

# Talk Talk

RAY SHULMAN AND GENTLE GIANT'S  
FUNNY, PROGRESSIVE WAYS

.....  
by Andy Goldenberg  
.....

“Challenging!” If I had to choose one word to describe the music of Gentle Giant to the uninitiated, challenging would be most apt. Arising out of the ashes of Simon Dupree And The Big Sound, a hard-working R&B unit playing the pub circuit in and out of London in the mid-60s who scored a UK Top Ten hit in 1967 with “Kites” (B-side w/ “Like The Sun Like The Fire”), Gentle Giant released its self-titled debut album in 1970, consisting of a mixture of blues, rock, and soul while infusing a touch of the progressive elements that would so set apart Gentle Giant from its fellow and (unfortunately) frequently more successful British counterparts: King Crimson, ELP, Yes and Genesis.

The Giant would release 11 studio albums and one live album from 1970-1980. To state that Gentle Giant's music was progressive is a tremendous understatement. The band's music was an amalgamation of rock, classical and choir, as well as free-form and structured jazz. From the haunting, “Funny Ways” from the group's debut album to the adventurous hard rock style of 1973's *Octopus* (short for “Octo-Opus” or “eight musical works”) Gentle Giant's music conveys a search, be it the search for childhood, evidenced on 1972's *Three Friends*, or a search for truth in the political process, as on 1974's *The Power And The Glory*. GG's music emotes an almost medieval/minstrel-like feeling with the multi-tracked vocal choruses being the band's trademark.

Gentle Giant's live shows were legendary, often featuring various members switching instruments. The group's albums sold very well in Europe and the U.S. and developed an impressive following (far larger than the oft-repeated term "cult," conveniently used by the lazy rock press of the early '70s).

The band did have trouble securing a spot in the British musical hearts. This was partially due to the complexity of the band's music, which surpassed that of ELP and even *Lark's Tongue In Aspic*-era King Crimson, and also partially due to the group's serious commitment to the music, which left nothing for the gossip-hungry British media to dredge up.

In the age of glam rock, as the band so eloquently conveyed in the liner notes to the 1971 album, *Acquiring The Taste*: "It is our goal to expand the frontiers of contemporary music at the risk of being very unpopular. We have recorded each composition with the one thought — that it should be unique, adventurous and fascinating. It has taken every shred of our combined musical and technical knowledge to achieve this. From the outset we have abandoned all preconceived thoughts on blatant commercialism. Instead we hope to give you something far more substantial and fulfilling. All you need to do is sit back, and acquire the taste."

While it would take another full article to document the various labels that have issued and reissued Gentle Giant's music, the past few years have been very kind to Gentle Giant fans. *Under Construction* is now available as a double-CD set. This collection is a must for all Giant fans, as it features a cornucopia of unreleased material spanning the group's entire career. Included are four songs written before the debut album as well as unmixed live material from the brilliant 1976 tour, songs from a soundtrack to a Robin Hood film that was never made, as well as snippets of demos, band rehearsals and outtakes. Sound quality varies throughout, depending on the master tape quality, but this collection serves as both a historical document for prog rock fans as well as an inside look for musicians into the intricacies of a diligent working band. In addition, King Biscuit Flower Hour Records has released a magnificent concert from the Jan. 18, 1975, show at the Academy of Music in New York City.

*Goldmine* caught up with former Gentle Giant bassist and violinist Ray Shulman. Through the magic of e-mail, he helped shed some light on the career of one of progressive rock's most innovative (and collectible) bands, Gentle Giant.

Goldmine: So, what have you been up to since the 1980 demise of Gentle Giant?

Shulman: My first adventures after GG were in the world of advertising and TV composition. I hadn't really planned any career, but a couple of happy accidents led me down a certain path. In commercials I met some people who were setting up a company to write advertising music. This was in the days where sampling was still quite a novelty, and I was a very early user and abuser. I did a couple of demos and both were accepted, so for the next few years that is what I did. I did some pretty high-profile campaigns including three "Nike 'Air Jordan' ads for U.S. TV. (Music) production was similarly unplanned. I met a guy who was working at a studio I used for my commercials. He wanted to start his own label, and I already had an interest in alternative music. I became house producer for the bands he signed, and the second band I produced was The Sugarcubes. Their first single, "Birthday" topped the indie charts, and their album *Life's Too Good* sold well all over the world [Note: Ray also produced The Sundays' *Reading, Writing And Arithmetic*, which also went platinum worldwide.] I wanted to get back into composition, so now I've set up, along with a colleague, a company that provides audio for computer games (Orinoco Sound Source). I even hired (former GG keyboardist) Kerry (Minnear) to write some stuff for one game, *Azrael's Tear*, as it required Medieval music.

Let's go back a bit. I was listening to a friend's vinyl copy of Simon Dupree & The Big Sound's, *Without Reservations* (Tower Records ST 5097) and was struck with what, excuse the pun, giant musical strides the band made from that to the first *Gentle Giant* album. Was this musical transformation planned or was it a logical evolution?

*Without Reservations* was recorded mid-period Simon Dupree. Simon Dupree was actually a hardworking live band that was already very popular before our one big hit, "Kites." We were essentially a soul band. What we lacked musically we certainly made up for in performance, and that's probably the most important ingredient we brought forward into *Gentle Giant*. It helped us get through some potentially hostile gigs in the early days. By the end of Simon Dupree, we had already recruited Martin Smith on drums (who passed away last March and who had played on *Gentle Giant* and *Acquiring The Taste*) and we started to develop more sophisticated sounds inspired by the psychedelic stuff coming out of California.

*I believe you had an interesting, if not yet enigmatic, session player from Bluesology who sat in with you on keyboards for a spell?*

We had a temporary keyboard player, one Reg Dwight, (a.k.a. Sir Elton John) who filled in for our regular keyboard player when he went down with glandular fever. Reg had just left Bluesology and was working as a session player. After rehearsing in London we went on a month-long tour of Scotland. He was actually very funny and outgoing. We got on really well and stayed friends with him and Bernie Taupin after he left. I went along to a couple of the sessions for the first Elton John album. I remember one night at a hotel in Scotland, Reg sat down at the piano and played us some songs that he was working on, including "Your Song." Of course we thought it was hilarious and offered him no encouragement at all... Especially when he told us he was going under the name Elton John. Dudley Moore [the actor!] played on a couple of Simon Dupree sessions as he was a friend of Chris Gunning, an arranger we were using. These were quite orchestrated songs we were doing at the end of Simon Dupree. I think the only song that he played on that made it to release was "Broken-Hearted Pirates".... Dudley was really nice and an excellent pianist.

Moving on to the Gentle Giant era, were any of the albums originally planned as "concept albums" before they were recorded? Or did the songs develop individually, only to be joined as a cohesive piece at the end?

*Three Friends* was the first definite concept, the songs being written specifically to fulfill their part in the story. *Octopus* started as a concept, each track was meant to represent a member of the band, but by the time it was finished it was much looser. I do remember that "River" was about Gary (Green, the band's lead guitarist) and "Dog's Life" was an homage to our road crew. *The Power And The Glory* was developed alongside the writing where each song was given its lyrical place after the event.

Not having a complete GG vinyl collection, I was wondering if it was true that your first album (*Gentle Giant*) and *Three Friends*, have identical covers? (Attention Goldmine readers: has this ever happened with any other band? Two different albums from different years with the exact same cover?)

I think that *Three Friends* was the first release in the United States. So CBS thought that the Giant head would be the best promotional tool for them. We of course had an original cover for the album over here and only found out about it on our first U.S. tour. I'm afraid bands weren't consulted much in those days.



*As the band's reputation grew, Gentle Giant found itself opening for many big-name bands, including Jethro Tull. How did you find that experience?*

Our first tour of the U.S. was supporting Black Sabbath. It was quite a painful experience, but we learned quickly how to deal with unsympathetic audiences. We abandoned any subtlety with this kind of crowd and kind of rocked our way out of trouble. We also appeared with bands like Edgar Winter and the J. Geils Band. By the mid-70s we luckily had our own audience. In some areas we were able to fill stadiums and other pretty large halls. We did a mini-tour with King Crimson in the Midwest and a headline tour with Renaissance. We often watched Tull's set and got along with them really well. They gave us exceptional treatment. It was probably the biggest break of our career. It exposed us to a lot of people very quickly. I think they appreciated that having us as openers made for a great night. They were confident and established enough not to feel threatened by us even though we went down really, really well. After a lengthy European tour with Tull, we immediately went back in our own right and established our own audience. I imagine that we did learn a lot from their production.

*Listening to some of the unfinished demos on Under Construction, I could not help but feel a bit voyeuristic. Very few bands have allowed listeners such an intimate glimpse of the musical process. The only ones who spring to mind are The Beach Boys with their recently released Pet Sound Sessions, The Beatles Anthologies, Bob Dylan's Bootleg Series Vol. 1-3 (where's Vol. 4-7 dammit?!) and in the progressive era, The Faust Tapes. Was there any apprehension about allowing some of these rough musical drafts out? How did the project get started?*

There was definite apprehension. We have a self-appointed executive fan, Dan Bornemark who trawled through all the archives looking for any tapes, and he uncovered the first GG session, which constitutes the first part of *Under Construction*. This is very much the transitional period, and we all felt that it would be interesting enough to put out. The demo stuff on UC was a different story. My first reaction was, "Who wants to hear this?" but a lot of our fans are musicians themselves and they do have the albums to which these demos relate. For a final check we allowed Dan Bornemark and Dan Barrett (creator of the GG web site & perhaps the one responsible for keeping the GG memory alive) to edit the selections.

*Looking back now, which GG albums are your favorites and why?*

I must say I don't own all the albums now and certainly don't play them. At the time I would have said that our most recent album was my favorite, but on reflection, my favorite album is *Acquiring The Taste*. It's the purest in terms of intent. It was early enough for us not to know we had the audience for this stuff, and we didn't feel we had to make any allowances for record companies etc.

*What video footage, if any, of the band exists in the vaults? Are there any more archival releases on the way?*

I know there are a few films/videos knocking about, but we don't have immediate access to them. There is *BBC In Concert* video that was out a few years ago, and I remember filming in Belgium with a well-respected classical music director Christopher Nupen around 1976. This may be an area worth us investigating for our own release. Another plan for a future release is to assemble the best of the live concerts from both official and bootleg sources.

*By 1980, were you ready to call it quits?*

Yeah, it felt like the right thing to do. Even though we should have been happy with our very loyal and, by then, very large audience, we were not achieving the kind of success our contemporaries were. Not surprising, in retrospect, as our music was still a lot more "difficult" than theirs had become.

*Any "Spinal Tap"-like moments from touring that you can remember?*

Probably far too many... we had quite an elaborate production, so the potential was always there. One immediate example is that I used to do a quasi-quadraphonic violin solo with speakers placed at the front, back and sides of the venue. A converted Revox used to throw the sound around the venue in sequence. When playing a date at a club in Texas, I played the first riff, which then was repeated at the sides, but there was a noticeable absence of a sound from the back. The next thing we saw was our road manager apprehending an audience member who was trying to escape the club with a column speaker under his arm.

*Do you have any vivid memories of the 1975 Academy Of Music show in New York?*

My only recollection of this concert is that I remember at the time, after the tour was complete, I was sent back to New York to mix the tape. During my violin solo, someone in the audience shouted out, "You suck" (in New York?!) The engineer was kind enough to cut out the piece of tape. I then gave this to my then-girlfriend, now wife, who embedded it in a Plexi-glass heart. I still have it (laughs).

*Have you heard the GG tribute CD Giant Tracks? What did you think?*

Yes I've heard it, and firstly it's so flattering that folks took time out to do it. There's some nice stuff on it, and the original material really captures the essence of the Giant in both feel and humor.

*Overall, what are your proudest memories and achievements of GG, and what would you liked to have accomplished that was not done?*

Probably, I am most proud of the fact that there's still interest and an audience for music that was created so long ago. During the time of the band you tend to get on with things and always strive to do better, so you don't reflect on what might be considered accomplishments. It would have been nice to have more mainstream success.

---

*Edge Of Twilight* (Vertigo/Mercury-534 101-2) a brilliantly remastered import CD compilation was released in 1996 and serves as an excellent introduction the band's catalog. The CD was compiled by Gentle Giant fanatic Barrett, who also created the excellent and critically acclaimed Gentle Giant Home Page: (<http://www.blazemonger.com/GG>). Be sure to check this site out for all things Giant, including discography and album-by-album detail of each CD reissue, (Collectors should scrutinize this before purchasing any Giant CD!) Also, Giant fans should check out the recently available double-CD Gentle Giant tribute, *Giant Tracks*, for more information on this Internet-assembled compilation, or to order, check out <http://www.blazemonger.com/GT>.