

A photograph of Cornelius "C.C." Celestine, a Black man with short hair, smiling and looking towards the camera. He is wearing a black tuxedo jacket with a red pocket square, a white dress shirt, and a red bow tie. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with water and a fence.

# “Music is My First Love”

## *Real Love's Cornelious “C.C.” Celestine Reflects on a Stellar Career*

*By Dean M. Shapiro*

**W**hen Cornelious “C.C.” Celestine was eight-years-old and living in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward, he recalls watching his brother, James “Larry” Celestine - 14 years C.C.’s senior - singing with The Drifters on Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand” TV show in the early 1960s.

Coming from a musical family and seeing his brother perform on TV with a top-selling group inspired Celestine and convinced him that he too wanted to perform. And, in later years, he would be doing just that – sharing the stage with such greats as The Temptations and opening for The Chi-Lites, The O’Jays, Johnny Taylor and other luminaries of the popular music world.

Today, as the lead singer for the vocal trio, Real Love, Celestine and his bandmates have built up a local and regional following that he hopes to take to the national level. In addition to Celestine, the group, which originally came together as a vocal quintet in 1998, also consists of baritone-tenor Rene Fleury and bass-baritone Nathaniel Brooks. They are backed up by the six-piece Real Love Show Band.

“I love what I do,” Celestine began. “Music is my passion. I put a lot of work into it and collaborate with a lot of different folks; writing, doing vocal arrangements, producing and recording. It’s something I just love to do.”

Celestine’s “real love” for music began early, in church, like

many others of that time, and in school. One of his teachers at Carver High School, Martha Francis, perceptively recognized his talent early and worked intensively with him, honing his vocal skills – especially in the classical repertoire. It paid off.

“We went full circle,” Celestine said. “She taught me and I ended up singing with her at The Kennedy Center, Constitution Hall, The Meyerson Center, and The Senate while part of The Moses Hogan Chorale.”

But other voices were stirring inside Celestine besides those in the classical vein. As a teenager hearing the songs of Jackie Wilson, The Drifters, and Motown artists like Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye and others, he began learning their songs. To the dismay of his classical music mentors, he began following his destiny to perform those singers’ hit songs professionally.

At 14 he joined a group called The Counts, belting out Motown tunes at French Quarter clubs, touring to New York City and opening for big-name acts whose tours brought them to the New Orleans region. In 1970 he formed his own group, an R&B quartet they named Ardi’che. They entered talent competitions, winning many of them and they performed throughout New Orleans and the surrounding areas.

A decade later, while employed as the director of loss prevention at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown New Orleans, Celestine

sang onstage with The Temptations and was given an opportunity to join the group but he declined.

Now retired after 25 years on the job and has raised his three children to prosperous adulthoods, plus the security of a pension and rental income, Celestine is happy to be pursuing his “first love” – music – full time.

For the past several months, Real Love has been singing to capacity houses at the Pontchartrain Landing Supper Club in Gentilly in a monthly show titled “Motown and More.” To keep up with popular demand they recently added a second performance and the shows will continue at least into early next year.

“My background is opera and church, which is similar to Jackie Wilson’s gospel background and style,” Celestine explained. “My natural tenor has the type of pitch and range that he had. I do songs like ‘Higher and Higher’ and ‘Baby Work Out’ but I can also do Chi-Lites, Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye and the mid-range stuff. With my versatility, from a vocal standpoint, I can do one and switch to the other.”

Continuing, Celestine said, “So, I was being trained to sing opera and I hung in there till ninth grade. Then ‘I Heard it Through the Grapevine’ (the original Marvin Gaye version) came out and I just had to do it. I did it in a talent show and it was a lot of fun. I knew this was the music I had to do.”



And so he did it but, for many years, it had to be in his spare time. Taking the job with the Sheraton put him in charge of security for the hotel and his responsibilities expanded when he became the president of the Greater New Orleans Hotel Security Directors Association.

“For years I would coordinate details with all the downtown hotels for the major events that were coming into town,” he said. “Mardi Gras, etc.. It was a lot of work.”

It was during this time, in the mid-'80s, that The Temptations came to New Orleans to perform a benefit concert. “One of the guys in the group (Dennis Edwards), heard me singing and asked me to come up on stage with them and sing a couple of their numbers,” he fondly recalled.

After Celestine sang two of their hits, “They loved it,” he said. “They told me, ‘You need to come out to L.A. with us. You’ve got something going there.’ We exchanged information but I later called Dennis and told him ‘I can’t do it. I’m safe where I am right now. I’m buying a house, I’ve got kids in school and a good job with benefits.’ I couldn’t give all that up.”

Today, as a retiree, Celestine is “thrilled” to be doing what he loves most. “My instrument is my voice,” he says proudly. “It’s given me the opportunity to meet great people and perform in many different settings.”

He also loves sharing the spotlight with the other two singers in his group and he praises their vocal skills and stage presence. “They’re great. I love being on stage with these guys.

“We do the stuff you’re not going to hear anywhere else in New Orleans,” Celestine continued. “We’re not doing the traditional stuff. The selections we do are songs people can reflect back upon from on their younger years and enjoy.”

He also loves interacting with his audiences. “We don’t put people up on the stage, we go out there to them,” he said. “If anyone has a birthday that month, we get them out on the dance



*Real Love:  
Nathaniel Brooks, Cornelious C.C. Celestine,  
Rene Fleury*

floor with us and we sing and have fun. And then we get everybody else on the dance floor and everyone’s having a great time.”

Many of Real Love’s fans come to the shows with umbrellas, towels, T-shirts, and caps emblazoned with the group’s name. In addition to being the group’s lead singer, Celestine is also their business manager. “I’m the guy in front of the band and the guy behind the scenes,” he proudly declares.

Celestine emphasizes that Real Love does more than just “pay tribute to the great singers who came before us.” He explains that the group has released several CDs and is working on some original material that they plan to release soon.

Summing up an eventful and rewarding career, Celestine said, “Music is . . . and always will be . . . my first love. It isn’t my main source of income but it is my main passion.”

*For more information about Real Love visit them on their Facebook page or website: [realloveentertainment.com](http://realloveentertainment.com). To book them for events and performances call (504) 952-7581 or email them at [cc@realloveentertainment.com](mailto:cc@realloveentertainment.com).*

**Real Love will be performing on Friday, December 8 and again on January 5 for two shows, 7:00 and 9:30 p.m. at Pontchartrain Landing, 6001 France Road, New Orleans. Optional buffet dinners or hors-d’oeuvres are available for both shows. For reservations call Gwen (504)373 2992.**