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Interview with Mickey Z

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **MICKEY Z** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 238.*

JASMIN: A vegan since 1995, Mickey Z is the author of 12 books, most recently *Occupy This Book: Mickey Z on Activism*. Until the laws are changed or the power runs out, he can be found on a few obscure websites called Facebook at facebook.com/mickey.zvegan, Twitter at @MickeyZVegan, and his website is mickeyzvegan.wordpress.com.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Mickey!

MICKEY: Hey. Great to be here, thanks for having me.

JASMIN: It's really great to talk to you, Mickey. We've been following your career and all of your writing for a very long time, and I'm very excited about your new book *Occupy This Book*, which I want to talk to you about. But first can you just give us an idea of how you define activism?

MICKEY: I guess it's a pretty broad term and something that I've been exploring a lot more lately. I think it's something that is infused by a sense of urgency, a sense of solidarity, a sense of intersectionality. It's more of a lifestyle than a weekend march or holding a sign or signing a petition, not that I'm disparaging any of that. But I look at activism as a lifestyle choice.

MARIANN: Yeah, I think we've been struggling a long time with the word "activism" and how it relates to veganism. And tell us a bit about what role veganism plays in your worldview.

MICKEY: Well, it's one of the most important decisions I've ever made. I've been vegan 19 years now. But I was radical before I was vegan, which isn't always the case with vegans that I've met, so once I learned about the issues surrounding veganism, animal liberation, animal rights, it just seemed like the absolutely logical, natural step to take. And then it began to -- it introduced me to people that were some of the most amazing activists. And over time I began to recognize connections to issues like environmentalism, workplace justice and so on, and I saw it as a crucial part of this big picture of the struggle against all forms of oppression.

JASMIN: Now tell us about your new book, *Occupy This Book*.

MICKEY: It's published by Sullivan Street Press, which I will say is non-corporate, green, vegan, independent press, which is, I'm proud to be connected to them. And it grows out of

a bunch of writing that I've been doing over the past couple of years, some of it directly connected to my work with Occupy Wall Street. But it's the book that, for lack of a better phrase, is just a memoir in the way of my experiences and lessons that I've learned, in the hopes that it would inspire some new ideas from those who are reading it. And as I said earlier, if I had to sum it up, it's looking to provoke a sense of urgency and to get activists of all different types of movements to recognize the crucial need for solidarity that we really need to be working together and recognize that, although the differences are crucial and important, we also have to find where we can connect and our struggles connect. So it's sort of a broad sense like that, but written very accessibly, lots of fun cartoons by Richard Cole. And I think it's an easy read, at the same time thought-provoking.

MARIANN: I've seen this quote from you, and it's so intriguing and almost devastating. You've said, "We're on the brink of economic, social, and environmental collapse. What an extraordinary time to be alive. How lucky are we! We've been trusted with the most vital mission of all time: survival. This is the best time ever to be working toward collective liberation." First of all, before we unpack the rest of that quote, can you explain the crises that you believe are coming?

MICKEY Z: Well, we live in a time where every day 150 to 200 plant and animal species go extinct, close to 80% of the forests are gone, over 90% of the large fish are gone. We are really, really on the brink of what is commonly called ecocide. And regardless of what our most passionate issues may be, all of that would be irrelevant if we don't have a functioning ecosystem. And the side result of that is the powers that be are continuing with their relentless exploitation of resources, which is bringing us to the brink of economic collapse at the same time, and still trying to keep us divided because they don't want us to unite and change things, which, that's where it connects to the social collapse. And so my phrasing there is my almost desperate hope to put this in a more positive, inspiring way than saying, "Oh, we're doomed," and saying, look, all right, look how lucky we are. People have been struggling against oppression for all of human recorded history, and this is quite possibly the most important struggle ever because we're talking about the survival of the vast majority of life on the planet.

JASMIN: Now can you explain why you think these crises could be considered a good thing?

MICKEY: Well, it's obviously somewhat -- I'm being somewhat facetious there. Like, when I do talks I sometimes will rattle off some statistics and you get this sense of doom and gloom in the room, so I'll say, "Who wants some good news?" And that's when I'll say, "We're on the brink of collapse," and their eyes are glazing over and I'll say, "Well, this is the best time ever." I believe that if we looked at the state of the planet with the type of urgency that we would if we were in a room where there was suddenly a fire or we saw a toddler wandering off towards traffic, and we'd recognize that something has to be done immediately. We can't create a Facebook or organize a candlelight vigil or call for a committee. We need to take action right now. And I think that the good news is, is that because we're in that crisis, perhaps it can inspire people. And I see it more and more, inspiring people to recognize the urgency and then act appropriately because in a state of absolute emergency, people usually don't hesitate. They just do what needs to be done to remedy the situation.

MARIANN: Yeah, I totally agree with you. I think that there is an increasing sense that something has to be done. And after all when you think about where the animals are, their

crisis couldn't be worse than it is already. So whatever happens, no matter what happens to people and what happens to the planet, for the animals on factory farms the crisis is already ongoing, so any opportunity for change has got to be seen as a good thing. The last line of that quote, not that I mean to spend the whole time unpacking one specific quote, but I find it so fascinating. You say, "This is the best time to be working toward collective liberation." Can you describe what you mean by that term "collective liberation"?

MICKEY: This is really perhaps my most important issue and I tend to misuse the word "my" because it's our, every sentient being on the planet's, most important issue. We need to connect these struggles against oppression. And one of the things I'll say to activists who aren't vegans, I'll say, "Well, if your idea of liberation only includes one of the 8.7 million known animal species, that's not liberation." But just as easily I say to my vegan and animal rights comrades, if you're not reaching out to oppressed communities, unprivileged communities, and those who don't necessarily even know about veganism, people that live in food deserts and so on, if we're not reaching out to these folks then we're not understanding liberation. So I try to use those two long times worn radical words, "collective" and "liberation," together to say that all our grievances and all our solutions are connected, and that if we recognize that, if solidarity is created, then new ideas can be heard. Because who knows what new ideas we can learn from communities that aren't traditionally involved in veganism and animal rights? And the possibilities become endless at that point, and I want to be part of that movement. But if everybody's factionalized and pointing the fingers at each other or prioritizing one issue over all other issues, then that's not a very hopeful activist situation.

JASMIN: Does intersectional activism mean that we all have to agree on everything? Is it possible to find any common ground with other animal rights vegans even if they're Republicans?

MICKEY: Yeah. I think that these are conversations that have to be had on a consistent basis. But if we waited till everybody agreed, the planet is doomed. But I don't think anybody that seeks liberation should be looking for people to march in lockstep with them, but I think it's absolutely essential to look at people that aren't in your personal community and try and find ways that you -- what things that you have in common with them, and learn from them, from their experiences, and bring that into your community and connect the communities. So there would be some sense of agreement just that "hey, we have to work together," but there's no need to march in lockstep. And I think that what happens -- understandably, each of these individual struggles against oppression, they're so suffocated by this weight of oppression that it's difficult to reach out to other struggles. And I see it most prominently that the animal rights people are, we often get accused of saying, "Oh, you like nonhuman animals over humans." And we laugh at that because at heart it's not the case, but if we're not connecting with humans who live 24/7 in struggles that they didn't ask for, then in a way we *are* not caring about humans. And so we do have to see the world with new eyes, not necessarily agree with everybody, but if we don't connect with other communities, these movements aren't gonna grow and they aren't gonna create social change.

MARIANN: How do you suggest that people do this, that people connect with another community or find their own way to work toward a world that takes animals and humans

who are suffering from oppression into account? What would be some of your suggestions for actions in connecting to other communities?

MICKEY: Well, one of the first things we could do, because -- let's stay with vegan and animal rights because, for example, here in New York City there's an ongoing number of events, protests, marches, fundraisers and so on. There's a never-ending amount of events here. The first thing you want to do is make sure that your event is welcoming to a wide range of people. One of the big priorities when I give talks and so on is that any venue that asks me to talk, one of the first questions I ask is, "Is it wheelchair accessible?" because how in the world can we talk about liberation if some people can't even get into the room? So I think as hardworking activists can make their current events, what they're doing now, accessible and open to new communities, therefore these can create what's euphemistically and accurately known as "safe spaces," where people feel like, hey, I can come in and talk to these people and I could find out what they're about, and then find out that animal rights people aren't just these crazies that you read about in the media, that would be an excellent first step.

But otherwise we need to reach out to communities and then zip our mouths shut and listen and hear what their story is and not judge everyone and tell them, "Oh, it's so easy to become vegan," when you live in a neighborhood that maybe it's not so easy to become vegan. And maybe your lifestyle and what's been imposed upon you is such that you can't make transitions as fast as someone like me. So we need to develop that understanding and patience but really, really listen to other people. Otherwise we wind up in this sort of privileged echo chamber where we're just telling each other, patting each other on the back about our moral superiority, but we're not growing the movement and we're not reaching out to people that could add so much to our lives.

JASMIN: There is certainly a belief, a quite justified one, within the animal rights movement, that the left has not stepped up to the plate, so to speak I guess, when it comes to animals. Do you agree, Mickey, and if so, why do you think that this is the case?

MICKEY: I definitely agree. And one of the reasons I would think is that the left has more than its share of hierarchies, regardless of its rhetoric. And those who sit at the top, the Noam Chomskys and so on, dismiss this issue. Not only would they not even discuss it, they dismiss it. And I can speak from personal experience that when I was asked last year to take part in a panel on the Left Forum, it was like the only animal rights panel and it got scheduled early morning on a Saturday which you could imagine isn't gonna be conducive to a big attendance. And this event charges money for these panelists to actually appear on a panel and charges money for people to get in, and so I facetiously asked, "Well, are the main speakers, Cornel West and Michael Moore and Oliver Stone and Noam Chomsky, paying to get in to give their talks, and are they saying anything new?" I said, "Because what we're gonna talk about on this animal rights panel really isn't discussed on the left." And the next email I got was, "Thank you for your time. We found someone else for the panel." And I think that that's pretty much of a microcosm right there.

This is my own personal theory on this, as someone that's moved within Occupy and had a good influence and also a lot of resistance to veganism there, is that, when you make a choice to be an activist, you're almost volunteering to be marginalized. And if you're a bright, skillful person you could have taken those skills to Wall Street and have a corner office right now. But you made the choice to do this and you've gained some respect that

way and that's become your form of identification. So if another activist comes along and says, "There's a whole wave of stuff that, if you looked this way, you'd recognize that you're missing a pretty big part of this whole liberation thing," it's not shocking that the response would be hostility and resistance because people are feeling pretty good about themselves. And they should, they're activists. They chose to spend their time in a way to make the planet a better place. But it's not always easy to reach those people with even constructive criticism.

And then the reverse, as I mentioned earlier, when I'm in my vegan animal rights community and I say to them, and they ask me to speak at an event and I look at the list of speakers, and I say, "Hm. Every single person on this list is white," then *they* get defensive to me 'cause a big part of *their* identification is how hard they work as vegans and animal rights activists, so they don't want to hear even constructive criticism. And I'm not saying that I can't take criticism, I don't want to come off that way. But one of my personal missions is to be that sort of, that little prod to say that, "This is awesome what you're doing, but imagine if you expanded it even to this." And some cases I get wonderful responses, other cases I get genuinely hostile responses. So maybe I can't always be the best voice for this. And the more of us that are trying to connect these issues and connect these movements, the more voices, the better chance that the voices will be heard.

MARIANN: So in addition to the left being kind of out of the loop here, I think most of us would agree that mainstream environmental organizations and even some of the more progressive environmental organizations are totally out of touch with the coming collapse and with the importance of animals. Would you say that's the case?

MICKEY: From my personal experience, absolutely. You can go to one environmental event, protest, march, conference -- there was a socialist eco-conference last year at which they served animal products. So when you bring up to them that the top source of human-created greenhouse gases is the global animal byproducts industry, they once again will greet you with hostility. I guess it's a lot easier to draw people to your cause and to raise money if you're pointing the finger at Big Oil and fracking and tar sands and so on, and Republicans. And so you're pointing at all the usual suspects and then the donations flow in and the Facebook likes and the Twitter followers, everything goes up and it's wonderful. But if you tell people, "Hey, you really need to change your personal lifestyle and get out there and work on that aspect," it's a little bit trickier and you lose followers and people funding you and so on. So it's been a big setback for the vegan animal rights aspect, and really in the bigger picture because the fact for environmentalism is that so much of Big Green just chooses to ignore the role that global factory farming plays, the huge role. And that's also been something that I've been trying desperately to make connections. And like, after Hurricane Sandy here in New York City, many of the rescuers and the workers, the people helping out, the relief workers, they would organize dinners and serve animal products to victims of climate change caused by the consumption of animal products. So the disconnect exists and it just tells us that we need to be doing better work to reach people, that we have to find new ways because obviously our tactics are good but not exactly succeeding in a major way.

JASMIN: Mm. Now when did you first realize that animals mattered?

MICKEY: Well, I guess it's almost a cliché type of thing. I grew up in an animal loving family, always had cats in the house. My mom would be the cat lady on every block and right up till

the end of her life, she'd always be carrying with her like nuts and seeds to feed birds and squirrels, so I had this sort of inherent comfort zone with animals, particularly cats. But it wasn't until my personal worldview became more radical that I began to see how choosing to not eat them, wear them, and exploit them in any way fit wonderfully into that revolutionary lifestyle. But I always identified as an animal lover but just was completely unaware of how hypocritical it was to then pay someone to have them killed and served to me. So I kind of lived that clichéd existence until I became radical politically and then my love of animals, I was able to live it 24/7.

MARIANN: I want to revisit that challenge you spoke about in the middle, of how people need to see the coming crisis as an opportunity. And I'm curious to know what you think the world would look like if people actually rose to that challenge. Like, say in 100 years. What would the world look like if people do what you would like to see them do? And specifically, what would they be eating and how would that food be getting to them?

MICKEY: I answer the question hesitantly because it really falls into the "who knows?" category 'cause there are so many factors. But I guess if I just allow myself to daydream, the first word that comes to mind is "downsizing." Just the way we live now, the globalization, the sprawl, it requires this type of lifestyle, it requires this daily, hourly consumption of resources. And it also, not by accident, creates alienation and isolation because we're not, we're no longer in the tribes that the humans, that we evolved to be in. So without sounding reactionary that we're gonna go back to primitivism, with the lessons we've learned, I'd like to imagine that we could downsize and just like a first step right now would be simply everyone surrendering their lawns and turning it into an organic, GMO-free garden and then sharing food with each other in their neighborhood. And I could see that model expanding across the globe because it's the sustainable model and it's also the model that creates solidarity and community. What we have now is we're staring at cell phones, we're staring at TVs, we're staring at computers. We have an alienating culture in which outside of the big cities you have to drive miles to get what you quote unquote "need." And I can't -- that is obviously not sustainable. So what I would love to imagine is not going back to primitivism but having the knowledge that we've accumulated, both good and bad, over the past couple of centuries, and using that to effectively downsize our culture and to keep things far more portable. We can grow our food locally. And I said this to someone once and they said, "Well, even in New York, that means that you would never eat an orange because it doesn't grow in New York." And I said, "Well, if that's the case, so be it." This is how the planet is created. It's the human race that imposed its will upon what we call nature, and the results are disastrous. So we really need to try something new.

But the more philosophical answer to that question is, I think if we begin to contribute less to this dominant culture, this really destructive dominant culture, and unite more, we would then be able to create a space where we could see solutions that we can't see now. And so anything I'm giving to you as a quote unquote "solution" is seeing through the prism of the destruction we live in, this resource feeding culture. And so I don't even have vision to necessarily see what might happen in 50 years and then make a better assessment of what it could be in 50 more years, but that's my limited perspective on it.

JASMIN: You've written, what, 12 books now? Can you give us an idea of some of the things you have focused on in your writing before this book?

MICKEY: My first book was a radical history of World War II and I've had a couple of novels out. Another book is a literal and metaphorical self-defense book called *Self-Defense for Radicals*. But if I had to find a common theme amongst all my writing and the books in particular, it would be just the sense of attempting to see through the façade, the corporate propaganda façade, to shatter the myths, to rediscover the subversive pleasure of thinking for yourself and encourage independent thought. Nothing makes me happier than if someone reads something I write and says that it made them think of new things or see things differently. I'm not asking people to agree word for word with what I write but if I can inspire someone to look in a new direction then I feel like I've done my job. So I've covered a lot of ground in terms of my writing and I hope to continue doing so. But definitely that's the common thread, it's just challenging the dominant narrative that has gotten us to the mess that we're in right now.

JASMIN: And what are you working on right now?

MICKEY: I'm basically having fun promoting *Occupy This Book* to be honest with you. It's been a great, great project. And I write for a website called World News Trust, so I write a wide range of articles on there. I have a blog. So I'm constantly writing. I've been doing a real lot of talks lately in New York City from the March Against Monsanto to Veggie Pride to National Animal Rights Day. And so I'm pretty much just trying to disseminate my worldview and information via the spoken word, the written word, face to face demonstrations and protests and just doing my best to encourage people to see beyond what we're being told.

JASMIN: And how can people find your book, *Occupy This Book*?

MICKEY: Well, it does have its own Facebook page, so if you look up "Occupy This Book" you'll find it. Perhaps the easiest way is on Amazon. If you prefer an eBook, you can find it on a site called Kobo. And I would say that perhaps the most fun way is to go into your local bookstore and ask for it, and if they don't have it you can ask them to order it, or go to your local library and do the same. And this way it enables it, it becomes more of a face to face conversation with the store owners or the librarian and makes it more of the community solidarity that the book is created to create. But again, if you're gonna log onto your phone or your computer, Amazon or Kobo, you can order it in a couple of clicks.

JASMIN: Well, thank you so much, Mickey. This has really been eye opening for us and we are so glad that you're connecting these dots that so many people are not connecting. It gives us a lot to think about, not only as animal rights activists who want people to join our movement, but as coalition builders who really want to create a more just society as a whole. We really appreciate all that you do to make the world a much better place and we hope that you'll stay in touch with us.

MICKEY: I definitely will and let me say it right back to you two. So your work is amazing and your holistic vision of justice is inspiring.

JASMIN: Thank you, Mickey.

That was Mickey Z.