

Former Commodores Guitarist Trades Fame to Spread Gospel Message

The co-founder of the 1970s pop group now coaches gospel choirs and mentors aspiring musicians

At the height of his fame, the co-founder of one of the most successful pop-and-funk bands of the 1970s left his lucrative career to return to his Christian roots. Today one-time Commodores guitarist Thomas McClary leads a simpler life, overseeing the music ministry at his Orlando, Fla., church and preparing to release a CD by its 100-voice choir.

Once famous for million-selling singles such as "Three Times a Lady," "Shining Star" and "Brick House," McClary is a deacon and worship team leader at New Destiny Christian Center. Later this year he will produce the church's first CD on his own Visitation Records label.

"He has the zeal of Peter but the wisdom of Solomon," his pastor, Zachery Tims Jr., said. "He keeps everything balanced. He's a team player and a team builder. When he takes charge, people want to follow him."

"He's really a nice guy," added Sam Kenoly of the Kenoly Brothers, who is also a member at New Destiny. "He's given me so much advice that it's like taking college courses. He's really been an inspiration to me."

Born Oct. 6, 1950, in Eustis, Fla., the youngest of eight children, McClary played high school sports and graduated as valedictorian. He went on to the Tuskegee Institute in

Montgomery, Ala., where his life took the path that would lead to fame. While standing in line to register for classes, he heard someone whistling a sax solo by legendary jazz musician Eddie Harris.

“He was going through all the riffs, and I was thinking this guy’s got to be a musician,” he recalls.

McClary asked the student to start a band with him. His name was Lionel Richie, and they founded the Commodores in 1968 with four other Tuskegee students.

They started off as a backup band for Jerry Butler, Candi Staton and the Ike and Tina Turner Revue. Later they landed a two-year opening spot for the Jackson 5’s world tour. Their popularity growing, Motown head Berry Gordy wanted to sign them.

Their string of pop smashes brought them negotiating power. They demanded to keep their song-publishing rights—something Motown’s Jobete Publishing never surrendered to artists.

But the Commodores became trailblazers, creating music that won fans worldwide. “Some of the letters we’d get were amazing,” McClary remembers. “One lady was dying of cancer. She said every time she put a certain song on, it would ease the pain.

“We had people write us from around the world who didn’t speak a lick of English but knew the spirit in which the songs were written. ... We tried to be good stewards of that gift that God gave us even though we didn’t give God the glory at that time.”

One of the group's most beloved songs, "Jesus Is Love," hit the R&B Top 40 in 1980.

By 1982 McClary and Richie had co-written songs for Diana Ross and Kenny Rogers. After their manager—the glue that kept the group together—died, both men went solo.

McClary cut the Hot 100 single "Thin Walls" and produced a hit with the group Klique. He was scheduled to produce James Ingram, Melissa Manchester and the Four Tops. Then, "I heard an audible voice from God while I was in the shower," he recalls. "The voice said, 'It's time for you to come home now.' I thought I was hearing things."

McClary went home—literally. He returned to Eustis, where he joined a church and produced a documentary titled The History of the Apostolic Faith. He used his celebrity influence and recording royalties to fund local church and community charities and, as a local hero, gave motivational speeches at youth groups.

Meanwhile, Universal Records keeps all of the Commodores' music in print with various hit compilations. Because of the group's enduring popularity, McClary says there may be a reunion tour in the near future. He keeps in touch with his band mates and reminds them of the source of their good fortune.

"I tell the guys all the time that God had to honor me to honor His Word," McClary explains. "I was a tither even back then. I tithed even though I wasn't saved because of my praying parents who feared God. My accountants used to laugh

at me and wonder why I'd be giving six figures to the church.
... For the last 20 years the royalties have not stopped. It's
been incredible."

Bill Carpenter