

HOLIDAY CHEER

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Tom Skillman's yard glows from Christmas lights in his synchronized display.

Dancing lights

Synchronized displays make the season bright

By Shawn Clubb
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Strands of colored lights signal that it is the season of Christmas at a stretch of houses in Rock Hill.

The block on McKinley Avenue is like so many other blocks across the area at Christmas-time — a few houses here and there are decorated for the holidays. But something is different. The lights in five adjacent yards blink to a certain rhythm.

Anyone who follows the instructions to tune their car radio to 89.5 FM will find songs that match the blinking. The houses, tree, bushes, fences and yard decorations blink to a total of 15 songs. They are broken down into three “shows” of five songs each. Depending on what night you arrive, you might find a different show.

This cluster of Christmas spirit is the work of Geoff George, who works by day as the caretaker for a private estate. George started decorating for Christmas 11 years ago when he bought his house. It started small with some lights on the house and bushes. It grew and changed every year.

In 2005, George computerized it and put the lights in synch with music. He decorated just his own home with 25,000 to

30,000 lights and played five songs: “Jingle Bell Rock,” “White Christmas,” “Frosty the Snowman,” “Jingle Bells,” and Trans-Siberian Orchestra’s “Wizards in Winter.”

As he decorated his house in 2007, his next-door neighbor was leaving for work. George joked with him, saying, “Mind if I decorate your yard?” The neighbor said he’d be happy to let George do it.



A prolonged photo exposure captures the lights in Geoff George's yard, and the yards of his neighbors, during a sequence in which they blink in synchronization to Trans-Siberian Orchestra's “Wizards in Winter.”

He later enlisted another neighbor when she moved in two houses down. Last year, two neighbors across the street told him he could do their yards too.

The five yards blink with close to 140,000 lights. George's yard also features a garden railroad with Christmas cars, animatronic reindeer, a blow-mold Santa Claus and nutcrackers, and a Frosty the Snowman on the roof that tips his hat. George does most of the work, but some friends from Clean Cut Creations/St. Louis Snow Cone help.

The work gets noticed. Tour buses that go through the nearby Winter Wonderland at Tilles Park also drive to McKinley Avenue for George's display.

Sean Koepke of North County is a fan. He has even created a

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synchronized light and music display of his own in his parents' yard. In previous years, Koepke, 20, built M&M and Snoopy cut-outs and other Christmas decorations for the yard on a side street off Lindbergh Boulevard near St. Ann. He now has more than 15,000 lights decorating more than an acre.

“I’ve always been into displays,” Koepke said. “I’ve seen Geoff’s house many times and also a house in Ladue. I finally decided to do it.”

“My mom does the inside and my dad and me do the outside.”

Tom Skillman of South City recalls his start with animated lights. It began in 1996 with his initial experiments with computer control.

“What really started

Where are they?

Geoff's Christmas Lights

Where: 1337 McKinley Ave., Rock Hill
Hours: 5 to 10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 5 p.m. to midnight Friday-Saturday
Station: 89.5 FM
Website: <http://www.gtechdesign.com>
Extras: Collects money for Backstoppers and canned goods for the Webster-Rock Hill Ministries food pantry

Lavernell Lights

Where: 6429 Lavernell Court, St. Louis
Hours: 4:30 to 11 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 4:30 p.m. to midnight Friday-Saturday
Station: 107.1 FM
Website: <http://lavernell-lights.tomskillman.com>
Extras: Collects canned goods for St. Vincent DePaul Society

Sean Koepke display

Where: 13 Green Garden Drive, St. Ann
Hours: 6 to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 6 p.m. to midnight Friday-Sunday
Station: 107.3

it was we had a crib scene in front yard with a star up high,” he said. “I tried to sequence rays going down from the star to the crib scene.”

After a few years of working with systems that took a lot of work, Skillman found a company that manufactures control boards and software for controlling Christmas

lights. For the past nine years, he has added to the animated light display he calls “Lavernell Lights.”

“Looking back, it’s amazing to see what’s grown out of a few \$3 strings of lights,” Skillman said on his website.

Skillman has put up more than 13,000 lights since Nov. 13 and synchronized them to 10 songs. In addition

to lights, he has a candy cane and garland border, blow-mold candy canes, an igloo with two penguins and other items. He does most of the work, but his wife helps.

“It’s something to do to try and brighten things up a little bit,” Skillman said, “(but) it always seems so dark when you take it down.”