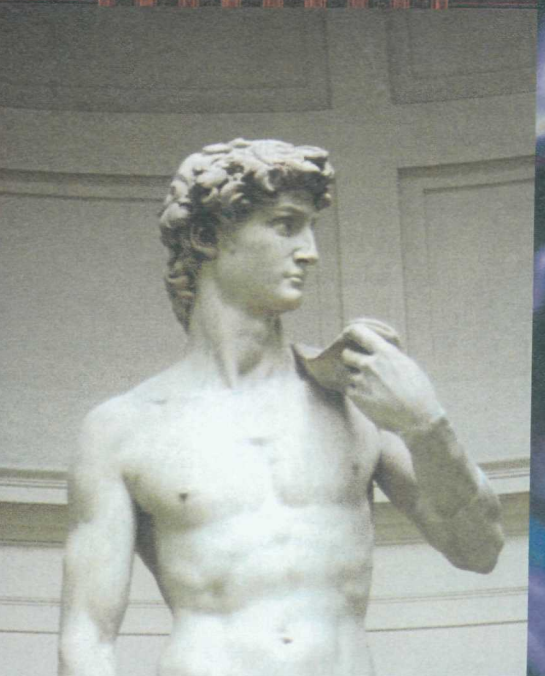
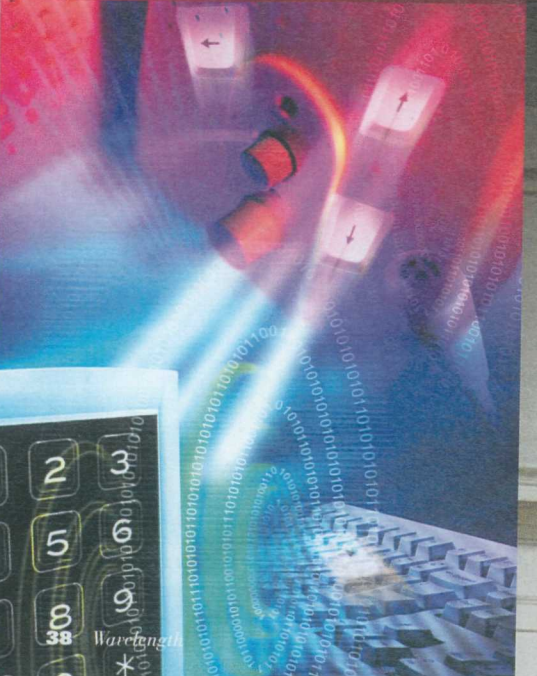


# STILL TALKING

By Amy Abrams







*For 30 years, NPR's Neal Conan has hosted news shows, covered wars and connected listeners with the defining issues of the day. Today, in addition to his duties at Talk of the Nation, Conan criss-crosses the country reading poetry and prose to the Celtic music of Ensemble Galilei. Before a recent swing through Scottsdale, we caught up with him.*

**T**he switchboard lights up; e-mails stream in ... "You're on the air," says host Neal Conan. From their cars, offices and kitchens, 2.5 million weekly listeners tune in to NPR's midday show *Talk of the Nation*, a national conversation about the most important issues of our time: breaking news, science, politics, religion, economics, education, the arts.

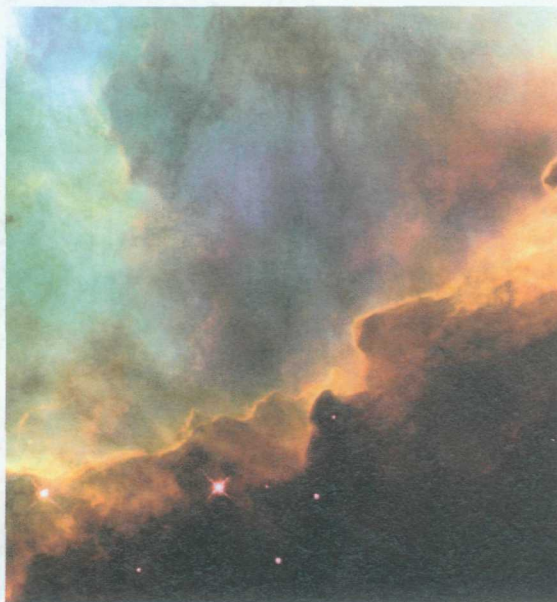
Conan is a master of the medium, with four decades in public radio, beginning at WBAI in New York—one of the country's first public radio stations—before joining National Public Radio in Washington, DC in 1977. He served NPR on the flip side of the mike, as editor, producer and executive producer (where he won many awards for *All Things Considered*). He has also acted as NPR's foreign editor, managing editor and news director, and become a familiar voice to listeners as the host of

*Weekly Edition: The Best of NPR News*, and as a substitute host for several NPR programs. As an award-winning reporter, he's covered major breaking-news stories, such as September 11th and its aftermath, and has reported from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq.

A devoted baseball fan, Conan took a sabbatical from public radio in 2000, to live out his dream of being a play-by-play announcer. He is the author of a heartfelt and humorous book about the experience: *Play by Play: Baseball, Radio and Life in the Last Chance League*.

Conan spoke to us from his office at NPR in Washington, DC. He lives just north of the city, in Bethesda, Maryland, with his wife, NPR *Weekend Edition Sunday's* Liane Hansen. They have a daughter, Casey, and a son, Connor.





Last November, Neal Conan performed at the Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts, accompanying Ensemble Galilei and imagery taken by the Hubble Space Telescope. Although Conan claims, “I have a tin ear and no sense of rhythm,” he performs nationwide, approximately 10 times a year, with the show called *A Universe of Dreams*.

**Q WAVELENGTH:** Tell me about your first job in public radio.

**A NEAL CONAN:** My first job was as a listener at my home in New York City. In those days, there were really only two kinds of voices on radio. On AM: “Time to back the wax and hit the tracks,” and FM: “Here in the city of fine music ...” People didn’t talk like people on the radio. As I was tuning up and down the FM band, I stumbled across this unbelievable conversation where people were telling really bad jokes and were laughing. You heard women’s voices (very unusual in those days). You heard Midwestern and Brooklyn accents, people with passion who cared about what they were doing and wanted to involve *me*. What I heard was the first public radio fundraiser. During WBAI’s next fundraising marathon, I was there answering telephones.

But I think you’re talking about when I was on the air for the first time. I hung around the station and kind of pestered people to teach me stuff. The way onto the staff was to become an announcer. To do that, you had to be part technician and part announcer. I knew the technical side reasonably well, but I was just so terrified the first time I was on the air. A man named Steve Post gave me the opportunity. It was a station break—30 seconds total. I was so scared of opening the mike that when I did, other orifices opened too—not for very long, but I did wet myself a bit. And in attempting to close that orifice, I closed all of them and with a strangled voice said, “This

is WBAI in New York.” Post was hiding in the hallway, but I could hear him say, “This kid is never gonna make it.”

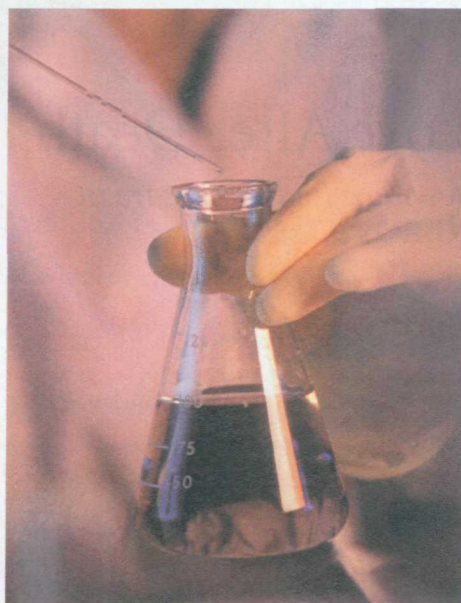
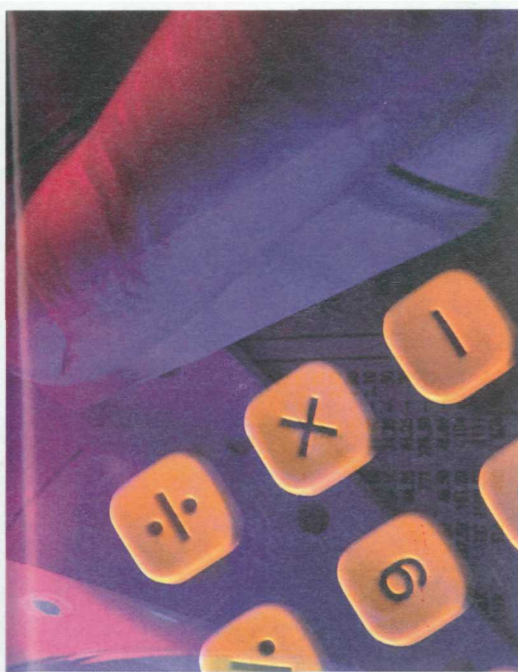
**Q WL:** What’s changed in public radio over the past 40 years, since you started at WBAI in 1966?

**A NC:** Public radio was a tiny, scruffy, adventurous community of people and listeners who thought it was an interesting experiment. Through the aegis of National Public Radio, it’s grown from fringe to mainstream. The technology has gone through a complete revolution from audio tape to digital media, from AM broadcasting to FM stereo, to now high-definition radio and satellite radio, and to streaming to the Web. With the consolidation of media, it’s vital that there be an independent voice that’s not beholden to commercial interests, to government interests, to anybody. In our time, it’s more important than ever.

**Q WL:** How do your experiences as editor and producer inform your role as announcer?

**A NC:** I’ve learned a tremendous amount as producer for *Talk*, which is produced live each day. While we plan it—and a lot of work goes into planning it—once you open the microphones and start the show, the first time a guest opens his or her mouth, the show changes and it’s not the show we planned. Through my role as producer, I have a better idea about where to take the show when it’s developing live, morphing before our ears.





**Q WL:** Are calls to the show screened?

**+ NC:** Staff members screen all calls and e-mails—it's absolutely critical to the success of the program. When someone calls and says, "I have four questions and a comment," screeners help narrow their questions. It's got to move along, so others have a chance. We get in a lot more e-mails than we can air. We pick the good ones.

**Q WL:** You were born in Beirut?

**+ NC:** Yes, my father, a physician, was running the medical school at the American University of Beirut. Then, we moved to Saudi Arabia, where he helped set up a hospital. Then, we moved to exotic New Jersey. When I was in high school, we relocated to New York City. I started in radio at 17; I didn't go to college—somehow I've made a living in radio ever since. However, I didn't recommend it to our children. Both of our kids studied theater in college. Liane and I look forward to the day when they can both work in the same restaurant.

**Q WL:** Did you meet Liane at the station?

**+ NC:** Yes, in 1979.


**Q WL:** Why do you and so many Americans love baseball?

**+ NC:** Baseball is the story of our lives, and to

some degree it's a male soap opera. It's something we shared with our fathers, brothers and friends, and something we care so much about. When I hit what some might call a midlife crisis, I ran away with the circus—and took radio with me—becoming a play-by-play announcer for a minor-league team. Liane was so pleased that I managed to locate a sector of the broadcast industry that paid less than public radio—and when we had the kids in college. It was the realization of a dream. Things had become gray; I needed color and richness back in my life and baseball gave me that.

**Q WL:** Tell me about returning to NPR and into the crisis of September 11th.

**+ NC:** Baseball was, oddly, very good training for 9/11. I learned stamina—a game goes three-and-a-half hours. And there's no script in baseball ... you think it's a slugfest and it turns out one to nothing in the eighth. I did the presidential debates [Gore vs. Bush], and then, you know, that election went into extra innings. After I wrote *Play by Play*, I returned to work—on September 10, 2001—and the next day the world changed.

I was ready. 

## Talk of the Nation: Join the Conversation

**When:** Monday through Thursday, noon to 2:00 p.m. **How:** Call 1-800-989-TALK (8255) or e-mail [totn@npr.org](mailto:totn@npr.org).

**Neal Conan** has hosted *Talk of the Nation* since late 2001. Past hosts include Ray Suarez and Juan Williams. Each Friday, Ira Flatow hosts *Talk of the Nation—Science Friday*.