

Interview with Cee-Cee LaRouge
Chicago-based drag performer and fashion designer

Interview conducted and written by A.J. Smuskiewicz for publication in the *CAAN Intersections* newsletter - <http://caanmidwest.org/index.html>



Cee-Cee LaRouge describes herself on her Facebook page as a “self-made drag queen.” The Chicago-native, of Puerto Rican ancestry, began performing in drag at Maneuvers bar in Joliet in 1999. She was crowned Miss Gay Joliet 2009. Since that first pageant victory, she has competed in numerous additional pageants and has won many titles, including the following:

Miss Illinois USofA at Large 2011

Miss Tri-States North America International at Large 2011

Miss Wisconsin North America International at Large 2012

Miss North America International at Large 2013

Miss Five Nightclub Plus 2013

Miss Elite of Elegance 2013

Miss Chicago Continental 2013

Miss Midwest United States 2016

Cee-Cee performs regularly in drag shows at venues throughout the Midwest, primarily in “Dining with the Divas” at Hamburger Mary’s in Oak Park and Milwaukee, as well as at Berlin, Hydrate, Progress, and Atmosphere in Chicago; Club Krave in Blue Island; Club Diesel in Peoria; The Office in Rockford; Traz in Carbondale; several nightclubs in Wisconsin; and many other regional night spots. She has also performed in shows in Las Vegas.

In addition to pursuing her drag career, Cee-Cee has founded her own fashion business in Blue Island called LaRouge Designs, featuring her unique, customized showgirl-style designs of dresses, gowns, body suits, and other clothing. She also has merchandise for sale at [teespring.com](https://www.teespring.com), such as t-shirts, tote bags, and coffee mugs bearing her likeness, and she is very active on social media, including Facebook and Twitter:

<https://www.facebook.com/CeeCeeLaRouge/>

<https://www.facebook.com/DesignsByLaRouge/>

https://twitter.com/cc_larouge





AJS: I met you and Twila [one of Cee Cee’s “drag children”] at Maneuvers a couple times several years ago, including at the 2010 New Year’s Eve party. You launched your drag performing career at Maneuvers, so you’re a “local girl” that the regulars of that bar take a lot of pride in. How did your first performance there come about? Did people encourage you to do it, or did you decide on your own?

CCL: If memory serves me correctly, my first performance came about during an amateur competition. That was when I met Miss Jennifer, Sable Coats, and many other girls who have become life-long friends. I’ve always wanted to be on a stage, so I took the initiative myself to do it. It’s been so long...November 1999 to be exact. My first song was “Bidi Bidi Bom Bom” by Selena.

AJS: Did you used to dress as a woman before you started performing in public?

CCL: I did, yes. It started when I was in high school. At that time in my life, I felt as if I was born in the wrong body, so I decided to “transition” during my junior year. I wore women’s clothing and wore makeup every day. I took a lot of heat from my fellow classmates and from the school staff, but I kept doing it. I don’t regret the experience at all, because I learned first-hand what my trans brothers and sisters have been facing for a long time. You name it—bullying, restroom issues, after-school activities, police escorts... A friend of mine bet me money that I wouldn’t go to my senior prom in drag. So, of course, I did! I even graduated from high school in drag.

AJS: What made you decide that you wanted to continue performing in additional drag shows and pageants? What do you enjoy most about performing?

CCL: After that first time, I felt so excited that I wanted to keep doing it. The idea of becoming someone else on stage is exactly what an actor is, and I felt I was right where I belonged. I enjoyed everything from the makeup to the costumes to the song selections. I mostly enjoyed the ability to portray how I felt on stage—to translate my feelings into art. Seeing the audience smile, laugh, sing along, and be amazed gives me such a good feeling!

AJS: Which of your many pageant titles are you most proud of? Why?

CCL: I’m proud of all of them because I worked hard in winning them. The amount of money that goes into creating the perfect winning pageant package is insane, but I’ve learned I can do exactly that with very little money if I just make it all myself. So I trained myself to have a detailed eye when it comes to fashion design, and I pride myself on making things for myself that no one else in the world has. I built a name for myself through the pageant circuit. and I’ve also made great friends.

AJS: What have you found most interesting, surprising, or revealing about the pageant circuit? Is there any particular incident or experience that stands out?

CCL: The most interesting thing about pageants is how much everyone “knows” about it... or at least claims to know. But you can tell who’s truly well-versed in pageantry by how they speak. I noticed a lot of girls speak eloquently and with confidence, so they’ve been trained to interview well.

AJS: What nightclubs do you perform at most often these days? Where and when can you usually be seen? What do you do in a typical club or bar show?

CCL: I’m mostly at Hamburger Mary’s in Oak Park, every Saturday for my “Dining With The Divas” show (7:30 pm and 9:30 pm showtimes), and every Sunday for my “Drag Me To Brunch” with my co-hostess Savannah Westbrooke (noon showtime). I’m also at Hamburger Mary’s in Milwaukee every second Friday of the month.

AJS: How often have you performed in Vegas? Was that experience (or those experiences) different than your Chicago-area shows? If so, how?

CCL: I've only performed a handful of times in Vegas, and it was a very long time ago, when I wasn't very seasoned. The experience was not so much different than it was in Chicago, but it was a different time then... That was way before "RuPaul's Drag Race," and we were still considered rather taboo.

AJS: I noticed, on your Facebook page, that you name your "drag children" as Twila LaRouge, Lolita Vixen LaRouge, and Nautica Nero. Can you tell me a little bit about these folks? Do they perform with you? Did you help them start their own performing careers? How often do you do mentoring?

CCL: Twila is my ex-fiancee. He did drag as a fun hobby but let it go when he became fully submerged in his work. Lolita still does drag here and there, but she's more of a scare queen—meaning she loves horror makeup and does a damn good job at it. Nautica is my bestie, and she moved to Florida to live her life. She does drag, but not that much anymore.

I have other kids that weren't mentioned on my page—which reminds me that I need to update that. Ki'Arra Inifiti Ross is a retired drag queen and a new father. Jazzelle Boyette-LaRouge still does drag to this day and also does pageants here and there. She was the one who introduced me to that world and taught me the ropes. Dymond Champagne Calloway is a show director at Maneuvers and the reigning Miss Illinois State. Lana Lake-LaRouge is an amazing cosplayer designer and comes out whenever she feels like it. Selena LaRouge is currently working in Springfield, Illinois, and does drag every so often. Sherry Flambe is a comedy queen and still performs. Karizma Mirage is a show director at Hamburger Mary's in Milwaukee for her own show, as well as for Plan B and Five Nightclub in Madison, Wisconsin.

AJS: Who are some well-known people that you have worked with or met during your career? I'm thinking of people like Mimi Marks. Any others? Any interesting stories about them?

CCL: I have worked with a good handful of well-known people, including Mimi Marks, Tajma Hall, Mercedes Tyler, Victoria LePaige, Kinley Preston, Miss Ruff N Stuff, Lucy Stoolie, and Trannika Rex. I've also worked with a number of RuPaul stars, such as Alexis Mateo, Shangela, Yara Sofia, Phi Phi O'Hara, Latrice Royale, Mimi Imfurst, Pearl, Kim Chi, and Shea Coulee. And I have met and worked with a handful of real celebrities, including Taylor Dayne, Thelma Houston, Monique, and Kristine W.

An interesting story? Well, it just happened this past Chicago Pridefest. I was just getting done with our show, and we were all getting ready for the curtain call, when Kristine W approached me to say she loved my makeup. She then asked me to paint her dancers and give her a touchup. Shocked and amazed, I rushed into the trailer and went to work! We now keep in contact, and when she's back in Chicago, I'll be right there with brushes in hand to make her fabulous. Don't be surprised if you'll catch her wearing a LaRouge Designs costume or two as well!

AJS: Gini told me that you tried out for RuPaul’s show. Is that true?

CCL: I have, yes. I’ve tried out every year except the last two years, because I’ve just been way too busy. But who knows? Maybe next year again.

AJS: When did you launch your fashion design business, LaRouge Designs? Is that a full-time occupation for you? Tell me a little about your designs and your clients.

CCL: I launched LaRouge Designs this year because of the popularity my designs gained thanks to Lucy Stoole and Monica Beverly Hillz. Monica wore one of my designs on the red carpet for “Drag Race,” and Lucy’s video game character wears one of my creations. Since then, it has become a full-time occupation for me, as well as a way to make costumes for myself every week. It’s been a very humbling experience. My designs are tailored to my clients’ personalities. I first get to know them and then make them something special and unique. I love that they give me all the time I need and the autonomy to make my creations come to life.





AJS: In looking at the photos you've posted online of your designs, I think I have three favorites:

-the red Skittles gown, with the name of the candy in white letters from chest to knee, and large round colorful candies dotting the gown;

-the blue and gold gown with gold tendril- and vine-like extensions seemingly growing all around the head;

-the long-sleeved, flowy pink gown with a sparkly silver diamond-like collar and lines of sparkly jewels down the midline on the front.

How do you develop highly original design ideas such as these? Are you inspired by any other designers or artists?

CCL: I honestly don't know how I come up with the designs. I just do it. Sometimes it's a song that'll inspire the noodle, or a look someone had and I just change it completely. There may be small hints of who or where the idea for a design came from, but largely it's all me. For example, my Kim Kardashian-inspired jean boot... Now everyone wants a pair of those! But for the most part, I would say it's the song [intended for a performance] that will inspire the look for a design. The only downside is that the garment may not be versatile with other songs.

AJS: I understand that you do charity-related or volunteer work for Joliet Junior College. What type of work do you do for them?

CCL: We—meaning myself and other girls—put on a show at JJC to raise funds for World AIDS Day. We've been doing it every year for I think seven years.

AJS: I saw on Facebook that you describe your gender as "neutral." Would you care to elaborate on that? Do you consider yourself "transgender," "bigender," or some other gender type?

CCL: I don't like labels, except on clothing. Labels place restrictions on people. I prefer the term "human" since we all have that thing in common. At the end of the day, I'm a dude in a dress. Why make it more complicated than that? I think if we do away with labels, we will then see we have more things in common and we can become a better society.

AJS: Do you live full-time as a woman in your day-to day life? Or do you sometimes present yourself as a man? Do you use your male name sometimes? Anything else you care to say about this?

CCL: I live as a man every day. My name is Narciso Samuel John Torrentt, but everyone calls me Cee-Cee for convenience. I don't mind. Cee-Cee LaRouge is a character that I have created, and that character will remain as such.

AJS: Do you have any other activities that you'd like to talk about, or any special plans or goals for your careers (drag or fashion)?

CCL: My goal at this time is to keep paying my bills on time. I'm in the process of finding a new home for myself and a new home for LaRouge Designs. It's gotten so chaotic in my house—with all of the drag and sewing—that I feel it's best to put that all in a separate space.

AJS: Do you have any other plans for your life that you care to share?

CCL: I think I'm where I'm supposed to be right now. If God sends me in a new direction, I'll gladly take on that challenge. As of right now, I'm quite content working my shows, travelling the country, making my creations, and being happy.



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