

**The following interview with
MARK HILAN
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 27, 2022**



Library of Congress: Mr. Hilan, before we talk about your experiences having been on the air on WNYC on the morning of 9/11, can you tell me, at that time, how long you had been at WNYC and, specifically, in the morning timeslot?

Mark Hilan: I started as the host of “Morning Edition,” in— almost nine years earlier. Well, wait, I left in 2002 after about 10 years so, yes, I started in 1992. I came to the station about a year earlier as a freelancer and then went to “Morning Edition,” so, yes, I’d been there about nine years at that time.

LC: Since the studios for WNYC were just down the street from the World Trade Center towers, did you feel the vibration when the first plane hit?

MH: I felt the building shudder and I didn’t know what it was. At that time, the station was on the 25th floor of what is a 26-floor building and then there’s a tower that was in the center of the structure that went up more, to 39 floors, but we were basically the top floor. Then, right above us, there were satellite dishes and I thought, when I felt the shudder, that a satellite dish fell over or something. And I couldn’t imagine why it would have, since it was such a perfect day.

LC: When did you first learn that a plane had crashed into the first tower?

MH: I was in the studio and, from the studio, you can see out several plate glass windows and out into the hallway. The first I heard of it was when one of our classical music announcers came down the hall—I saw him running down the hall—and he said, “A plane has just crashed in the World Trade Center!”

And, honestly, my first thought, because it was a primary election day in New York, and that was going to be our lead story throughout the day, was that that explains the shudder and now we have a new lead story.

LC: How quickly did you learn—discover—that this wasn’t an accident but a planned attack?

MH: Quickly, within minutes. We had had a meeting going on the 26th floor and several people in that meeting saw the first plane fly by the window at a very low altitude. One of them came into the studio and, according to what the “New York Times” reported, that was the first eye witness report of [9/11], the first person to describe it.

I did run out of the studio and look at the Towers and I did see the smoke and flames. The towers were a clean view from the station.

An interesting thing, for the nine-year period, since I had started on “Morning Edition,” I used to look out this one particular window in our newsroom. The way the building is, the windows are kind of high. I’d leave the studio and look out to see what kind of day it was: was it cloudy? rainy? But, that day, the only thing framed in that window was the upper floors of the World Trade Center. Now, suddenly, when looking out this window and instead of...well, it’s a bit of a shock. When I returned and looked and there’s nothing there.

LC: Was there ever a thought in your mind of abandoning your broadcast if only to see to your own personal safety?

MH: Absolutely not. They evacuated the building [but] I wasn’t going to leave. We lost one of our stations as the tower [antenna] for it was at the World Trade Center; the other tower was located elsewhere. So we had a bit of a power issue throughout the day. But I was the primary news anchor, the morning presence, there was NEVER A MOMENT that I thought about leaving.

Then I heard the station was—actually the whole building—was being evacuated. One of the executives and came in and said, “You have to leave.”

I said, “I’m not leaving! We’re still on the air.”

In fact, my plan was going to be get a really long microphone cable and somehow figure out a way to stretch it out onto the roof and then I would have had a clear line-of-sight to both the towers and be able to look over the edge and see down to the ground, to the cars, traffic, people....

At that time, though, the problem was, I was a one-man operation. Everyone else was gone. It would have been difficult for me to do that without some help.

LOC: Were you completely alone at the station at this time?

MH: All alone. Virtually. The exec had been, “Leave or I’m going to fire you!” But he really didn’t have the power to fire me. I could not believe that anyone was telling me to get off the air. I mean, stop? Think about what’s happening! I wasn’t going to leave, certainly not out of fear of losing my job.

At that time, I had a reputation for being difficult, of having blinders on. How should I put this? I really protected my radio territory as much as I possibly could; I was always a one-man operation [and] I just grew into this final arbitrator of what should be on radio.

But, in a tragedy, I wanted to be cooperative so I very reluctantly walked down the 25 floors and...the minute I stepped out [of the building], the first tower came down. I immediately turned around and went back to the studio.

We had been running NPR's signal out of Washington [over our station]. Some other people ended up coming back, too--not the least of which was the president of the organization.... So we ended up with a very skeletal crew—no more than four people...

LOC: How did you learn about the crashes in DC and Pennsylvania?

MH: Just following through with it, the story, sitting in the studio. I cannot tell you how I first heard... We got word initially either from AP or from seeing the reports from a TV in the studio --it had to be one or the other.

LC: I'm sure, as both a New Yorker and a broadcaster, you had to have found it difficult to simultaneously report and process what was going on. How did you manage?

MH: I remember, in my initial report, after the classical music announcer came in and that look out the window, being somewhat breathless during my first report. But then, I had to find out as much as you can. I knew that, if I had to leave the studio, I can always bring back the DC-NPR feed and then I could gather info and then go back into the studio and interrupt that feed in case I was interviewing someone at one of the local hospitals. Later, I remember speaking to someone with the Red Cross.

Somehow, two of our reporters, near the site, were able to get through on a phone and describe the actual moment when the planes hit.

There were lots of snippets of info to get out from the studio. It was very hectic but it was a huge story and it was my responsibility to do it and that's the mode I fell into.

To tell you the truth, I was strangely calm. As a journalist, my mantra was always "Expect the unexpected." And be prepared. And I guess I fell back on that.

LC: As a broadcaster, what did you learn about yourself on that day?

MH: Honestly, now that I'm retired, I can look back... I know that there's a lot of broadcasters out there who are better than me. But [that day] there is one thing that was reinforced for me—not discovered, but reinforced—my commitment to my listener.

I wanted to stay on the air and have always felt a strong responsibility to my listeners. I've gone to work day after day, year after year, when I was deathly ill, when I've had commitments to other things, but I always wanted to make sure I was there for the people who expected me when they turned on their radio. My commitment to my job.... I was really, really fortunate in my career.

When I got the call about this [the broadcasts being added to the Library's National Recording Registry], I was very glad and honored but also... well, I wish they didn't have to be, I wish that 9/11 didn't happen.

