

GENTLE GIANT

By Tony Matrianni

MG: Derek, could you talk about the origin of Gentle Giant?

DS: Actually, my brother Ray and I started an R & B-based band in the mid-sixties called Simon Dupree and the Big Sound. We were into Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf and most of the other people who were the dominant influences on Eric Clapton, the Stones and, for that matter, just about everyone in England at that time.

MG: Who was Simon Dupree, and did the band release any records?

DS: I'm Simon Dupree. That is to say that was my stage name. It was popular for vocalists to adopt stage names in those days. As far as our recordings, yes, we even entered the Top 40 charts in England two or three times. "Kites" was our biggest hit and that almost made it to the top. It made it all the way to three.

MG: Were there any other notable musicians in that band, aside from you and Ray?

DS: Actually they were mostly a bunch of neighborhood kids. They were so bad that we wouldn't allow them to play on our records. Ray and I did all the drums, guitars, and keyboards ourselves. At the time I was strictly a vocalist and Ray was a violinist. Anyway, most people don't know this, but Elton John once played keyboards for us. His name then was Reg Dwight.

MG: And he wasn't good enough to play on your records?

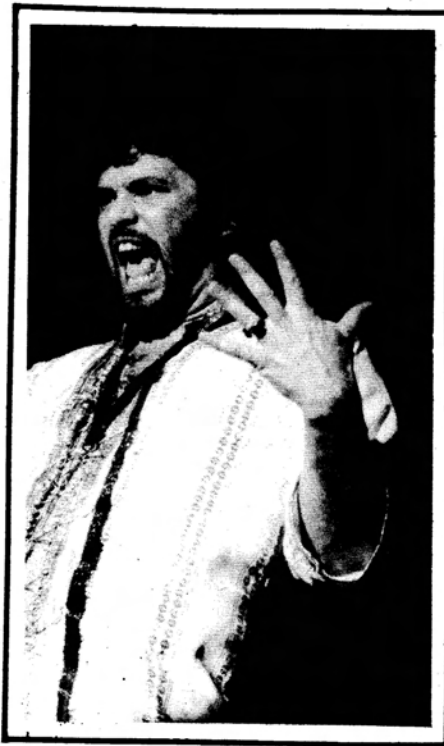
DS: That's how we felt at the time.

MG: Okay. Simon Dupree and the Big Sound was an R & B band. Gentle Giant certainly is not. What happened?

DS: Well, we wanted to expand our sound. Ray had just finished his musical work at the Academy of Music. He was a classically trained musician. Incidentally, he was a student of John Cale. Anyway, I guess you could say that we were very much influenced by the first King Crimson record and wanted to dump the routine R & B act.

MG: Where did producer Tony Visconti come into the picture?

DS: Tony was producing David Bowie at the time. That was early, around the time of Bowie's *The Man Who Sold The*



Mark MacLaren

World LP. He heard us in a club one night, insisted that we were terrific and asked if he could produce us. He played recorder on some of our early LP's — *Gentle Giant*, which was never released in the U.S., and *Acquiring the Taste*.

MG: Have you experienced many personnel changes throughout the years?

DS: As a matter of fact no we haven't. My other brother Phil dropped out of the band a few years ago to pursue a teaching career, but for the most part we've remained intact. Kerry Minnear is our keyboardist. Gary Green our lead guitarist I think is brilliant, and John Weathers is our drummer. I like this band and I hope to keep it together for a long time.

MG: Gentle Giant is regarded as a "musician's band". What about that stereotype?

DS: I think that's very sad. First of all, we are a rock and roll band. Sure we can play in 7/8th time but, we make mistakes too. We are quite fallible. I must say that around the time of our *The Power and the Glory* album we got a little stuffy, a little out of hand.

MG: How do you mean that?

DS: It got to the point that we were laying counter-melodies on top of melodies. The vocals were going against the grain of the song. We got too esoteric and I got bored. Now we are again more of a rock and roll band.

MG: I must say that your new album (*The Missing Piece*) does sound a bit more basic than most Gentle Giant records. I also understand that you are back in the Top 40 charts in England.

DS: And we couldn't be more happy about it. We intended the first side of that record to be basic. We were trying to stress simplicity. "I'm Turning Around" is our first British single in a long while, and we'd like nothing more than to enter the charts in America.

MG: What about AM radio in England? There doesn't seem to exist that great AM/FM barrier that exists over here.

DS: That's an excellent point. The British charts will dictate to the rest of the world what will eventually be on AM radio. I don't think you'll hear the Sex Pistols on AM radio in America for a while, but I'm hoping it happens soon.

MG: That statement may surprise a lot of people. Does a traditional British powerhouse like Gentle Giant actually like the Sex Pistols?

DS: Most definitely. I like what they stand for. They are the iconoclasts. That's what rock and roll is all about. Without bands like the Pistols, The Clash and the Damned, rock and roll would probably die out in the not-too-distant future.

MG: But isn't there a lot of resentment between say, the Who and bands like The Jam and the Stranglers who have publicly put down the Who?

DS: Maybe the Who feel threatened. Or maybe the Jam feel that it's great publicity to go and knock a band as great as the Who, but actually I don't think any of it means anything.

MG: Is Gentle Giant a visual band?

DS: Not anymore. We really cut down on the visual aspect of our presentation. We used to have six projectors running at once, or be showing hundreds of slides in syncopation with the music.

But, that got pretentious. We will still move around on stage, but as I said, we want to stress simplicity which is another reason for eliminating the visual shows.

MG: Who are your favorite contemporaries?

DS: Robert Fripp, of course. I've always liked Frank Zappa a lot, too.

MG: What is the ideal environment for a Gentle Giant concert?

DS: I think there has to be something in between the club scene, which seats about 150 people, and the Gardens, which seats about 14,000. I think that a musical hall or a theatre which holds between two and three thousand is ideal. Club scenes are just too small, and there is no room for the performers to move around. On the other hand, the Gardens doesn't carry acoustics well and the performers are too removed from the audience. I like concert halls. Not to be pretentious, but Gentle Giant wants to be six feet above the audience.

MG: Do you find the stadium, or Garden atmosphere to be stagnant? I ask you this because I find it difficult to enjoy an ELO or Yes concert in a place like Madison Square Garden.

DS: Definitely. At that point there is no interaction between the performer and the audience, and it is not enjoyable for either side.

MG: Musicians are often intrigued by your technical effects. Can you talk a bit about some of them?

DS: As I have said, we are getting away from technical effects. You can hear a



lot of them however on our live album (**Playing The Fool**). There are all sorts of cross rhythms and counter-melodies. I'm singing one thing and the band is going astray and vice-versa. We are also cutting down on solos. That can be difficult, restraining Ray's violin or Kerry's synthesizer. But what we are doing is harnessing our energy. You might say compressing our sound. We

want to become more explosive.

MG: So the future of Gentle Giant lies in basic rock & roll?

DS: Most definitely. We want to be known as a rock and roll band again. And we want to stay open-minded. That's the key. Without that quality no band can survive for too long.



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