Larry Mantle Is Known for Hosting a Talk Show But His Secret Is that He Listens

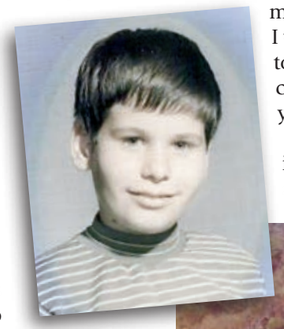
WITH 40 YEARS OF "AIRTALK" AND COUNTING, HE RECEIVES THE LA PRESS CLUB'S LUMINARY AWARD FOR CAREER ACHIEVEMENT

BY JOHN GITTELSOHN

The most enduring radio talk show host in Los Angeles was momentarily stumped when asked this question: How would Larry Mantle interview Larry Mantle?

"Something I would ask myself?" he said. "I have to think about that."

Mantle, 66, has built a career through relentless curiosity about others, not shining a light on himself. He has hosted "AirTalk" on public radio for 40 years. He invites as many as 10 guests a show, four days a week, more than 45 weeks a year, which simple arithmetic over four decades brings to at least 70,000 interviews. That doesn't include "Film Week," the review program he pre-records to run on Fridays.



Larry had straigfht hair as a young boy; in 1970, he grew into a young man with curls.

Guests have included presidents, Nobel laureates and Oscar winners. It's no exaggeration to call Mantle a Southern California institution, a man whose voice is recognized by millions, and who tonight is receiving the Los Angeles Press Club's Luminary Award for Career Achievement. Previous winners include Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Janice Min and Hugh Hefner.

"It's a tremendous honor to be part of this year's National Arts and Entertainment Journalism Awards," Mantle said. "I appreciate all the LA Press Club does on behalf of local journalism, which makes this recognition all the more meaningful to me."

Mantle is a fourth-generation Angeleno, whose favorite topics are all things Los Angeles: freeways, politics, Hollywood, sports. He stayed at Dodger Stadium all 18 innings on Oct. 27 to witness the World Series game three victory over the Toronto Blue. He went on air the next morning with just three hours of sleep.

"L.A. is in his DNA," said Linda Othenin-Girard, an "AirTalk" producer for 20 years.

Mantle was the only child of teenaged parents who always talked to him like a peer. He said they interviewed rather than interrogated him, shaping his on-air style.

"In a sense, we grew up together. My mom was 16 and my dad was 17 when I was born," he said. "I was very verbal, to the point where my teachers would complain, particularly when I was very young, that I was always talking."

Mantle loved radio. While playing boyhood sports in Inglewood and then in Hollywood he'd narrate









Top: Mantle in the KPCC studio in 1992.

From left: He has interviewed celebrities from actor Don Cheadle to civil rights activist Rosa Parks, shown with her book in 1999.

the play-by-play action. In junior high, he began knocking on doors of the radio studios on Sunset Boulevard, asking people how to break into the industry. They told him it was a tough business with only a few people making good money and the rest struggling for a living.

"They made it sound like it was not a great career," he said.

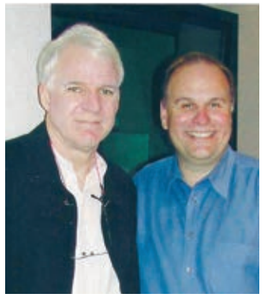
Mantle wasn't discouraged, and in retrospect his career ascent seems remarkably easy. He graduated from Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, with a degree in psychology at age 20. He briefly attended divinity school at Fuller Seminary before deciding he lacked the calling for the ministry. "I was just an immediate misfit," he said.

He was living in Pasadena when his wife urged him to follow his passion and try radio. He signed up as a volunteer at the closest station, KPCC, 89.3 FM, now known as LAist. When the news director's job opened up, he applied but was told, at age 23, to get more experience. He cold-called KPRO, an AM station in Riverside, and was hired to run news there. Less than six months later, KPCC invited Mantle back, because the news director had quit. He's been there ever since.

In 1985 Mantle launched "AirTalk" as an evening call-in show, mostly about L.A. area politics. He personally lined up guests. Off the air, he still logs long hours preparing for celebrities, politicians and other guests. He once ran a regular











Clockwise from upper left: hosting a live event; on the air interviewing chef Julia Child; laughing with actors Tony Shalhoub and Peter Falk; getting a hug from Milton Berle; and meeting Steve Martin.

segment interviewing experts from Cal Tech, but dropped it because it required too much study time. With every guest, his goal is to get them to open up, to surprise and delight listeners.

"Your job is, of course, to try and get them to say something they never planned to say," he said. "Not a gotcha. That's not what we do. But something that sounds thoughtful."

Longtime Los Angeles journalist Patt Morrison knows firsthand Mantle's skill and light touch. She has been on his show many times.

"To be questioned by Larry Mantle is to be interviewed by someone who knows the material inside-out, and who has the helm of the discussion, but who also listens closely to the answers, and who lets himself be surprised," said Morrison, who for seven years had a mid-day KPPC show that aired right after Mantle's. She added that Mantle "lets the conversation go into unexpected places, unlike interviewers who work from a list of questions and never deviate from it, no matter what rewarding surprises pop up along the way."

Mantle loves hearing from listeners, opening his call-in lines to people who talk about their favorite taco stand, must-see places for out-of-town visitors or serious subjects. One memorable show was devoted to callers discussing their experience undergoing an abortion.

He loves L.A.— its sprawl, diversity, spirit of welcoming immigrants and intermarriage. But he also worries it's becoming too expensive. Hollywood is losing jobs. The future as a creative capital is uncertain.

"I think this is still a place where people feel a certain degree of freedom," he said. "I think the high cost of housing, though, has made it really difficult."

Mantle is quick to say he's not a one-man show, paying tribute to the staff that keeps "AirTalk" humming.

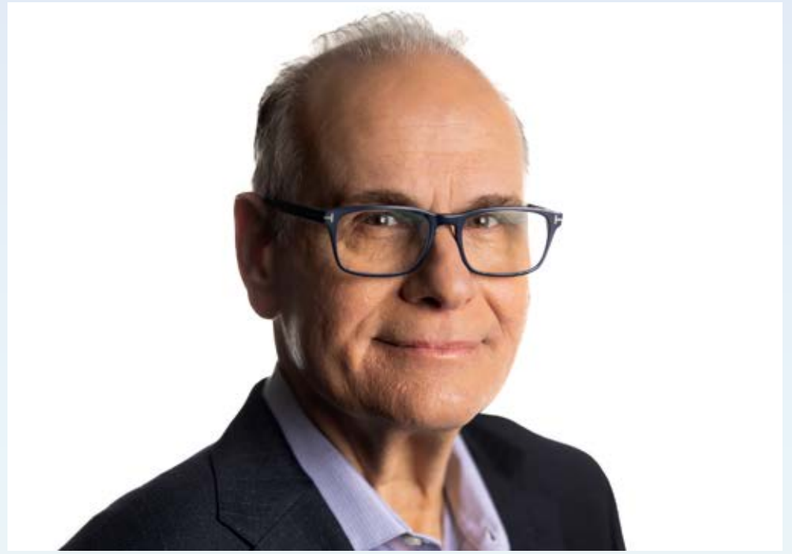
"I've had a dream job for all these years," he said. "I've gotten to work with some of the most interesting and intelligent and curious people I could imagine."

He's interviewed the world's biggest stars, including Martin Scorsese, Dianne Feinstein, Barack Obama and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. He admits there are people he hasn't sat with.

"I haven't interviewed Steven Spielberg," he said.

He would love to be hosting "AirTalk" in a decade for a 50th year, though it's impossible to predict what the future will bring, especially with public radio. But Mantle says that no matter what happens, he won't stop talking.

"I can't imagine whatever I do, not involving conversations that I want to share with people," he said. "I learn every day."



CONGRATULATIONS, Larry Mantle

LAist congratulates Larry Mantle on being honored with the 2025 Luminary Award for Career Achievement from the Los Angeles Press Club.

We celebrate Larry's extraordinary 40-year legacy as host of AirTalk and FilmWeek on LAist 89.3 FM—programs that have shaped the conversation in L.A., inspired curiosity, and built trust across generations of listeners. We are grateful for Larry's enduring commitment to thoughtful local news and his unparalleled contributions to the Los Angeles public media landscape.

"Larry's curiosity, generosity, and grace have guided Angelenos through four decades of change, helping us make sense of the world and one another. He exemplifies what it means to serve Los Angeles with heart, integrity, and a deep respect for its people. We couldn't be prouder to celebrate him."

– Alejandra Santamaria, President and CEO of LAist

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