

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | DEATH OF A DJ

EP63 Transcript

NARRATION:

THIS EPISODE CONTAINS AUDIO FROM AN EMERGENCY 911 CALL THAT MAY BE DISTURBING TO SOME LISTENERS. DISCRETION IS ADVISED.

HILDA EDGERTON: Mia ran in the room and startled me. "Mama, I'm scared. Somebody's knocking on the window." And then I jump up hysterically, and I was like, "Hold on, hold on," because typically Stephon would be right there on the sofa in the living room. And I say, "Mia, where's your daddy? Did you see your daddy?" She said, "No, Mama, something's wrong. Daddy's not in there." So, I went to the door and I was like, "Who is it?" One of the detectives broke that news. Stephon was dead. And then they added murder, shot, and all of that just closed in on me and all I could do was just call on Jesus.

NARRATION:

IT'S NEAR MIDNIGHT IN SOUTH GEORGIA. STEPHON EDGERTON HAS JUST SIGNED OFF HIS ON-AIR SHIFT AT WGOV-FM RADIO, EAGER TO GET HOME TO HIS WIFE, HILDA, AND THEIR THREE CHILDREN. STEPHON'S A PROMINENT DJ AND MUSICIAN, WITH A LARGE FAN BASE WHO KNOW HIM BEST BY HIS NICKNAME JUAN GATTI. HE'S ALONE AS HE MAKES HIS WAY THE SHORT DISTANCE TO HIS CAR OUTSIDE THE RADIO STATION STUDIO. IT'S A REMOTE LOCATION BATHED IN DARKNESS, BARELY VISIBLE FROM THE EMPTY HIGHWAY. SUDDENLY, FROM THE BUSHES NEXT TO THE BUILDING, A DARK FIGURE EMERGES AND FIRES A .38 REVOLVER THREE TIMES. STEPHON COLLAPSES, BUT WHAT THE SHOOTER DOESN'T KNOW AS HE MAKES HIS ESCAPE INTO THE WOODS, IS THAT HIS VICTIM IS STILL ALIVE.

I'M STEVE FRENCH, AND THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "DEATH OF A DJ."

AUTOMATED VOICE: January, 20, 2012. 23:53:15.

DISPATCH: Lowndes County, 911 Emergency. What's your emergency?

STEPHON EDGERTON: I'm at the radio station, V96 on 84. I've just been shot three times. Come help me please. Jesus.

DISPATCH: Okay, you at the radio station on 84?

STEPHON EDGERTON: Yes, I'm dying please get somebody to help me.

DISPATCH: Okay, sir. I'm gonna, I'm gonna get someone to you. Where -

NARRATION:

A DESPERATE AND TRAGIC 911 CALL COMES INTO THE VALDOSTA, GEORGIA EMERGENCY DISPATCH. THE CALLER IS SURPRISINGLY COHERENT FOR SOMEONE WHO'S JUST BEEN SHOT THREE TIMES.

DISPATCH: I'm gonna get someone to you sir. Do you know who shot you?

STEPHON EDGERTON: No, someone - a white man. Ma'am, help me please. I'm dying. I'm losing consciousness.

DISPATCH: Okay, I'm gonna get someone. Are you inside of the business?

MATT HOWARD: He called 911, I believe it was around 11:53pm, stating he had been shot three times. He had been shot in the head and the stomach, and it was a very disturbing call to listen to.

NARRATION:

MATT HOWARD IS AN INVESTIGATOR WITH THE LOWNDES COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT IN SOUTH GEORGIA.

MATT HOWARD: He went on to tell the dispatcher his attacker just walked up to him and shot him. He was asked if they took anything and he denied having the attacker take anything from him.

DISPATCH: Where were you shot at? Can you put the pressure on it?

STEPHON EDGERTON: I was shot in the head and the stomach.

DISPATCH: Shot in the head?

STEPHON EDGERTON: Oh, God. Help me, ma'am, I'm dying.

MATT HOWARD: Listening to the 911 call, it's really in a testament to the strength of Mr. Edgerton, after being shot like he was.

DISPATCH: Is there someone else there with you now?

STEPHON EDGERTON: Uh, uh. I need somebody here quick, Ma'am...

DISPATCH: They are coming to you, sir, as - they are coming to you as fast as they can get there.

MATT HOWARD: He was able to provide excellent details to the dispatcher, which was crucial at that timeframe. He explained the individual had come from the woods and fled to the bushes. He was also able to say he did not know the assailant and described him as a white male, roughly five nine, slender build, dressed in all black and wearing a mask.

DISPATCH: Do you think he's coming back?

STEPHON EDGERTON: I don't think - I don't think so. Oh god. Oh god.

NARRATION:

AFTER AN AGONIZING 10 MINUTES ON THE PHONE, HELP ARRIVES ON SCENE. 41-YEAR-OLD STEPHON EDGERTON IS LYING ON THE GROUND NEAR HIS CAR.

MATT HOWARD: I believe he thought that he was not going to make it. He was in excruciating pain. My heart sinks for him when I hear it. I believe he did a good job of getting as much information to us as he possibly could. Mr. Edgerton was a local DJ who worked the evening shift at the local radio station. I'd heard of him on the radio. I knew he was married. He had three children. He was an active musician in his church as well.

NARRATION:

STEPHON IS RUSHED TO THE HOSPITAL, BUT IT'S TOO LATE TO SAVE HIS LIFE. HE SUCCUMBS TO HIS GUNSHOT WOUNDS AT 12:53 AM WITHOUT PROVIDING ANY MORE DETAILS ABOUT THE KILLER. AT ABOUT 1AM, POLICE OFFICERS HEAD TO STEPHON'S HOME, WHERE THEY WAKE UP HIS WIFE, HILDA.

HILDA EDGERTON: So, I went to the door and I was like, "Who is it?" And it was such a loud knock. Think about how police officers knock. And I thought, when I looked at them, they looked so gloomy. And when they broke that news, I just had to just fall back in the chair and they didn't give me enough time. They just start firing off on all these different questions because I know time was of the essence, but I was like, "Do y'all not realized what you've just said to me?" I was like, this can't be the right information they're giving me. They have to be talking about the wrong person. I didn't even have time to say why, who, what? I was shocked. The house just started flooding with church people and family members. It was overwhelming.

NARRATION:

STEPHON AND HILDA HAVE THREE CHILDREN — 13-YEAR-OLD MIA, 7-YEAR-OLD CHRISTIAN, AND 5-YEAR-OLD WINSTON. AFTER LEARNING ABOUT HER HUSBAND'S MIDNIGHT SLAYING, HILDA BARELY HAS TIME TO PROCESS THE LOSS BEFORE SHE HAS TO TELL HER KIDS THEIR FATHER IS GONE FOREVER.

HILDA EDGERTON: I actually waited for my pastor to come and he drove over and, probably about nine that morning, we took him in Mia's room and we all had prayer. Then that's when I was able to break the news to them, and... the wail and the cry of the children was just unforgettable. That was one hard day. Stephon, he was just always there and hands on. He was the kind of dad that would get on the grill and have everybody play on the trampoline, get in the pool with them. The kind of dad that would sing with them and teach them how to learn how to hold a part and do three-part harmony. He was that dad that made other kids, because our house was always full of love and laughter, and they wanted to be around Stephon.

NARRATION:

HILDA AND STEPHON HAD BEEN MARRIED 14 YEARS AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH. THEY FIRST MET AT NEW HOPE MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH, WHERE HILDA'S FATHER WAS THE PASTOR.

HILDA EDGERTON: I was still just a little teenager in the choir and he was our church musician, and he was going to Valdosta State College at the time. As years progressed, some kind of way with his charm,

he asked me on a date. It went from there. We actually didn't date long, and then we were married because he was seven years older than me. And I was 19 and he was 26 when we got married.

STEPHON EDGERTON: [SINGING] Hallelujah. Salvation and glory.

HILDA EDGERTON: Oh, I thought he was just the coolest guy. He was so funny. He made choir rehearsals feel like it wasn't hard work. If we train wreck it, he'll go make a big joke in the mic. He was that Minister of Music, where he made the youth feel comfortable. Stephon was short in stature, about five six, medium build. He always walked with, like, this cool, smooth, dap and anybody he walked up to, he would do the manly dap them up, cool, homeboy greet. Then he's gonna hug you and give you this big Kool Aid smile. So that was Stephon. He was small in build but mighty, like a giant, in personality.

NARRATION:

IN 2005, STEPHON WENT TO WORK AT WGOV-FM, A LOCAL RADIO STATION, WHERE HE BROADCASTS UNDER THE NAME JUAN GATTI.

HILDA EDGERTON: His responsibility at the radio station at his shift was mainly the music, to make the music pop. He took it back to the old school, the most popular songs that are out, and artists. And he even did a unsigned artists day where he promoted other guys and ladies that were trying to be heard and discovered. So, he had a lot of different varieties of what he promoted during his show.

NICK HARDEN: My name is Nick Harden. A lot of folks refer to me as Big Nick. Gatti was actually, we were at the same radio station. I was the program director. So, I guess I was his boss. He was crazy. I mean, you know, as far as, you know, personality, big personality. He was he was hilarious, you know, and it's just good to be in his acquaintance. He was good, good people. Really good people.

NARRATION:

BIG NICK WAS ON THE AIR JUST BEFORE STEPHON'S SHIFT STARTED, AND HE RECALLS THE LAST TIME HE SAW HIS FRIEND AND COWORKER.

NICK HARDEN: I passed him coming in, and I blew my horn. He, you know, he threw up the peace sign. I threw up the peace sign. I don't think I stopped. I think we just, we just kept going, and so, you know, like pass the baton. He went on in and I kept going.

NARRATION:

THE LOCATION WHERE STEPHON LOST HIS LIFE IS WELL KNOWN TO NICK AS A REMOTE AND CREEPY AREA.

NICK HARDEN: So, it's dark back there, man. It's on Highway 84, which is, like, leaving Valdosta and it's, like, a dirt road you had to go down. The building definitely wasn't well lit, but it's nothing where you're secure, you know. No cameras. It was kind of spooky. I didn't like to be there at night at all. I'm thinking to myself, why and who would kill Juan Gatti? Like, how, you know? I'm thinking it was an

accident or something. Something happened or... We couldn't believe it, man. The whole community was shocked, but, of course, us being right there next to it was.... man, it was crazy.

NARRATION:

THERE ARE SCANT CLUES AT THE SCENE TO EXPLAIN WHO KILLED STEPHON EDGERTON. AT AROUND 11:45PM, HE SIGNED OFF, SWITCHED THE RADIO STATION OVER TO AN AUTOMATED SYSTEM, THEN LEFT THE BUILDING. THAT'S WHEN HE WAS SHOT.

DISPATCH: Okay, he had a .38 revolver?

STEPHON EDGERTON: Yeah, we had it. I have it – shit.

DISPATCH: Okay, he had a .38 revolver. I'm sorry. Can I get your name one more time?

STEPHON EDGERTON: Stephon, god damn. I'm shot.

PARAMEDIC: You're shot?

STEPHON EDGERTON: Yeah.

PARAMEDIC: Three times?

STEPHON EDGERTON: Yes, I'm gonna -

MATT HOWARD: Once the first units got on scene, Mr. Edgerton was located on the ground between his car and the front door of the station. They observed a set of keys, a cell phone, a bag of potato chips, a phone charger, Newport cigarettes, and a small bag of what they believe to be marijuana. They also noted that his car was in the parking lot and didn't appear to be disturbed or anything.

PARAMEDIC: All right, man.

MATT HOWARD: I can say we could rule robbery out because he was in possession of just under \$100 on his person. He had over \$100 in his vehicle. He himself said that the person didn't take anything from him. They just walked up and shot him, and he didn't know why. So, the canine units did come into the area. They did pick up a scent and tracked it from the incident location eastward towards the wood line, which led them to a clear cut. The canine at the clear cut then began to track northward up to Highway 84, where the track ended. There was some castings of some tire prints that were found in that area. So, it's reasonable to believe that the individual either had a car sitting there, or there was a car there waiting for him, or them, to pick up and take them from the area.

NARRATION:

INVESTIGATORS CANVASS THE AREA AND STOP VEHICLES, HOPING TO FIND A WITNESSES WHO MIGHT HAVE DRIVEN PAST THE STATION AT THE TIME OF THE MURDER. THE EFFORT UNCOVERS A POTENTIAL LEAD.

MATT HOWARD: A truck driver who was traveling eastbound on 84 near the time of the incident did report a small car with, uh, large rims pass him at a high rate of speed, roughly a mile from the incident location. The car continued down into town right there at the I-75 where they headed northbound. Unfortunately, during that timeframe, we had traffic cameras, but they weren't set up to record, so the identification of the vehicle was never able to be determined so no one was able to be questioned on that.

NARRATION:

THE DEATH OF STEPHON EDGERTON HAS ALL THE HALLMARKS OF A TARGETED ASSASSINATION, BUT THOSE WHO KNOW HIM CANNOT IMAGINE WHO WOULD WANT TO KILL THIS CHURCH MUSICIAN AND FAMILY MAN. IS IT POSSIBLE THAT STEPHON WAS NOT THE INTENDED TARGET? COULD IT BE A FATAL CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY?

MATT HOWARD: When I looked into Mr. Edgerton, I haven't found anyone that spoke ill of him. He was well-liked by everyone he came in contact with. He was loved by his family. So, he really had no known enemies that we were able to find. I know there was a rumor of mistaken identity and obviously, that could be a theory. However, we had no evidence to point us in either direction on that.

NICK HARDEN: No known enemies, not to our knowledge, you know. So we had disgruntled rappers, you know, and musicians who wanted us to play their music. But nobody, you know, I don't know nobody that didn't like Gatti. He didn't do anything but laugh. He was always laughing and silly. He was silly. He was so silly. And it was like, man, how could you not like this dude? So, we couldn't believe it.

NARRATION:

THE VACUUM OF LEADS QUICKLY FILLS UP WITH RUMORS AND THEORIES, BUT ONE POSSIBLE SUSPECT TAKES HOLD WITH A FEW OFFICIALS INSIDE THE SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT. IT'S A DRUG DEALER FROM ANOTHER COUNTY WHO GOES BY THE NAME WHITE BOY.

MATT HOWARD: So, we did receive an anonymous tip that individuals should be looked at and they referred to them as White Boy. White Boy was explained to be an African American male who was light skinned. The theory was there might have been a connection between Mr. Edgerton and this individual's girlfriend.

HILDA EDGERTON: They thought White Boy killed Stephon. Allegedly, Stephon was involved with the White Boy's girlfriend, that there was a love triangle and he was jealous because Stephon was going with his girlfriend.

MATT HOWARD: During the course of the investigation, this individual's girlfriend, she was interviewed. She stated she did not know Mr. Edgerton other than his radio show, and there was no other leads or probable cause that led us towards White Boy.

NARRATION:

STEPHON'S WIFE, HILDA, DOES HER OWN INVESTIGATION INTO WHITE BOY AND ALSO COMES UP EMPTY.

HILDA EDGERTON: I found a few people that knew of White Boy, and I wanted to get information about his character and who he was. Two or three people that responded to me said that he could be upset with somebody all day long, if that was the case, but he was not the one to just want to murder somebody. One of the cousins that answered me even stated, "Just be careful dealing with the sheriff's department because it looks as if they just want to pin it on somebody."

NARRATION:

IF THE SUSPECT KNOWN AS WHITE BOY WAS INVOLVED IN SOME KIND OF LOVE TRIANGLE WITH STEPHON, HE'S NO LONGER ABLE TO TALK ABOUT IT. WHITE BOY WAS SHOT AND KILLED IN A DRUG-RELATED HOMICIDE NOT LONG AFTER STEPHON'S MURDER. IT'S A LITERAL DEAD END. BUT THE POSSIBILITY OF A ROMANTIC ENTANGLEMENT SURFACES AGAIN, WHEN INVESTIGATORS RECEIVE A COPY OF STEPHON'S PHONE LOG.

HILDA EDGERTON: There was a phone call on his phone log that the detectives did focus on. He talked to someone, which was a female in Douglas, Georgia, for over an hour and a half before he left out of that building. They questioned that young lady. To this day, I don't know who she is, what's her name. I don't know if she was married. Did she have a boyfriend? I don't know what came out of that. But all I know, I was told later on down the line, there was nothing leading them to believe she was affiliated with anyone that had something to do with it.

NARRATION:

DESPERATE FOR ANSWERS, HILDA MENTALLY REPLAYS EVERY ENCOUNTER AND CONVERSATION SHE HAD WITH HER HUSBAND IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS LEADING UP TO HIS MURDER. FOR THE MOST PART, EVERYTHING SEEMED NORMAL, BUT THERE WAS ONE STRANGE INCIDENT TWO WEEKS BEFORE THAT MAY SHED SOME LIGHT ON THE MYSTERY OF HIS DEATH.

HILDA EDGERTON: Stephon came home one day, and he had a business card and he kind of flipped it out of his hand on the bed. And I was sitting on the bed and I said, "What is this? What's wrong with you?" Because he has such a disgruntled look on his face. And I picked up the card and I read the name, and it was the name of a Sheriff of a surrounding county close by and took me off guard. So, I was like, "Well, why do you have this card? What's wrong?" And his words were like, "He came by to see me at the station." And I was like, "Why would he come see you? You're in some kind of trouble or something? Were you involved in something? What? Do you know something?" He was like, "It's not that serious to me." He said, "I didn't have anything to say to him. I told him I don't have anything to talk to him about." And he said some choice words. And he never came back and expanded on that. And to this day, it bothers me because I'm like, it had to be more to that and he just kept it to himself. It was no kind of fear. It was more so really pissed off, excuse my wording, but he was mad. Whatever that card was about, and that visit from that sheriff was about, it really irritated him. Stephon must have known what the visit was about. But Stephon never made me aware of the details.

NARRATION:

STEPHON'S FRIEND, BIG NICK HARDEN, ALSO RECALLS SOME UNUSUAL ACTIVITY AT THE RADIO STATION WHERE THEY BOTH WORKED AS DJS, AND HE WONDERS IF THERE WAS SOME CONNECTION TO THE MURDER.

NICK HARDEN: It was just not a good working environment. Even before this happened, it just got worse, you know, when all this happened. The station owner, she knew that he had been murdered. And she was like, "No, I don't want to go to the station. No, I don't want to go." And we're like, "Hey, this is the weirdest thing ever. Like why would you not want to go to the radio station, you know, during this time? You're the owner." So, at that time, we were looking at each other like, this is weird. If this happened at my station, I would be so, like, trying to make sure all my staff is good, make sure everything, everybody was okay. I would be getting security cameras put up. I would, you know, I would be really trying to change some things, but it just was definitely frustrating because after I left the station, the owner, you would hear just different things, you know, and she would blame others or she would say that this person was involved or it was really frustrating. I mean, because at one point, uh, she told the officers that I might have something to do with it. So, it was like, you know, she was just throwing our names, you know, our names into the mix. It's like, lady, this is crazy, like, no. And so, we all assumed like she's doing all this, maybe she's just trying to deflect or she's just trying to make sure that nobody looks her way. I've always thought that maybe the station owner knows or knew more than what was going on. Everything about that station was weird, and you never knew what was gonna happen. What was going on? It was just really weird.

NARRATION:

A DECADE LATER, THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS ABOUT STEPHON EDGERTON'S MURDER STILL LINGER.

HILDA EDGERTON: It's been ten years, and it's been an emotional roller coaster. And I often tell myself, I know I gotta remember the word of God says to have the faith the size of a mustard seed. And I don't want my faith to dwindle. I want to keep that faith that in due time, at the right time, it won't be overlooked and the case will be solved. Just my opinion, the way he was shot, to me, it seemed very much more like an assassination. But the next question is, when we find who did it, and we find out why, what are we going to do with that next? So, we want the closure. We want to know, but then we got to work through that next set of emotions, of learning the why.

MATT HOWARD: I'm sure his friends and his family think about this daily. And just, like, here at the sheriff's office, we haven't forgot about this case. The person that did this isn't the only person that knows this happened. I have a hard time believing that there's not someone else out there that knows this happened. So, I'm really hoping that someone will come forward today and provide us just any information they might know that can help point us in the right direction to help bring some peace to this man's family.

HILDA EDGERTON: The kids have struggled. I put them through counseling. I didn't do my counseling until later on because I was so focused on them, but the one that needed the most emotional support, that really had a hard time keeping it together, was the baby boy. Even more so now it's come back on

him. And I guess because, you know, as you grow older, you start realizing more things that your father's missing out on and you see your friends with still their parents, both parents.

NICK HARDEN: It's sad. I hate it for the family and the kids, you know, especially. It's just so sad that he was taken away from them, and we have no clue as to how, when, why, just crazy.

NARRATION:

IN THE WAKE OF THE TRAGEDY, STEPHON'S CHILDREN HAVE MANAGED TO THRIVE AND SUCCEED. WINSTON, THE YOUNGEST, HAS A MUSICAL GIFT LIKE HIS FATHER AND MADE FIRST CHAIR TUBA IN THE STATE OF GEORGIA ALL-STATE BAND. CHRISTIAN IS A RECENT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE AND STAR FOOTBALL PLAYER, WHOSE TEAM WON THE STATE CHAMPIONSHIPS, AND MIA, THE OLDEST, IS PURSUING A PHD IN NEUROSCIENCE AND NOW HAS A BABY OF HER OWN.

NICK HARDEN: I think he would be so proud. He would be that dad that was making all the noise, you know, in the stands seeing Winston carry that tuba. And then the same with seeing Mia graduate and getting her doctorate, and Christian graduating and playing ball and he was the man last year on the football field, and academically still doing well and it's a shame and it's sad that he can't be a part of that. But I'm glad that his legacy is continuing on despite all of this.

HILDA EDGERTON: And I don't normally go out there to the cemetery, but I just went out there two days ago. And I told Stephon, "I know we've been preached to and taught that 'Vengeance is mine, thus sayeth the Lord', but what's gonna be good for your legacy and for me and these kids, is to get that justice right here on Earth, and make that person be held accountable and exposed for the murderer that they were and are."

STEPHON EDGERTON: [SINGING]

HILDA EDGERTON: Music was Stephon's life. He was music.

STEPHON EDGERTON: [SINGING]

HILDA EDGERTON: I miss his love and his personality of laughter in any situation. I miss his music.

STEPHON EDGERTON: [SINGING]

HILDA EDGERTON: He can make a joke out of any situation and I - sorry to sound greedy, but I miss his cooking.

NARRATION:

IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT THE MURDER OF STEPHON EDGERTON, PLEASE CONTACT THE LOWNDES COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE AT 229-671-2985 OR LOWNDESSHERRIFF.COM, OR SUBMIT A TIP AT UNSOLVED.COM

NEXT, ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES:

MISSY MORRISSEY: At 7:39AM, a worker named Cary Turnbull on the northeast Boulevard Bridge, saw a body come down the middle of the river, and the body got stuck on the branches of the tree that had been lodged under the bridge. Cary Turnbull actually told me that if the tree hadn't been there, he couldn't imagine that we would have been able to find her. That she may have gone out to Delaware Bay. I know that happens to people, that they never find their loved ones and I just can't imagine a worse torture.

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Unsolved Mysteries is a production of Cosgrove Meurer Productions and Cadence 13, an Audacy company.

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Thanks for listening to Episode 63 of Unsolved Mysteries