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# John Weathers

## On Reflection

### Interview - Mover

Think progressive rock from the '70s and immediately Genesis, Yes, ELP, King Crimson and Jethro Tull come to mind. All of them equally progressive in their own way, and in some ways, share a common thread between them. But, ask any diehard prog-rock fan and I guarantee another name comes up each and every time: Gentle Giant. Although never quite attaining the same level of sales or status of celebrity as the aforementioned, Gentle Giant most certainly made a statement, left a mark and carved their names into the history books of English prog. A mixture of rock, funk, jazz, classical, and even a bit of punk, Gentle Giant was as progressive as they come—and then some.

Holding down the fort for the better part of eight years was John Weathers. Although not their original drummer, it was Weathers that helped propel Gentle Giant to international fame with an interesting mix of bombastic backbeat, an ear for tuned percussion and the ability to play any time signature and style thrown his way.

On my interview list from the beginning, John wasn't an easy man to find. A few Internet searches every so often didn't turn up much until I happened to stumble across 'Two Weeks In Pain - Under The Knife' [<http://www.gorgg.org/UnderKnife1.htm>], a twenty-five-episode online diary of John's experience in the hospital and under the care of the N.H.S. [National Health Service]. Funny, articulate, sarcastic, passionate, frustrating, humbling, and sad, the story not only reveals John's condition of Spinocerebellar Ataxia, but the personality of it all is exactly the man I met one crisp afternoon in the Welsh countryside last fall when I was welcomed into his home for an afternoon walk down memory lane.

**Jonathan Mover:** There's very little on you out there other than a few bits and pieces on a website or two. How about the basics on how you started playing, your early influences and the things that led to taking the chair in Gentle Giant.

**John Weathers:** Well, in a nutshell, I started on a chair with a pair of knitting needles, as a lot of guys did. I was very influenced by early rock 'n' roll records, in particular Jerry Lewis and Elvis Presley, just wondering what the drummers were doing.

My parents were avid music collectors: Sinatra and Brook Benton, Sarah Vaughan, Billy Eckstine, there was always music in the house. When I was about 11 or 12, I started buying records, which were 78s [78 RPM records] of course, and that's what actually started me off. Then, one day I went to a St. Patrick's Day dance and they had what was called a skiffle band, with a tea chest bass, and the drummer just blew me away. I thought, "I've got to do that." He was my early influence, Pete James, whose daughter is Gail Louise James, also a great drummer.

From there, I got myself a cheap kit and started playing in the house, which drove my parents crazy.

**JM:** You also play tuned percussion, did you ever study an instrument, theory, arranging, anything?

**JW:** Nothing, no. I could play a touch of guitar. But it was by ear, on the hoof as it were. All self-taught.

At that time, we're talking about 1961, '62, I was a bit of a tear-away as well and ended up busting up on my parents. My father was from Liverpool and we had uncles, aunts and family up there; so I ran away to Liverpool, leaving my little drum kit behind. They accepted the fact that we both needed a break away from each other, so I stayed with relatives.





JM: And Liverpool was just because of relatives and nothing to do with the scene that was starting to happen there?

JW: No, because the scene was just about to happen as I arrived. It was happening, but it certainly wasn't the reason for going. Within a couple of weeks a friend brought my drum kit up, and a couple of weeks later I was in a band.

JM: A part of the Mersey Beat scene.

JW: Yeah, that's right. I was a member of the Cavern Club and would go to see all the bands there. I stayed in Liverpool about a year all together.

Eventually, I'd had enough and decided to move back to my hometown. There was a rock 'n' roll band in town called The Vikings, and of course, word got around very, very quickly that John Weathers had just moved back from Liverpool. I got a knock on the door from the lead singer and the guitar player, "Hey, you've just come back from Liverpool, can you play this Mersey Beat thing?" because their drummer used to play it backwards. I said, "Yeah, that's no problem."

I was 16 and they were all older than me, but they asked me to join the band, and I did. I turned professional at 17 in 1964. We played dance halls all over this area and started off doing shows that were called 'pop acts' in those days—opening up for Gene Vincent, the Walker Brothers, P.J. Proby. And we learned a lot from those bands. I found that the band from Carmarthen [Wales] was actually better than 90% of the bands that were in Liverpool. Great players. Eventually we moved from rock 'n' roll to R&B and blues. That was '64, '65 and then the band folded, but I got my chops by that time.

## The Eyes Have It

I'd learned quite a bit, but I stopped working for about nine months to a year until I got an offer from a soul band in this area called The Eyes Of Blue. By then soul music had taken over from R&B.

JM: Did you stop working because there was no other gig worth going for, or were you not sure about continuing as a drummer?

JW: I wasn't sure about continuing at that point, plus there weren't any gigs around. I did a few bits and pieces, but nothing to speak of. My father kept saying, "You want to get a decent job; you don't want to be messing around with this music lark," which is what he called it.

So the Eyes Of Blue came along. It was supposed to be temporary while they were looking for a new drummer, but they offered me the job. Their drummer came back, tried out, and they said, "No, he's better than you." I got the job and soon after we won the Melody Beat competition, which set us on a journey.

JM: Did you win from submitting a recording or playing live?

JW: Playing live. They had heats all over the country, and the final was in the London Palladium.

JM: That must have been exciting.

JW: It was, yeah. There were about ten bands in the final. The judges were Lulu [UK pop singer] and Steve Winwood [Spencer Davis, Blind Faith, Traffic] and a couple of other people, and they thought we were the best band. We got a recording contract and were immediately signed on to do a package tour going all over the country with Georgie Fame, Eric Burdon & The Animals and the Butterfield Blues Band. We only had 20 minutes in the beginning of the show, but I got some good tips there because [drummer] Billy Davenport was playing with the Butterfield Band. He played traditional [grip] and was showing me how to do it. I was trying to play traditional, but I couldn't get the thwack out of the snare, the power just wasn't there, so I stayed with matched.

JM: I'm sure playing with them and being around that scene must have led to other things as well.

JW: Yeah, we did some work with Quincy Jones, a film soundtrack. At that time he was writing music for movies. He'd just finished *The Italian Job*, and our producer, Lou Reizner, was a friend of his and got us this movie soundtrack. We spent a couple weeks with him, and again, I learned so much. We used to run to his apartment during the day, he'd teach us everything that needed to be played for the soundtrack that evening and we'd just go to it. I would conduct, or play drums, and he'd be in the control room.

JM: And that was in London, but you were still living in Wales.

JW: Yes, I was just sleeping on people's floors. We did three albums all together for Lou, a couple on Mercury, and then he sold us off to a short-lived one called Pegasus and it all started to fold.

By that time we were into what was the embryonic progressive scene. We'd been through psychedelic and the West Coast—Moby Grape and Buffalo Springfield—we used to play all that stuff. We had a residency in a speakeasy club and got to know a lot of good people there, and saw a lot of things go on, like the first gig of Blind Faith. It wasn't even a gig; it was just them getting up and jamming after rehearsing all day. Hendrix on New Years Eve, that was something special. He was playing Peter Green's guitar upside-down. Incredible. Never seen anything like it. Little things like that went on. We were regarded as "the roadies' band" because all the roadies loved us and came to see us.

JM: You mentioned that after the psychedelic thing you had just started to get into the progressive thing. Was that when odd-time, epic arrangements and orchestration started to come into play?

JW: Yeah, the keyboard player, Phil Ryan, was a trombone player in the National Welsh Youth Orchestra, so he could read dots and all that. He suggested we start incorporating some classical bits into what we were writing at the time, so we did, which was very successful. Yes used to come down to see us at that time because of the type of things we were doing. The arrangements and all were quite progressive, and we could play a bit of jazz. We could play any old thing, just like a melting pot—chuck everything in and see what comes up. But we didn't have the success that those bands did. Eventually that folded and we all started going our own separate ways.

## GIANT STEPS

JM: Which I'm assuming leads to Gentle Giant.

JW: Yeah, the way it went is that Simon Dupree & The Big Sound used to come and play concerts down at the dance hall where we had a Thursday residency. We would open the show for whatever top band came down, which was a big name band every week, and we'd be after them with a club, really going for them. Simon Dupree came down a couple of times, so we met them.

JM: All the three Shulmans [Derek, Ray & Phil] were a part of that, right?

JW: All three, yeah, that's how I got to meet them. The Eyes Of Blue played in Portsmouth one time and Ray [Gentle Giant bassist and composer] came to the gig, so we were nodding acquaintances. Then, later on, I was playing with Graham Bond's band Magick, and we happened to have been playing in London, and they [Gentle Giant] were playing upstairs while we were playing downstairs. They came down to see Graham Bond playing, and then I went upstairs and watched them play one tune, which was "Mr. Class And Quality" [*Under Construction*].

JM: Was Malcolm [Mortimore—prior GG drummer] playing drums?

JW: I think it was Martin Smith [first GG drummer] playing drums at the time.

JM: Did you even know of Gentle Giant?

JW: No, only from that one gig. But I heard a shuffle you see, so I thought they were a blues band. I didn't catch the clever bits of it, they just didn't go in...I was probably drunk (laughing).

I didn't hear anything for about a year after that. In between I did a little stint with Joe Cocker's Grease band, which didn't last very long. When that broke up, Henry McCullough went on to join Wings, and I went to work, because I was looking for a gig. I was loading trucks and carrying carpets at night, when I got a call from Ray asking, "Are you available? Our drummer [Mortimore] has broken his leg and his arm in a motorcycle accident, and we've got a tour coming up. We'll pay you well. Do you fancy taking it on?" How he got my telephone number, I'll never know, but he found it out. So I went over to Portsmouth, did the audition, and they said, "Great. No problem at all, but we've got to get into rehearsals tomorrow, the tour starts the week after next." I went head-on into rehearsals and just gave my all.

We rehearsed for the tour, did the tour, and at the end of the tour, they had a meeting and said, "Well, look...would you like the gig, because we like the way you do it."

JM: It wasn't even a question of Malcolm healing and wanting to come back. It was your gig.

JW: That's right. Yeah...a bit bolshy. Even after the first few days of rehearsals I started chucking ideas at them, which maybe I shouldn't have done. But perhaps it was the right thing to do because there was such a rush on and the music was really complicated...a lot of it was too busy for me, if you know what I mean.

JM: You mean too many time changes? Because I think you handle that really well.

JW: No, it was the recordings. They were playing Malcolm's work, which I found a little busy. I said, "Look, these four bars here, I don't think I should phrase all of that. It's detracting from what you guys are doing. Why don't I just hit the shit out of them underneath what you're doing?" We gave it a try and they went, "Wow. We like that." And that's just the way I heard it. There were all these lovely things escaping because the drummer was phrasing every single thing. I think that was part of the reason that they decided I fit in a little better. The band even started to change direction a little bit.

JM: During the time that you were out there subbing, was Malcolm waiting in the wings expecting to come back?

JW: He was expecting to come back, but of course, after it took him six months to heal up, I don't think it was any great surprise when they said, "Well, you've been out of it for six months and this guy knows the job, we're going to hang onto him." That kind of thing happened all the time.

## GIANT FOR MORE THAN A DAY

JM: After the tour, with you breathing new life and personality into the band, how did it affect the direction and what was the process for your first recording with them, *Octopus*?

JW: Well, the primary writers were Ray and Kerry [Minnear]. Kerry would have ideas; Ray would have ideas; they would bring them to a rehearsal, and in fairness to them, they would be pretty well the finished thing. We just beat them around until they were right. Then all the lyrics were done by Phil [Shulman], who was very well read, hence the depth in the ideas, the [Albert] Camus and all of that stuff going on. Me, I never heard of him, "Albert who? I like the lick though." But they'd already started writing *Octopus* before we recorded it, while we were still out on tour promoting *Three Friends*. We went to America with Black Sabbath and [Jethro] Tull. By the time we got back from that, well, touring America really makes the whole thing tight.

*I can knock you out a tune on anything. It's just being a musician I guess.*



JM: Was Tull the headline with Black Sabbath in the middle and you guys opened up, or two separate tours?

JW: No, that first tour was just ourselves and Black Sabbath.

JM: How did that go down?

JW: Terrible. (Laughs)

JM: I'm sure Sabbath's audience didn't know what to make of you guys.

JW: No, but we had the same management, which is why they put us on that tour. At the end of the Sabbath tour, they managed to get us onto the Tull tour, which was about a month, and was a totally different thing.

JM: Was it Clive or Barriemore with Tull?

JW: Barriemore was already in it.

JM: Amazing drummer, one of my favorites.

JW: Great guy, great player. *That* was a true education. I watched him every single night. I did not miss one performance because I thought that show, *Thick As A Brick*, was so good. It was a killer show. Meanwhile, while I was watching Barry, the guys were busy

it. Ray would sometimes have ideas, a little idea on this, a little idea on that, and I'd interpret it. But I was never pushed to go in any particular direction. We would just discuss how to approach certain sections the best way.

JM: Regarding some of the complicated odd-time figures, one of the things that I really like about your playing—and Gentle Giant—is not only were you playing in odd time, but you were also phrasing within odd time. Were those the types of things that you would count out and follow along mathematically, or was it all by melody and feel?

JW: A bit of both to be honest with you: because playing drums *is* mathematics. That's what it's all about. But I would not count and then put a fill in, I would put the fill in where I felt it worked. And if it worked, that was great, and if it didn't, I would take it out. So it was a bit of both.

But there were times I would have to really sit there and count. I would follow the melody and I'd be listening to what was going on.

JM: Yeah, I find a lot more of that here in the UK. When you listen to some of the more difficult progressive pieces from Jethro Tull, Fairport Convention, Genesis and Gentle Giant, it's in the music history here. It comes from the folk background. Many of the drummers that I

was heavily influenced by, yourself included, just had that innate sense of—if the lyric line had 31 syllables or beats in it, and it was in 8th-note time, you were playing in 31/8. Simple. It wasn't the type of thing that you had to structure and count, it was just something that made sense melodically and musically, so you did it.

JW: Yeah, it's just following the tune, seeing where the tune ends, and judging all from there.

## BAD BOYS

JM: You covered so much musical ground with Gentle Giant, lots of different directions; are you happy with all of the places that you went, and if not, what are some of the disappointments?

JW: One example of a disappointment: "The Boys In The Band" [*Octopus*].

JM: Absolutely one of my favorites. A great song and a fantastic drum track. Why is that a disappointment?

JW: Ray came up and said, "Here is the next tune." He played it and I nearly died. I didn't know whether to cry or throw up. I said, "You've got to be joking? What am I gonna do to that?" He said, "Oh, you'll find something to do. It'll be brilliant. Don't worry about it." I said, "We're going into the studio next week Ray!" There's everything in it. There's a kitchen sink in it. So we went into the studio and, you know, there are a couple of small errors in there and a really bad mistake. You can hear that I get completely lost.

JM: Oh really. I think I know what you're talking about. It sounds like you're playing a five across the bar, but your snare lands on ONE when it goes to 3/4. Even so, it's an incredible track.

JW: Well, if you put on the *Playing The Fool* live album, of course, we'd been touring it, so it's just 'whack, here it is, no problem whatsoever.' But I just hadn't had time to learn something *that* complicated considering we were learning the whole rest of the album as well. It was like, "Count me in and see you at the end."



*We could play any old thing, just like a melting pot; chuck everything in and see what comes up.*

writing. So we recorded *Octopus* as soon as we got back, I think... we may have recorded it before we went. But either way, the guys were writing while we were touring.

## IN THE MIX

JM: With Gentle Giant's music, similar to what you said earlier about *Eyes Of Blue*, there are so many different elements and styles mixed in there. You said you didn't study, but obviously you must have been listening to a lot of different genres. Gentle Giant mixes heavy odd time within a framework of rock, jazz, blues, classical, funk, punk and even a bit of reggae. Was anything ever dictated for you to go in a particular direction, or was it just whatever came out of you from everything that you were listening to and grew up with?

JW: I was never dictated to at all on what to play. We would discuss

There are places where I go, "Where am I?"

JM: (Laughing). Still haunts you to this day?

JW: Oh, it will really haunt me to my grave, the mistakes on that. Oh dear, dear, dear.

JM: Well, all things considered, it's an amazing track, and the fact that you recovered and landed on the ONE is good enough for me.

## PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

JM: Well, on the flip side, what are some of the prouder moments, or some of the songs that you would point out and say, "That one is really what we were all about. I'm really happy with that." And hopefully there's more than a few.

JW: I like a lot of stuff on *Missing Piece*.

JM: I love that record. "Two Weeks In Spain" is fantastic.

JW: The way we did that was we took that on tour first, and then we went to record in a studio in Holland and played it live. On a drum riser with everyone spread around, and there's hardly any overdubs on the thing. The basic band, guitar, keys, bass and drums, were all done together. We arrive in the morning, warm up, whack—straight in and do it, because we'd been playing it on tour. I like the way the album flows. You can tell everyone knows exactly what he's doing.

JM: There are very few bands that are allowed or able to do that—to go out and play new material to an audience. Zappa obviously got away with that. He was always writing and re-arranging, trying out new things every night, often times well before recording. Were your audiences open to receiving new material like that?

JW: Very much so. Most of the show was the old stuff, and we snuck most of the new stuff in.

JM: Did you find that gauging the audience's reaction changed the direction of any material, or was it pretty much from the beginning to the end of the tour, the same songs; you just played them much better at the end.

JW: Yes. That's exactly how it was. I like a lot of stuff on *Civilian* because I always was a rock drummer, and that kind of M.O.R. [Middle Of The Road] stuff, or A.O.R. [Album Oriented Rock], gearing it towards that and getting the precise drum break with a great drum sound. So I do like *Civilian* from that point of view. It's a wonderful sound on it. Umm, there are lots of things I do like, "His Last Voyage," [Free Hand] I like that, and I like "Aspirations" [The Power And The Glory] in particular.

JM: Such a beautiful song.

JW: There's a little story attached to that. We'd been running it through, not all afternoon, but for a good hour and a half and just could not get the feel. So we went out to the pub and had a drink, came back, turned all the lights down in the studio and just played it. And that was it, the first take. You could just feel it. It's like you can almost hear us breathing and feel us breathing. It's so natural. The whole thing just flows beautifully and it's live. Gary [Green] did one guitar overdub on it. So that really stands out.

There's so much of it that I'm proud of, but "The Boys In The Band" is the only one I'm ashamed of. I like a lot of *The Power And The Glory*, especially "Cogs In Cogs." Good stuff on there. But we were always under-rehearsed when we went into the studio. The *Missing Piece* is when we found out how we should have done it. Take half of it out on tour first.

I went head-on into rehearsals and just gave my all.



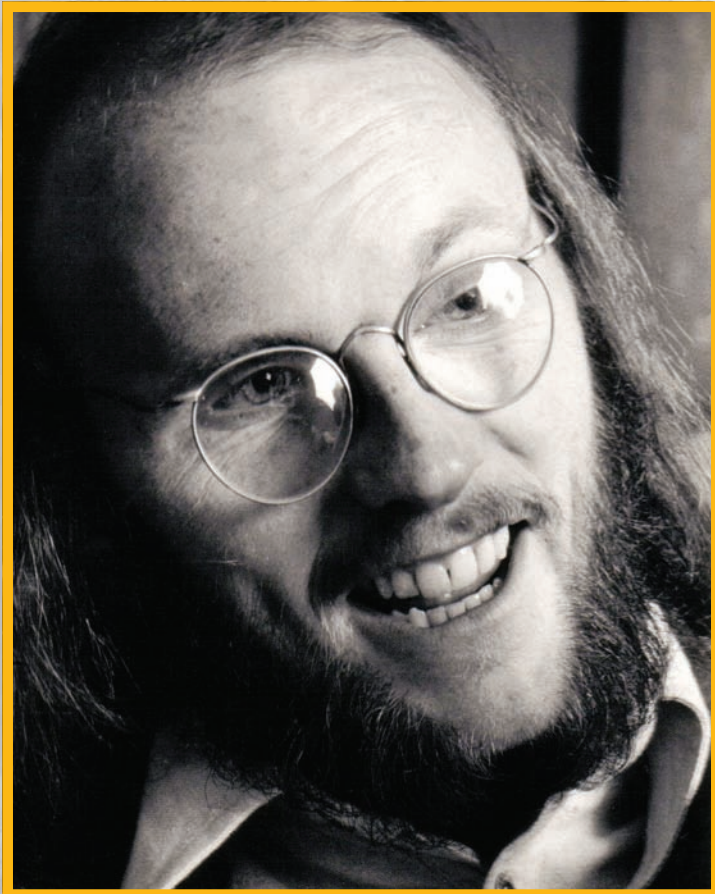
## FIVE AND TIME

JM: Speaking of tours, I was very fortunate to have seen you on tour in 1977 at The Paradise in Boston. One of the things that really blew me away was everyone was playing every instrument, and when it came time for the drum solo, five guys onstage played drums and tuned percussion. Who wrote it? Was it something that was based around your solo and everybody picked up on it, or did you work out bits and pieces and hand them out?

JW: Well, I used to play the standard off-the-shelf drum solo, and try to make it as interesting as possible, squealing and doing tricks and juggling. I always found that I was bored with even the best drummers' solos if they went on longer than about three minutes. The whole band wanted to do a section, as usual, with a big drum solo. We tried it first with the guitar in "Peel The Paint" and that worked pretty well, but it came to a point where I said, "Can't we do something else because I just do not like playing these drum solos. I find them boring, and I'm sure the audience does as well." So, "Kerry, you've got a degree in percussion; Gary, you're a great

## ROAD(IE) RAGE

There was some bad blood between myself, and one of the roadies with Badfinger, and there was a local DJ who kept winding it up and winding it up because he wanted to see something happen. I confronted this guy—I forget what it was about, something childish like a woman or something—but when I grabbed him by his lapels, all of Badfinger was standing in the wings, so they ran out and they tried to beat the shit out of me (laughs). Fortunately, the bouncers from the dance hall were there as well, and they broke it up pretty quick. That blew over and we were all friends again in no time.



*Through music I've been able to live a very fulfilling life and I don't regret one minute of it.*

drummer; Raymond can get away with it." So, Kerry went to work on something and we started throwing ideas together, changing tempos and rhythms, and then xylophones came in. It developed from a boring drum solo into a drum feature, which worked a lot better on tour.

JM: It was great. You mentioned Kerry with the degree, but you never studied; so you had a glockenspiel in front of you and Kerry showed you what to play?

JW: Correct. The same with the vibes. [For the song] "On Reflection," [he] just showed me, "This is how it goes," and I just worked on it. I had a tape recorder, I had the tune, worked on it, worked on it, worked on it—in a couple of hours I have the thing. I can knock you out a tune on anything. It's just being a musician I guess.

## A HARD SELL

JM: Unfortunately, it seemed as though prog was on its way out by the late '70s. Even a band like UK, whose debut album is a prog masterpiece, dabbled with pop on their follow up *Danger Money*. I'm sure even Gentle Giant had to consider the changing climate of the industry.

JW: You're right about prog becoming a little more simplified. I think most of the prog bands were headed that way, just look at what Yes and Genesis were doing. The hit single in America, the golden key to success, was "The Holy Grail." There was a feeling that once that was achieved, then it would naturally follow that your audience would buy your back catalogue and it would be far easier to get them to listen to the more adventurous stuff.

The main problem lay with the big record companies and centered on greed, they weren't willing to spend money building up a band any more. They expected "product," something that would be an instant hit and make them loads of money. The accountants were in charge even though they knew nothing at all about music, the business they were supposed to be in!

Then came the advent of punk and new wave, and there was total chaos. Everybody in the record industry was running around like a headless chicken, trying to predict what was going to be the next "big thing." Executives were being fired left, right and center. It was a well-known fact that one company had fired every single promotion man they had and replaced them overnight. They were truly bad times, especially if you were a middle order band like us.

So, we started to follow suit; we didn't have much choice. We recorded *Interview*, which was purposely a little more "accessible" but still included "Design"—a Minnear percussion classic—to show what we were capable of. But the headless chicken syndrome was rubbing off on us, *Interview* lacked direction and wasn't very well received at all.

Live concerts though, were going amazingly well, that's why we decided to put out the live album, as well as the fact that it gave us the chance to decide where we were going musically.

The truth of the matter is, we went the wrong way. We chose to make the next album, *The Missing Piece*, even more 'accessible,' digging an ever-deepening hole for ourselves...it got deeper. *Giant For A Day*, still no real direction, a total mishmash, but I love "Spooky Boogie."

## THE MISSING PIECE

JM: Your kit, from what I remember, seemed like a standard 5-piece, but the rack toms were set up in an interesting way. The left one was on a snare stand and the right one was mounted on the kick, but on the opposite side of the tom holder.

JW: When I first joined the band it was a Ludwig classic kit with just the one mounted tom. One day we were in Manny's [Music, NYC] and I was looking around while all the "musicians" were messing around with picks and strings and god knows what. Up on a top shelf I see a champagne sparkle 12-inch tom. I thought, "Ohhh, hello!" So I called the guy over, and he said, "That old thing." He went up and got it and it was a Slingerland. I said, "Well how much do you want for that?" He said, "Umm, it will have to be 25 dollars." I said, "I'll take it, and a stand for it." I then added the 12-inch Slingerland.

JM: So that explains the one tom on the snare stand, and instead of putting on a double tom mount, you just mounted the 13 from the other side.

JW: Yeah. That's the way it worked best. And it made a big difference having a 12, a big, big difference. Then about six months later I added the roto-toms, which I used a little bit, not a huge amount.

## GIANT FOR A DAY

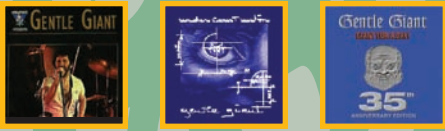
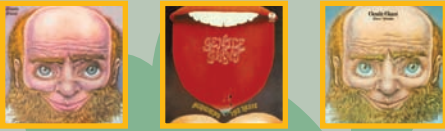
JM: You recently attended a Gentle Giant convention. Is that the extent of your involvement with the band these days?

JW: Well, there isn't the band Gentle Giant anymore, but obviously there's still product out there.

JM: Do any of the other guys show up as well?

JW: Kerry and Gary, and Malcolm Mortimore go. It's great because there's a club called On Reflection, where we discuss all things Gentle Giant, plus all sorts of other things. From that, there's an off-shoot called G.O.R.G.G, which is the Global On Reflection Giant







I would not count and then put a fill in,  
I would put the fill in where  
I felt it worked.

Gathering, and that happens once a year. One year it's in the States and the other year it's in Europe. I used to go to all of them, but the last four years I haven't been able to travel as much. This last one was in Edinburgh, so we went up for that. It's like a convention. A bunch of people, 70-100, getting together, talking music, having a drink, going out for the day, visiting, talking deep into the night about Gentle Giant. They've got loads of gear there and they rehearse old Gentle Giant stuff, so we have a big night, which is a dinner and then get up and play.

JM: You say, *they* rehearse and play, meaning the fans?

JW: Yeah, and we sit in and play a bit too.

JM: That must be fun.

JW: Oh, it is. And, of course, Gary and Malcolm have got this band called Three Friends, and they're playing Gentle Giant material. Kerry started playing with them, but he pulled out; too much to do. But there are a lot of people that love seeing it performed. They do a great job. I went down to their first concert and it brought tears to my eyes.

JM: What's it like hearing Malcolm play your parts?

JW: Interesting. He's very faithful to the drum breaks, very faithful indeed, which is very nice of him. I took it as a compliment.

## WEATHERING THE STORM

JM: You mentioned that you're no longer playing due to what doctors thought was a certain type of arthritis in your legs, mainly affecting your right foot.

JW: Lack of control. You know with all those doubles and triplets on the bass drum, they just weren't happening.

### YAMA-HA HA HA

I used my Ludwigs in the studio except for *Civilian* when I borrowed a kit from Yamaha. For the *Civilian* recording, Ray said to me, "We need a drum kit. How about a Yamaha?" I said, "Yeah, sounds great to me, but how do we get one?" He said, "Phone Yamaha, tell 'em Steve Gadd told you to call, and can you borrow a kit." That's exactly what I did, and they fell for it. They said, "Yeah, sure, come down and pick it up. No problem at all." Who was going to turn around and phone Steve Gadd and ask, "Did you really speak to this guy?" So we borrowed the Yamaha kit. They came out of the box and sounded great.

JM: You didn't notice anything walking around, or experience any pain as a warning?

JW: No, nothing at all. It was only when I was doing a gig somewhere and staying in a hotel. I was actually doing a Welsh pantomime thing, which I did for about ten years. Every Christmas I was the MD of a little pantomime band up in Cardiff, and so was staying in a hotel. We only have a shower at home here, so it's very rare that I have a bath. I ran a bath, put my left foot in, felt the water, hot, and that was fine. Put my right foot in and I couldn't feel. It was like the water was tepid all the way up to the waist. I thought, "There's something seriously wrong here." That's when I went to see the neurologist.

JM: And that was the first time you noticed anything?

JW: Well, before that, I was trying to figure out what was going on with the bass drum and I couldn't. I thought maybe I needed a new pedal or something. But, when one leg says the water's hot and the other says it's tepid, that's when they started trying to work out what it was. The doctor told me it was possibly a bit of arthritis, but it turned out to be Spinocerebellar Ataxia.

Once I realized what was going on, I kind of soldiered on; trying to play the bass drum with the left foot; tried the double pedal thing, but it just upset me so much I stopped everything for a while until I got over the fact that I wasn't going to be able to play drums anymore. You know, I've been doing it for 50 years, so to suddenly take it away...

It was over the course of about a year, from when I first noticed there was something wrong to not being able to play at all, or at the standard that I'd want to play at. I got very upset about it.

## PAST TENSE

JM: Understandable. Had this not all come about, was there any talk or idea about a Gentle Giant reunion?

JW: There were talks about it, but it wouldn't ever come about. Ray and Derek, they'd never get back on a stage again. Never, ever.

JM: Happy with their careers, or did something happen between them?

JW: Oh, no, no. They're still on good terms, but what they both say is, "It's all in the past, why try and bring it up now?" And I must admit, they're not too keen on the Three Friends idea.

JM: They'd rather just leave it on the shelf as a nice memory.

JW: Surely. That was 1970-1980 and that stays on the shelf in the museum. Because Ray has had great success, and so has Derek in his various guises.

JM: It's interesting how Derek, being the lead singer and focal point of one of the more progressive bands that broke a lot of the rules, which negated them from radio, turns around and throughout the '80s was the man, monumental for basically putting corporate formula rock on the map: signing Bon Jovi and Cinderella early on, and more recently Slipknot and Nickelback.

JW: Well Derek was always a businessman. I think even Gentle Giant was a vehicle to get somewhere, and now he *is* somewhere. I mean, his resume reads rather well.

JM: Are you still in touch with everyone?

JW: Very much so with Kerry and Gary, annually with Ray, but I don't hear very much at all from Derek. He's far too busy I'm sure. But, just talking back to the band getting back together, if I had still been playing, when the idea of Three Friends came up again, I'd have gone for that with no problem whatsoever. The only other time

I did a gig was playing congas with Wild Turkey in Italy at a Jethro Tull convention. They asked me if I'd go out there and make an appearance. But playing the gig was actually difficult. The amount of effort that one has to put in from the moment you get on the stand... and to do that when everything is absolutely forced.

## A PRESENT FOR THE FUTURE

JM: Have you attempted or have any desire to reconfigure a kit so you could play from waist up? You could approach the kit like Trilok Gurtu, who doesn't have a kick drum, but plays a tom, tuned very low, as his kick drum, going back and forth to the snare with his hand. You could mount a bass drum to your left and play it with your left hand, going back and forth to and from the snare. Or mount it to your right, like the floor tom, and use both hands with your left foot stepping on the hi-hat. Because you could do it.

JW: I could do it, but it would take an awful lot of hard work, and then what would I do?

JM: You could do the Three Friends gig.

JW: No, no, the Three Friends gig belongs to Malcolm. I would never dream of interfering with that.

JM: Yeah, I guess you did that one time already.

JW: (Laughs) Yeah, I did it on the first circuit. Umm, but I'm lazy, and to go through all of that after the disappointment of not being able to play. Also, I've got a little heart problem as well, an arrhythmia, so I'm not able to exercise a great deal. I get very tired if I actually physically play, even congas. But I can play around on the computer.

JM: I noticed the computer here with a keyboard attached. Are you getting into programming?

JW: Yeah, a little bit here and there. I didn't even think about computer-generated stuff until about eight years ago while seeing a bunch of guys from the G.O.R.G.G [Global On Reflection Giant Gathering] and O.R. [On Reflection], when they actually made me a present of all this gear. They were determined and not going to let me off the hook. And, at the same time cajoling Gary to try and write some new stuff. So I play around on it.

JM: Are you working with loops and full drum tracks that you're editing, or programming in MIDI?

JW: Programming in MIDI using Sonar, and I have my drum sounds from the original recordings. I'll put the basic track together and keep listening and listening and then put the drum breaks in. I tend to actually work through it, a beat at a time, rather than just slam a loop on. I've done some stuff for other people where I do the drum track, and I'm very happy with doing that.

## ALL AROUND

JM: I can definitely hear the influence that Gentle Giant has had on some of the newer prog rock bands of the last couple of decades. What's your take on some of those bands and the music of today in general?

JW: I'm ashamed to say that I'm not familiar at all with any of the nouveau prog bands; I don't pay a great deal of attention to what's going on although I suppose I should. But I find that there's too much dross out there to wade through, the likes of Coldplay and U2 do absolutely nothing for me, but then again I'm in the minority so I must be wrong.

The concept though of young players being so uncomfortable following popular trends in music that they hark back to the



innovative writing and playing of 30 years ago gladdens my heart. It means that there is a new generation of people out there that are interested in really learning to play to the best of their ability, taking up the challenge of playing something interesting and difficult, pushing themselves to the limit.

I suppose I'm a bit of an old fart really, developing nicely into a grumpy old man.

At the moment I'm listening to '30s and '40s stuff, early Frank Sinatra with those amazing big bands: could those boys play! And there we have the nub of the matter in my opinion. People who can play their instruments, not just a three-chord trick with a massive publicity machine behind it, are coming back to the fore and I heartily applaud them.

JM: What are your thoughts when looking back on your career and your history with Gentle Giant?

JW: Well sir, I think one word will suffice: fortunate. I was brought up in a house with no indoor plumbing and a toilet at the end of the garden, money was tight and times were very hard for us, as they were for a lot of people at that time.

I was nine years old when rock 'n' roll first arrived and even at that tender age was besotted with it. I just happened to go to a school dance at the age of 12 where a live band was playing and immediately resolved to teach myself to play drums.

At fourteen, I was a gangly, gawky youth running with a bad crowd and had very little in the way of prospects, but I could play drums a little.

From joining my first band to touring America with Giant took only 8 years, hardly any time at all—and I loved America. When I was a kid, America was big cars, John Wayne and the Wild West, a place you dreamed about. Now all of a sudden the dreams became a reality, visiting all those places I'd seen in the movies for free and getting paid for it. America during the '70s was a place that was laid back, happy and easy going, it was an absolute joy to play there, and I feel very fortunate to have done so.

But most of all I feel fortunate that I got to perform with some of the greatest musicians of the rock era, lovely people who taught me all that I know and to whom I owe everything.

I've been a rocker, a mod and a hippy. Through music I've been able to live a very fulfilling life and I don't regret one minute of it. I've been a very lucky man. \*



WEBFOOT

<http://www.gorgg.org/UnderKnife1.htm>

[www.blazemonger.com/GG/John\\_Weathers](http://www.blazemonger.com/GG/John_Weathers)