the drivers must love their horses because that's their bread and butter.

MARIANN: They say they do all the time.

JASMIN: Yeah, they love them.

DONNY: But they're commodities! It's much less expensive for them to sell their horse at auction and buy a new one than it is to provide veterinary care and to help a sick horse. They're commodities.

JASMIN: Well, there's a lot to think about here and thankfully you have the film *Blinders* and I hope that people can watch your film. They could learn more about *Blinders* on the website for *Blinders*, which, can you tell us what that is?

DONNY: Sure. It's www.blindersthemovie.com and there's a link to rent it on Amazon.

JASMIN: Excellent. And I'm so grateful to you, Donny, for joining us today on Our Hen House.