

# Remastered 1977 live album *Playing the Fool*: The infectious eccentricity of Gentle Giant

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The May 2025 release of the remastered *Official Live Gentle Giant: Playing the Fool—The Complete Live Experience* on Blu-ray disc captures Gentle Giant at the zenith of its creative and popular powers. The recordings were made during the band's European tour from September 23 to October 7, 1976, in cities including Düsseldorf, Paris, Brussels, and Munich.

The original album, released in January 1977, was a carefully curated double LP with a 12-page booklet, presenting a selection of live performances that spanned the band's career to that point. However, the original LP was necessarily limited by the constraints of vinyl and the production choices of that time.

The new complete edition in multiple surround audio formats offers a far more expansive and unedited presentation of the live experience. Where the original omitted certain tracks and edited some improvisational passages, the new release restores these, presenting the performances complete and unvarnished. Remixed and remastered from the original tapes, the audio is now clearer and more powerful, allowing listeners to experience the concerts as they happened. This edition is, in essence, the closest to the legendary Gentle Giant live shows of 1976.

Gentle Giant's place in progressive rock is unique. While the band's contemporaries—Yes, Genesis, King Crimson and Jethro Tull among them—were known for their virtuosity and ambition, Gentle Giant pushed boundaries even further, both musically and conceptually. Its music is renowned for its complexity, drawing on a wide array of influences: folk, jazz, soul and especially classical music, with a particular fondness for medieval, baroque and chamber styles.

Yet, despite the sophistication, Gentle Giant's music was accessible and engaging for mass audiences. While the compositions were no doubt often rhythmically and melodically intricate, the band also regularly featured infectious rock hooks and memorable grooves. The 1975–76 world tour, documented on this live album, was a resounding success, drawing large crowds across Europe and North America and demonstrating that adventurous music could

still connect with a big audience.

Gentle Giant was a collective of extraordinary multi-instrumentalists: Gary Green (guitars, recorders, percussion, vocals), Kerry Minnear (keyboards, cello, vibes, recorders, percussion, vocals), Derek Shulman (lead vocals, saxophone, bass, recorders, percussion), Ray Shulman (bass, violin, acoustic guitar, trumpet, recorders, percussion, vocals) and, eventually, John Weathers (drums, vibes, tambourine, percussion, vocals). Each member's versatility was central to the band's sound. On stage, band members would swap instruments with dizzying frequency, often in the middle of songs, a spectacle that astonished audiences and critics alike.

In the new live album's liner notes, Derek Shulman reflects:

Recording in the studio is completely different than playing a concert. Live gigs have to be more immediate to hit people. Our stage show is much more spontaneous and direct because it's a different medium.

Minnear adds:

We treat playing live as a separate form of entertainment... We have an improvised section in the middle of each song where we can really play, and I think that's very important. I couldn't possibly play in a band that didn't do that.

The performance of "On Reflection," originally from the 1975 album *Free Hand*, is a highlight of the set. The song opens with a fugue-like introduction on multiple recorders, followed by a stunning a cappella segment, featuring four- and five-part polyphony that evokes the sophistication of

Renaissance chamber music. Critics have hailed this as one of progressive rock's defining moments, and the live version demonstrates the band's mastery of vocal counterpoint and harmonic complexity.

The mid-1970s marked the zenith of progressive rock's global popularity. Bands that embraced the genre were filling arenas and selling millions of albums worldwide. Gentle Giant, though never as commercially successful as some of its peers, was recognized within the progressive community for its innovation and live prowess. Its tours saw the group sharing stages with the giants of progressive rock, and its live act could "equal almost any act on the bill," as one account of a 1975 Detroit show attests.

A key revelation of *Playing the Fool* is that Gentle Giant's music did not rely on studio trickery. The live recordings are, as the band insisted, "au naturel," with minimal overdubs and only minor fixes for technical issues. The performances are faithful to the spirit of the studio versions but often surpass them in energy and spontaneity. The band's ability to reproduce—and even expand upon—its demanding arrangements in a live setting is a testament to its musicianship and discipline.

Gentle Giant's value extended beyond musicianship into the realm of social and political commentary. The band's 1974 album *The Power and the Glory* is a prime example, exploring the corrupting influence of power, a theme inspired by the Watergate scandal and Richard Nixon's attempt to expand presidential executive authority. The album's narrative, which traces the rise and fall of a political leader, remains acutely relevant today, as questions of unlimited presidential power and massive corruption have reemerged in the era of Donald Trump.

The history of Gentle Giant is as fascinating as its music. The band was formed in early 1970 by the three Shulman brothers—Derek, Phil and Ray—who had previously led the pop, soul and psychedelic band Simon Dupree and the Big Sound. Simon Dupree achieved a Top 10 UK hit with "Kites" in 1967 but the brothers, dissatisfied with the limitations of pop music, disbanded the group at the end of the decade to pursue more experimental musical ambitions.

They recruited classically trained keyboardist Minnear, a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, whose background in composition and love of classical music became a defining element of the new band's sound. Guitarist Green, whose versatility on a range of stringed instruments impressed the Shulmans during auditions, joined soon after. Drummer Martin Smith, who had played with Simon Dupree, completed the original lineup.

The band's name, Gentle Giant, was suggested by a booking agent who noted the music's blend of power and delicacy, referencing the duality found in

Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1534). From their self-titled debut album in 1970, Gentle Giant's members set themselves apart with serious arrangements, multipart singing and the use of classical instruments in ways no other rock group attempted.

Their second album, *Acquiring the Taste* (1971), pushed boundaries further, incorporating jazz, folk and challenging harmonies, though its experimental nature gave the band a reputation for being pretentious in some circles. Nevertheless, its musical prowess impressed peers such as Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull, who invited Gentle Giant to tour as support in 1972.

Lineup changes were few during the decade of the band's existence. The original drummer, Martin Smith, was replaced by Malcolm Mortimore in 1971 and Weathers replaced Mortimore in 1972. The oldest brother, Phil Shulman, who was also a founding member, departed after the fourth album, *Octopus*, due to differences with his brothers and the stress of touring. From 1970 to 1980, Gentle Giant released a string of acclaimed albums, each marked by its trademark complexity and inventiveness. The band's influence and cult following grew steadily, especially in the US and continental Europe.

While *Playing the Fool* was released at the peak of Gentle Giant's popularity, the musical landscape had shifted by the end of the 1970s. Attempts to sustain its success by adopting a more commercial approach were ultimately unsuccessful, and the band disbanded in 1980. The rise of punk and new wave, with their emphasis on simplicity and directness, rendered the instrumentalism and complex compositions of progressive rock unfashionable.

Yet, as this new live release demonstrates, Gentle Giant's legacy endures. The band members' fearless exploration of musical frontiers, their commitment to excellence and their willingness to address the pressing issues of their time mark them as one of the true originals of the progressive rock era.

*The Official Live Gentle Giant: Playing the Fool—The Complete Live Experience* is more than a historical document; it is a celebration of a band at the height of its powers, a testament to the enduring appeal of music that challenges, delights and inspires. For those who witnessed Gentle Giant's concerts in the 1970s, this release is a reminder of their brilliance. For new listeners, it is an invitation to discover one of progressive rock's most extraordinary and accessible voices.



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