

Written Transcript of Our Hen House Podcast Interview with Eric Mills

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JASMIN: I'm very excited to have a second interview for you today and this one is with Eric Mills, who has been involved in the animal rights world for decades, and he is the founder and coordinator of the Oakland-based group Action for Animals. He's going to be talking to us today about something that we actually haven't talked about on our podcast nearly as much as I would have liked to have happened, so Eric is gonna turn that around right now. And he's gonna be telling us about the incredible work that he's been doing to fight the rodeo industrial complex.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Eric.

ERIC: Oh, thanks so much, Jasmin, good to be here.

JASMIN: We're very excited to have you. You've been working on campaigns against the rodeo for over 30 years. We want to dig in, Eric, 'cause this is just tremendous information you have, and experience. We want to find out what has changed in that time, but first let's take a step back. Can you give us the nutshell version of how rodeos exploit and abuse animals?

ERIC: Oh, boy. 'Cause my Grandmama used to say, "Don't play with your food." Most of the rodeo animals are en route to the slaughterhouse anyway, so it seems really strange to me that we have to abuse them before they get there. Keep in mind too that most of the rodeo is bogus from the get-go. Real working cowboys never routinely rode bulls or wrestled steers or rode bareback or tried to tie up a calf in eight seconds flat. You could do that to a dog and they would put you in jail and probably burn down the arena too. So why is this okay? I've always found it intriguing that the cowboys always name the horses and the bulls, but never the calves, the cows, the steers, which bear the brunt of most of the rodeo. So it just needs to go.

I got a wonderful letter in support of my work back in the 1990s from Cesar Chavez, the late founder and president of United Farm Workers, opposing all rodeos across the board. It's just, it's a macho exercise in domination, it's connected with sexism. Women are allowed to do only the barrel racing event and the cowboys look down on them for that. I got an extraordinary quote from an 18-year-old rodeo queen in Oregon about 10 years ago in a book called, let's see, *Rodeo Queens and the American Dream*, in which she says, "Me and my rodeo friends really hate Democrats, environmentalists, and gay people." Isn't that lovely? Well, as it happens, I fall in all three of those categories, so that really perked up my ears. I like the cowboys and they think it's a way of life that we're attacking. I said, "No, it's cruelty, it's irrelevant who's doing it."

I got an email last year from one of the Mexican rodeo promoters, the charreada, referring to "me and my legion of poor, white trash, racist friends." Isn't that lovely? So I said, "I'll give you three out of four, Mr. [indistinguishable] maybe: poor, white, and trash. But where'd you get the racist nonsense?" He said, "Well, you're picking on only the Mexican-American charros." I said, "You're the only ones who are

doing it! What am I supposed to do, pick up the NAACP?" No, we ran the black rodeo out of San Francisco and a gay rodeo, marched in the parade for, I think 17 years, organized a group called Gays and Friends for Animal Rights, then one of our signs got a lot of publicity called "Queers for Steers." Well, why not? What we do to animals, we probably should all go to hell for.

MARIANN: So what exactly does -- what would you say is the worst thing that you'd find at -- and let's not do the charreada yet, let's talk about just a good old American rodeo. What would you say is the worst event?

ERIC: Hands down, it's an event called "single steer roping" or "steer busting." It's a PRCA, and that stands for the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, they put on about 5,000 rodeos I think around the country ever year. It's so bad that it's presented only in eight or ten western states. It's a steer running full speed down the length of the arena, cowboy on horseback, lassos being around the head, horns, and then those -- they loosen the rope over the right haunch of the steer, rides his horse off at that angle, full speed and the steer of course switches directions 180 degrees, it's like cracking a whip. The intent is to knock the animal unconscious so that the cowboy can run back and tie him up. Well, a lot of these animals are routinely crippled and killed. Anybody in doubt should see SHARK, it's Steve Hindi's group out of close to Chicago, they've done a lot of good video work on this on YouTube. It is brutal, brutal stuff.

But after that I think the worst of it is calf roping, which is also a standard event, it's done in every state where rodeo takes place. And these are quite often unweaned babies. Babies! It's like the Canadian harp seals. Like, you don't do it to babies, damn it. It's bad enough that the adults get it. But as I say, a lot of these animals are jerked down. I was at the Salinas Rodeo, it's called the California Rodeo in Salinas, 1995, when five animals were killed. One of them was a calf in a roping event who suffered a broken back. They did not euthanize him, they sent him off to slaughter. It took two days. I talked to the attending veterinarian, now retired, Dr. Gary Deter. I said, "Doc, did he get any painkillers?" He said, "Oh no, that ruins the meat for human consumption."

JASMIN: Ugh. Wow.

ERIC: Gee. I said, "Your rodeo brings in 16 million dollars a year, at the time." I said, "So you let that baby suffer for two days, terrified and in agony, to save 125 bucks." I said, "Thank you, sir, I think your license should have been revoked for malpractice." Veterinarians are often not the friends of animals that they should be.

JASMIN: Yeah, I know. Every now and then you run into one who is and it is unfortunately refreshing. I wish it weren't refreshing. I wish it was standard. But Eric, what is a -- I'm probably going to say it wrong, but a charreada, a Mexican rodeo? Can you explain what that is?

ERIC: You did it well.

JASMIN: I did it okay?

ERIC: Yeah. So the charreada features nine standard events, only three of which are identical to the US rodeos. It's bull riding, bareback bronc riding, and team roping. But they have three events which involve the roping of the legs of running horses at full gallop

JASMIN: Ugh.

ERIC: Then yank their legs out from under them. Another event which I think is even worse is called steer tailing. I got it banned here in Alameda County where I live back in 1993. In this one a steer runs down a long straightaway into the circular arena. A charro, a Mexican cowboy, comes up behind him on horseback, grabs him by the tail, then wraps his tail around his leg and stirrup and rides his horse at a full gallop.

MARIANN: Oh, my God!

ERIC: And so the stirrup in there slams him to the ground. Horns can get broken. I've seen, have video footage of tails being stripped to the bone. They even have a word for it called "degloving." And horses sometimes get their legs broken when the steers run the wrong way. It's not a standard ranching practice anywhere in this country, and yet charreada is the national sport of Mexico. I love the irony. As we speak, there's a bill on the desk of the president of Mexico to outlaw circus animals throughout the entire country. Extraordinary. Colombia has already banned these things, and Greece and Israel and the United Kingdom. The United States is a third world country insofar as animal welfare concerns are involved, sometimes I think. We can do lots better without much effort. But to brutalize and maim animals in the name of entertainment, I think is beyond appeal.

MARIANN: I totally agree. And I think that our audience by now is about ready to just pass out with misery. And it is true that the United States is so far behind so many other countries. But you have indeed had some successes, you mentioned one, in campaigning against this horrific industry. Let's change the tone a little bit and talk about, what are some of the successes of at least limiting some of the worst brutality at rodeos that you've had on a local state and even national level I understand? Can you tell us what changes there *have* been for the better?

ERIC: Yeah. I think probably the best thing I've been able to do, back in 1999, my local state senator, Don Perata here in Oakland introduced a bill at my request, and it passed, and it got weakened a bit. As written, it would have required an onsite veterinarian at every rodeo and charreada in the state to take care of injured animals. They already require ambulances and paramedics for the cowboys, and rightly so, but why not for the animals? But the PRCA, Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, saw fit to weaken the bill to allow for an on-call veterinarian able to get there in an hour. I said, "Excuse me, would you let a cowboy lie there for an hour with a broken back waiting for an ambulance? Of course not."

So I'm trying to get this thing amended this year to require either a veterinarian onsite *or* a registered veterinary technician, and there are about 7500 of those folks in the state. They will work for far cheaper than the regular cowboys would, and would be far more inclined to summon an on-call veterinarian when necessary. That law has been in effect for 15 years now, and in all that time we have had fewer than 30 injuries total for the 15 years. There should be 60 to 100 reports every year. It's quite clear that the on-call vets are not being called and the animals are suffering needlessly.

Interestingly the charreadas have registered about 800, my charro friends tell me. In the state where they did horse tripping and steer tailing, they have not had a single injury report in 15 years, not one. I think you better look for a star in the east, it's a freaking miracle. There's no way in hell that could be true. It's basically we're trying to clean up the slave waters when the whole institution should be abolished. It's just, it's macho, it's sexist, it's brutal, and it's all done for money and glory. A lot of these cowboys are making millions off the backs literally of these animals.

JASMIN: And now it's 2015 and you'd think people would know better than to support a rodeo and yet so many people still see it as just clean, all-American fun. What would you say are the greatest challenges in changing hearts and minds about rodeos?

ERIC: I just read a great book by George Carlin, the late comic. He says, "All men are stupid and all women are crazy, and the women are crazy *because* the men are stupid." And that's part of the problem. Isn't that good? And most of the problems on the planet, 95% I bet, are caused by men. It's all that macho attitude: "I could do what I want." It's like the bumper strip says: "We're not the only animal on the planet, we just act like it." Well, we're losing about 30,000 species of plants and animals now, just because of human impact. The world is in serious shape now, and then to screw over these animals just for a good time. I'll give the charros, the Mexican rodeos, great credit, they don't make any money off this. They do it for family and prestige and maybe a trophy, it's grandfathers and sons and children. So we're making some headway there.

What I would love to see happen -- as far as I know the California state law is the only one in the country which does anything for rodeo animals. I'm hoping people might go online and look up penal code 596.7, the California law, and adopt something similar around the country. The new sessions start in January. And if you're not political, you're dead in the water as far as animal welfare is concerned, I think. We really need to get good people in politics who will help animals. And there are many who go up with good intentions but animals have neither a voice or a vote or a dollar, so it's up to us to speak up for them.

MARIANN: Yeah, and I think people need to remember they might not be aware of it but rodeo is all over the country. This is not just a western issue. I know there are plenty of rodeos right here in New York State. And sadly I know that this macho attitude, there are no exceptions within the gay community. Can you tell us about the gay rodeo industry? It's just, it's so disappointing to me to even have to say those words, "the gay rodeo industry."

ERIC: Yeah. Talk about unclear on the concept. I've been arguing with those folks for a number of years too. We ran the gay rodeo out of San Francisco, there was a lot of hoopla against it. They think they're trying to preserve the western lifestyle and they get a lot of flak from their straight counterparts in the rodeo world, so they put on a gay rodeo, which is good in the aspect at least that the women and men can compete competitively with one another, unlike the straight rodeo world. But most of the gay rodeo cowboys don't even know how to ride a horse. And they do stupid events like, what's it called, shoot dogging. It's like steer wrestling but there's no horse involved, you're just in the shoot with the steer and they open the gate and you try to wrestle him to the ground. They have another silly event called the wild cow drag, where three people dressed in clothing of the opposite sex try to drag this poor steer across the finish line. To their credit they do require a veterinarian on site, but I said, "This is silly." I said, "You're doing to animals exactly what's been done to gay people for millennia. Get a grip!" It's just unclear on the concept, it just does not follow at all. And gay folks of all folks need to do better.

Of course there's a black rodeo, there's a junior rodeo, the Bill Pickett Rodeo which is all black. And Bill's claim to fame was inventing the steer wrestling event, which is also called bulldogging. What Bill did was bite the steer in the nose and lip so that the pain kept the animal on the ground. Lovely, huh? That's illegal but it's still done.

The best thing that's happened recently is thanks to SHARK's videos, the state bill which I did 15 years ago requires that injury reports be submitted to the state veterinary medical board within 48 hours of the end of the rodeo. And nobody followed that at the time and it turned out to be the best thing in the law because as I said in those 15 years we've had only 30 reports submitted so just this week, Steve Hindi was part of a lawsuit filed by the Animal Legal Defense Fund here in Cotati, California, and Steve at the California Rodeo in Salinas this year filmed 19 incidents all in the team roping event, interestingly, where hurt animals were limping around on three legs. They were either broken or dislocated, I'm not sure which. But of those 19, only one was submitted to the state vet board as required by law. The lawsuit was just filed; it's getting a lot of press. I'm hoping it's gonna inspire some good legislation around the country. I know a veterinarian who was in charge back in 2010. He confirmed to me that three roping calves had their legs broken in the roping event, had to be euthanized, and yet the law had been in effect 10 years and he had never heard of it.

MARIANN: This is exactly what happens with so many issues where laws are passed to protect animals. They don't enforce themselves and unfortunately too often the government doesn't enforce them either. And it's animal activists and animal lawyers who have to step up to the plate and see that they're enforced, and I'm very glad to hear about this lawsuit.

ERIC: Yeah, we're always painted as the animal rights extremists. I said, "No, just play by the damn rules as you've got the right and I'd be happy."

MARIANN: Yeah, just follow the law.

ERIC: But they don't. And as G.B. Shaw said years ago about animal research, he said, "Anybody who does not hesitate to vivisect will not hesitate to lie about it." And they do, these are some of the biggest liars in the business.

MARIANN: Yeah. Enforcement is a really, really tough issue. When we asked you to appear on the podcast, I just wanted to ask this question 'cause I was so perplexed by it. You mentioned that you were just about to head off to a rodeo hearing in hopes of getting the Haywood Area Recreation and Park District to ban the wild cow milking contest.

ERIC: Yes.

MARIANN: What in the name of God is a wild cow milking contest?

ERIC: Yeah. People should go on Google and just write in that, just "wild cow milking contest." It's been a non-sanctioned event which they so anxious the cow, for the crowd pleasure. They let in a lactating cow, she obviously has a calf or she wouldn't be lactating, and a cowboy on horseback, lassos her and a cowboy on foot runs over and tries, wrestles her, holds her head steady while the other cowboy gets off his horse and puts a quarter inch of milk into a Coke bottle and runs back to the finish line. Well, last year, the video footage that a friend of mine, Shani Campbell took, the cow fell on this poor cowboy probably four times, I don't know why he wasn't killed. It's a big animal. And then she was dragging him across the arena with her tongue hanging out practically to her knees bawling in stress and fear, and the announcer was saying, I like this, I'll never forget it, he said, "She's peeing on him, she's peeing on him!" Well, yes she was, and as I pointed out to the board of directors at HARD, down at Hayward, I says, "It wasn't because she was pissed off, it's because she was stressed out."

And at this year's rodeo by God, one of these poor cows jumped the fence. I didn't know a cow could jump that high, more than five feet, landed on her head, broke her neck, and had to be euthanized and left an orphan calf. So we had a hearing in Hayward, it was about two weeks ago now, with a sea of cowboy hats and spurs, you could smell the testosterone. And one of the cowboys testified that the cow was suicidal. I couldn't believe it. Four of the board members sat there like bumps on a log and didn't say a word even though I'd met with them twice and they seemed very sympathetic. And so we were asking for a ban on this stupid wild cow milking contest, a ban on mutton busting where four- to six-year-old kids ride terrified sheep and to ban the use of the electric prod. Well, they did the exact opposite and they voted four to one to keep all that crap. And just a week later in Oakland where I live, the city council passed a ban on the use of bull hooks on circus elephants. They just stepped forward. We've had a law since 1989 I think which bans the use of electric prods on elephants, yet in Hayward they condone it. I said, "What is going on here?"

I just finished a wonderful book by E. O. Wilson, the noted biologist, and he says, "Mankind is innately dysfunctional." We are. Isn't that bizarre and so inconsistent?

JASMIN: Yeah, it's completely true that we are but there are people who are the opposite of that and you definitely spring to mind. You've been at this for a long time. When and how did you get started advocating for animals?

ERIC: Oh boy. I've been a birdwatcher since I was eight or ten years old and that's getting to 70 years ago now. I'm getting too old for this. But I've always had that innate love for animals like most children do until it gets educated out of them. I spent a lot of time on my grandparents' farm and then I came to California. What really got me involved, I was doing some volunteer work for Greenpeace and Earth Island Institute, and then so Cleveland Amory's book *Man Kind*, about hunting and trapping, and they had an office in San Francisco run by a dear friend who just died this year, Virginia Handley, she was the California coordinator, the best animal activist I've ever known in my life, she's just extraordinary and a walking encyclopedia. So I got to working with her.

And then in 1985 I think it was, I went to the Hayward Rowell Ranch Rodeo, no it was a rodeo at the ranch, it's not the official rodeo, and it's sponsored by the police department as a benefit for crippled children, Special Olympics. So at this event that year, a horse broke his leg in the shoot and he was down in the arena, couldn't get up, the cops were out there kicking him and using electric prods on him to get him on three feet. He finally hobbled out of the arena, no vet present. An hour later they got a cop's gun and shot him to death. The first three calves in the breakaway roping ran into the fence full speed and went down. I thought their necks had been broken so I raised hell with the police department and HARD and they promised me to have a vet there next year on site and to put up some signage on the fence so the animals could see where they were going. Otherwise they just see the fence and the fields beyond and they think they're home free and they don't know to stop.

So the next year, the very first came out of the shoot, no signage on the fence, ran into the fence, went down, broke his nose so badly that you could touch his forehead with his broken nose. No veterinarian present. We called one of our own who got there three hours later, and then along with that one of the most egregious things I've ever seen, they had an event called steer dressing, in which three cowboys, police officers in this case, force a steer to the ground and try to put women's lace panties on the hind legs. The steer is bawling, the cowboys are hollering and the announcer, I'll never forget this, bad grammar and all, "Take 'em down, boys, spread them legs, get them panties down!" I said, "Jesus Christ,

it sounds like a gang rape!” I’ve never been to one, but that’s exactly what it sounded like to me. And I made the same comment to the police department, and I said, “Don’t you find it ironic that police officers are crippling animals to help crippled children? What is the matter with you people?”

JASMIN: Wow, jeez. Well, you have been really at this for a long time. Tell me you see things changing for the better.

ERIC: Boy. That’s a hard one to call. I don’t know, really. We get some pretty good laws on the books but as you say, enforcement is key. I’d like to find some local animal control and SPCAs and humane societies who will pursue these things. Most of them just stand by and monitor. They need to go in there and raise some hell. We need to do some ballot initiatives. And speaking of which, now is the time to do that for city, county, and state. And with the lousy turnout we just had for the recent presidential election was about 45%, now is the perfect time to do ballot initiatives because it takes about 30% fewer signatures to qualify. So we need to do some for animals. I just saw a wonderful play about Molly Ivins, remember the reporter from Texas, she was just hell on wheels. But Kathleen Turner just did a one-woman show about her life at the Berkeley Rep.

JASMIN: Wow.

ERIC: And in the program, it says one of Molly’s best lines, it says, “Anybody who loves the state legislature need only a strong stomach and a major insensitivity to the needs of the people.” Well, most politicians are in it for the money and their own prestige and to move forward their own career, and they don’t help the animals even though the animal lobby is the biggest in the country. We should be more powerful than the damn NRA. But we didn’t whine. And we need to go to Sacramento and all these hearings and raise hell and put people in office who will make a difference. A lot of them go up there with good intentions and then go get coopted by the system. There’s too much money in there and I see that getting worse, especially when the Supreme Court says that money is free speech and corporations are individuals.

JASMIN: Well, I see things as changing for the better, I can’t help it. Call me naïve, and maybe I am.

ERIC: I hope you’re right.

JASMIN: Yeah, well, I hope I am too. And maybe I’m just saying that as a strategy, a personal strategy to continue doing this work. But the work you’re doing gives me tremendous hope and it makes me feel like there are people watching and there are people reporting on this. And I know you’re very involved in media campaigns as well. You have an organization that you founded called Action for Animals, and I’m just very grateful to you, Eric, for all you’ve done for so long.

ERIC: My friend Virginia always joked that Action for Animals sounded like a dating service for poodles. I thought that was a good line. But there are a lot of good folks out there. There’s a whole network of people doing good things, but you usually don’t see it on the news. One of the best things that’s happened in recent years is groups like Mercy for Animals, going, doing undercover video investigations and putting it up on YouTube. A lot of people are being educated now about what really happens to animals. Hell, we eat 10 billion animals every year in this country, not counting seafood, most of whom never see the light of day or touch foot to earth, except at the rodeo maybe when they get abused and then sent to slaughter. We better pray that karma is not true. I love the fact that the pope recently came out and said all animals go to heaven. And I wrote a comment and I said, “You’re damn right, it’s payoff

for the screw-over that they have from people every day routinely for the worst of reasons.” Of course animals would go to heaven, it’s people that are not. Jeez. Clean up our act, folks. It’s real easy on a lot of levels.

JASMIN: Well, Eric, I thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House and for all that you have done for so long to change the world for animals. You are changing the world and you’ve enlightened us, you’ve enlightened so many of our listeners today I’m sure. And I have no doubt that this will continue to get exposed in the way it needs to be, and that people will act in an ethical way. I have to believe that that’s true.

ERIC: I think it is. And just, you’re doing really critically important work, just getting the information out there so I really thank and commend you for that. It’s very important.

JASMIN: Thank you. And well, same to you, what you’re doing is so important too. So thank you for joining us today on Our Hen House, and stay in touch.

ERIC: Will do.

JASMIN: That was Eric Mills.