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Progressive Rock CD Reviews

Gentle Giant

Santa Monica 1975

Review by Bill Knispel

Gentle Giant just recently celebrated their 35th anniversary with a series of reissues of their classic studio output. Alongside this series of reissues, a number of live albums and compilations have been released, of varying quality and varying interest to both the hardcore Gentle Giant fan and the nouveau audient.



Santa Monica 1975 is one of these archival live releases, recorded, as the title infers, in Santa Monica California on 1 January 1975. Two additional tracks have been included to fill out the set, taken from a performance in Dallas TX on 19 March 1977. The iteration of the band featured here is generally considered to be the classic line-up; Kerry Minnear (keys, cello, vocals), Derek Shulman (vocals, sax), Gary Green (guitar), John Weathers (drums) and Ray Shulman (bass, violin, vocals). Sound quality is a bit of an issue here from time to time, most heavily seen on the album's opening track, which sounds as if it had been recorded by a poorly aligned cassette deck on tapes covered in grape jam and under 15 feet of rushing water. This does fairly quickly resolve itself, reaching the level of a decent, but heavily generated, analogue recording of this vintage.

From a positive standpoint, *Santa Monica 1975* showcases a band near the top of their musical powers, playing tight and complex progressive rock heavy on multiple vocal parts, counterpoint, and layers of instrumentation playing with and against each other. From a negative standpoint, the recording quality probably excludes all but the hardcore fan; the new listener picking this up will probably feel poorly used by a recording that does not exactly meet even period recording quality, let alone the clarity that is expected from a modern recording. However, one must also consider that, had this been a bootleg, it'd be praised as a superior find.

Track by Track Review

Cogs In Cogs

Poor recording quality plagues this piece from *The Power and the Glory*, really detracting from what is generally considered to be one of the band's strongest concise tracks. By the end of this cut, recording quality has risen to listenable standards; one should not be expecting pristine soundboard quality, no matter what.

Proclamation

The opening track of the band's 1974 album *The Power and the Glory*, "Proclamation" is incredibly bass heavy, and fairly clear. There is still some muffled top end, coupled with a touch of buzz that may either be the result of overdriving the mics or board, yet this is not overly distracting. A solid performance, this track has always been a good showcase of the band's multiple voice parts as well as a touch of the baroque counterpoint that exemplifies the group's arrangements. Unlisted in the album tracklisting, "Proclamation" segues into "Funny Ways," a composition from Gentle Giant's 1970 debut.

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Violin and plaintive vocals inform this performance, with a feel that is straight out of the renaissance. The bass heavy mix is a bit distracting, especially when the band kicks into a bit of a rock feel. A very nice vibes solo shines about 11 minutes in, interestingly juxtaposed against a straight (for Gentle Giant) 4/4 beat that verges on an almost disco feel.

Experience

Jaunty keyboards open this piece from *In A Glass House*. The vocals and delivery feel very minstrel-esque, and the band lays down a deceptively complex counterpoint beat underneath. Perhaps Gentle Giant alone could make multiple meter and counterpoint sound as fluid and natural as most bands handle straight time. Gary Green lets fly with a thickly wah-infused guitar solo, showcasing one of the most underrated players in all of progressive music, if not rock music in general.

So Sincere

The muffled sound quality throughout the recording takes its toll on "So Sincere," as the opening two minutes lack a clarity and sound that would make listening enjoyable. Some of this may be amplified by a song that opens with a solo voice and mid-emphasized organ, but the flatness adds a sense that the tune is either off-key or played too slow. The second iteration of the vocal theme, with additional vocal parts and harmonies, fares better, yet the shuffle beat that leads into another fantastic Green solo is hampered by the lack of clarity that a lower generation recording would provide. No Gentle Giant concert would be complete without a drum solo, and John Weathers tackles this obligatory experience with aplomb, leading the band out of this piece and into the final composition included from this show.

Advent of Panurge

Influenced by, and derived from, the Renaissance literary work *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais, this piece opened the band's 1972 opus *Octopus*. Sadly, the performance cuts off the first few seconds of the song, and more prominent fuzz and distortion evidence a higher/hotter recording level. It is a shame that an official release is hobbled so heavily by these defects, especially as later live recordings (with higher quality) eschew the individual playing of several of these tracks, instead including them as parts of medleys. One can easily tell that the band is especially "on" for this performance throughout (check out the recorder duet, certainly a rarity in rock music, starting around 2:20), yet the distortion, muffled audio and cuts detract from what might be a classic release.

For Nobody #1

The first of two tracks recorded at the Electric Ballroom in Dallas during the 1977 tour, this first take on the song "For Nobody" from *The Missing Piece* features a slightly better recording quality and a bit more clarity throughout the mix. To balance this, we have a mix that is also more distant by far, exhibiting a bit of recording head alignment issues (the watery sound in the cymbals show this most strongly). By this point Gentle Giant was playing more straight forward rock and roll for the most part, simplifying their newer material in an effort to move forward like contemporaries such as Genesis, Renaissance, and Yes, all of whom would move away from the epic statement in favour of shorter, more concise compositions.

For Nobody #2

A second take of the performance, recorded in Dallas on 19 March 1977. This track features different parts/arrangements of the song, with a slightly poorer recording quality. Not quite achieving "penalty track" status (as compared to their bonus track status on a live album), these performances, while somewhat enlightening, are likely to be played far less than the actual concert that makes up the majority of this release.



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