

Live from Belton:

A gift called 'The Neon Beat'

BY JOE DIMINO

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The story about a radio program called the Neon Beat with John Christopher is summed up in one word: "gift."

The Neon Beat is a triumphant radio program spinning together the best of the 1940s, '50s and '60s by its gifted creator John Christopher in his home studio in Belton. His tidal wave of delightful music is a combination of Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Henry Mancini, Marilyn Maye and a hefty host of mighty hit makers from that 30-year stretch of musical magic.

Its author, who goes by John Morris during the day as a radio engineer with Entercom, becomes radio persona John Christopher on the weekends to deliver his show to a legion of faithful listeners.

Currently, fans can hear the program on the radio station KCXL 1140 AM or 102.9 FM on Saturdays from midnight to 7 a.m. and a more oldies rock version of the Neon Beat on Sunday nights at 9 p.m. In addition to the terrestrial radio, you can catch Christopher's Neon Beat on the Internet 24/7 via www.radiogeorge.com. Each week, you can catch two new hours of his show.

How 'John Christopher' evolved

The full story of John Christopher began in his birth home of Lincoln, Neb., and made its way to Kansas City back in 1967. As a kid, he always dreamed of either being an airline pilot or radio engineer. In fact, he used to run a small neighborhood radio station out of his basement using an AM transmitter kit he picked up at a Radio Shack.

His dad, Bill, was a television broadcaster back in Nebraska during the late '50s and early '60s.

"Dad covered the Starkweather murders," John said, while reflecting on the most influential person in his life. "And we remember distinctly the assassination of JFK because he was on deck in the newsroom when it happened."

Christopher landed his first radio gig back in North Platte, Neb., in 1974 at a little rock and roll station. His dad always hedged him into the technical side of broadcasting because of the limited number of announcing gigs that exist within the industry.

"During hungrier years, when things weren't working out behind the microphone, I took several technical jobs outside the business," he said. "At those times, I really thank my dad for pushing the technical degree."

When he did get back into broadcasting, he interned under the chief engineer at St. Joseph's KFEQ radio in the 1980s. Eventually, he would take over as chief engineer when his mentor retired.

"The Neon Beat" was born at KEFQ during a Saturday night show called "Joe Town Tonight" with co-host Gil Johnson. Once this AM station turned into a talk radio format, management decided to end this small hit of a radio show and Christopher scrambled to keep the dream show alive once he moved back to Kansas City to become a broadcast engineer. His show is and always has been

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Top, John "Christopher" Morris spins hits from the past in his home studio in Belton, using a second-hand board from a St. Joseph radio station, bottom.

Photos by Joe Dimino

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NEON BEAT: Belton radio pro scripts his own memory lane

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geared at the baby boomer, 50-plus base.

"I set up this studio in my basement with junk equipment and just started doing shows, using all this music I'd collected," said Christopher, as he pondered all the vinyl he had collected during bouts of dumpster diving over the years. "I did this for a couple of years simply as a creative outlet with some vague idea that I might do something with these shows. For the time being, I was just playing with an idea. Doing that thing I do."

It wasn't until a colleague at KUDL he happened to be giving a ride home one night heard his homemade tape by accident in the car's tape deck and said, "This is good John. It's really good."

Christopher said hearing his own voice makes him a bit nervous, but his friend kept the tape rolling and wondered what station the show was playing in town. It wasn't at this point. The show only existed on tapes Christopher created.

To the airwaves

This was the prod he needed to get the gears moving on his charming radio idea.

"So with that kick in the pants, I started exploring avenues for getting it on the air," he said. "It was right about in here that I met Richard Ward Fatherley, another announcer I've admired and emanated. Darla Jaye

(KMBZ) was to say of him, 'my God, Richard you really do have the voice of God.'"

The first name for this show was "Golden Greats" and Christopher let Kansas City broadcast legend Fatherley take a listen. He liked it, but suggested that someone with a voice that had more impact lead the show back into radio. After some weeks of thought, Christopher thought that Richard would be the apt first voice of Golden Greats.

"We had to change the name of the show from Golden Greats to The Neon Beat, a name my wife came up with," Christopher said. "Turns out Golden Greats was a name and trademark owned by Dick Clark. Oops."

His show aired at KCXL in Liberty, but was pulled after four months for many issues. The chief issue was that KCXL was still a low power station at that time with bad market penetration. The sponsors loved the show, but complained that they couldn't pick up the station.

Over the next three years, Christopher became a contract engineer with KCXL to care for the new KCTO station. During this time, he cared for the station transmitter south of Belton, in his hometown. He kept his dream alive by recording shows on his own as a "hobby" in his basement and sadly during this time found out that his friend and first Neon Beat host, Fatherley, had passed away.

His current studio in Belton was

actually a gift given to him by his wife. With an old board from the studios of KMBZ and the help of friends with carpentry skills, he got the gift of a studio in his home to conveniently weave together hours of his Neon Beat program.

When the station owners at his radio home of KCTO were looking for programming, Christopher was in the driver's seat.

"By now, I'd gotten to know the station owners pretty well and I offered them my all-you-can-eat — just plug 'em in Neon Beat," John said. "They wound up broadcasting the Neon Beat almost all weekend. They liked the show and it was pretty clear the listeners liked it too."

And on to the Web

Just last year, Christopher met a former KCMO talk show host, George Woods, who was starting an Internet radio site out of his home. The site's specialty was to serve baby boomers and over the course of the year, Christopher pitched the idea for putting the Neon Beat on the Web.

"About the time George had worked out all the details, KCTO decided to change its format," Christopher said, regarding the pending end of the Neon Beat at KCTO. "The timing of this was pure coincidence. Or divine, if you are so inclined."

With a new Web home and constant presence on the Internet via www.radiogeorge.com, Christopher finds the

World Wide Web a great evolution of the radio format.

"As Wi-Fi and other technologies make it possible to hear the Internet in your car, that will be a bad blow to terrestrial radio stations whose main brag so far has been that you can take it anywhere," Christopher said.

When the Neon Beat debuted on Radio George, his first track was Marilyn Maye's "Step to the Rear." With this, Christopher emailed Maye and told her about the show and that he was a big fan of her music. Her response was that she was honored to be on his program.

"I have always been a huge fan of Marilyn's music since I was in high school," Christopher said. "In the future, it's my desire to get her on the show to introduce some of her own songs and the stories behind them."

Christopher tends to lean more toward being a Beatles versus an Elvis man and has a host of favorite musicians that have moved him over the years. He is a big fan of the big band era of musicians, like Benny Goodman and Dizzy Gillespie. He cannot discount the magnitude of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, along with noting the significance of pop standards via The Silhouettes. He also noted the impact of Louis Armstrong, The Beatles and Elvis on his musical tastes throughout the years.

"Much of what we call pop music these days is formula," Christopher reflected on today's era of modern music.

"What has happened to the instrumental? Remember Paul Mauriat, Henry Mancini and Percy Faith? Who's doing instrumentals anymore?"

Christopher would like to see his Neon Beat dream become syndicated on a network. Something along the lines of Sirius satellite radio or a powerful station in the Kansas City market.

For now, he continues to attract a growing crowd of faithful listeners to his program. Some weeks back while doing a live show at KCXL in Liberty, a young man drove to the station to deliver him a gift in response to his radio show.

"He gave me the Buddy Holly Greatest Hits album on the Coral label in the original wrapper," Christopher said.

"Flabbergasted, I asked if he was sure that he really want to part with this. He said absolutely because he knew I would appreciate it and he had another copy."

As far as the future is concerned for Mr. John "Christopher" Morris, he notes the cathartic qualities of his radio program continuing on and simply keeping things in life real. Let's just call it his "gift" to us all with a radio or computer that is handy.

"Mom used to say, if you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life," Christopher said.

"I hope through just enjoying what I do, that I'll leave a little legacy behind. Something that says slow down, look back, remember who we are and then, let's dance."