

Moved by 'The Neon Beat'

By Joe Dimino • Contributing Writer

It was a crisp fall afternoon and my wife and I had just stumbled upon our best thrift store purchase ever: a small, Radio Shack raccoon from the early 1980's with an AM transmitter square in its belly.

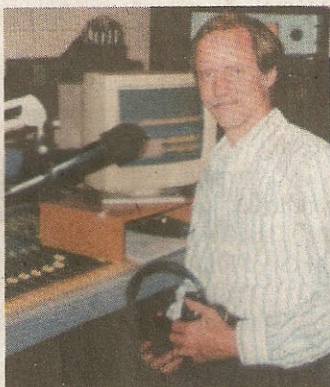
After swapping out the old 9-volt battery within the stuffed animal, analog sound transported us straight back to a time when the radio would simply put a smile on your face and make the sunshine burn a bit more yellow.

We landed on 1160 AM (KCTO) to hear a triumphant radio program called 'The Neon Beat' by creator John Christopher. He was spinning the best of the 1940's, 50's and 60's pop music. A tidal wave of delightful music ran forth--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. John is also a big fan of the big band era of musicians, like Benny Goodman and Dizzy Gillespie.

The Neon Beat disc jockey, who goes by John Morris during the day as a Radio Engineer with Entercom, becomes the radio persona John Christopher on the weekends to deliver his show to a legion of faithful listeners.

Currently, fans can hear the program on 1160 AM from 9 a.m. Saturday till noon on Sunday. This show will soon end on 1160 due to a station format change, but can also be heard on 1140 AM KCXL on Saturday and Sunday mornings.

As a kid, John 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.

John landed his first radio gig in North Platte, Nebraska 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," John said. "At those times, I really thank my dad for pushing the technical degree."

John got back into broadcasting in the 1980s, at St. Joseph, Missouri's KFEG radio. There, a Saturday night show called "Joe Town Tonight" had the first "Neon Beat" format. Once this AM station turned into a 'talk radio' format, management decided to end this small hit of a radio show and John scrambled to keep the dream show alive once he moved back to KC to become a broadcast engineer.

"I set up this studio in my basement with junk equipment and just started doing shows, using all this music I'd collected," noted John. "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."

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 his car's tape deck and said, "This is GOOD John. It's really good."

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

His show aired for a time at KCXL in Liberty, Missouri. Later, John became a contract engineer with KCXL to care for the new KCTO station transmitter south of Belton, in his hometown. When the station owners at KCTO were looking for programming, John offered up The Neon Beat.

"They wound up broadcasting The Neon Beat almost all weekend. They liked the show and it was pretty clear the listeners were liking it too."

Then KCTO decided to change its format. These days, John has a new web home and constant presence via www.radiogeorge.com. John would like to see his Neon Beat dream that was been hatched in his home basement become syndicated on a network.

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