

Gentle Thunder Trio LIVE
Review by Bill Binkelman – Music Reviewer - New Age Reporter

What should have tipped me off to the juxtaposed blend of music that awaited me should have come from the artist's name. "Gentle Thunder," after all, indicates softness and beauty as well as power and passion, and it's those contrasting elements which were in ample supply during the two hours of music (with a short break in the middle) played by "GT," (who performed on hammered dulcimer, Native wooden flutes, and drums) accompanied by percussionist Will Clipman and multi-instrumentalist AmoChip Dabney (piano, soprano sax, bass). Of course, I at least had the benefit of having heard their CD, *Beyond Words*, so I knew there would be some energetic moments during that late summer evening concert at the Unitarian Church in Minneapolis. I'm willing to bet that some unsuspecting folks in attendance who expected an evening of sedate and serene Native influenced flute and drum music didn't know what to make of it the first time Gentle Thunder perched her petite but powerful frame behind the full drum kit and proceeded to let loose with some ferocious rock-jazz fusion work on the skins and cymbals! The show featured quite a mixture of songs (none of which titles I thought to write down), from GT's sedate and beautiful solo pieces on flute or hammered dulcimer to world fusion ethnic-percussion workouts on which she was joined by Will Clipman and the full-out jazz/funk fusion jams and tunes where AmoChip Dabney really shone, sometimes managing to play both his electric bass and sax at the same time! More than once, these three artists let it all hang out and tore the walls down with an incredible amalgam of skillful musicianship wedded to unleashed passion and power.

Besides the fantastic music (which would have been enough to make this concert extremely worthwhile), what surprised me the most was how visually entertaining the show was, starting with the unique opening: Each artist entered individually from the back of the church, walking up and down the aisles, playing through wireless mics, so that the music seemed to appear from out of nowhere. During the concert, some songs featured lots of movement, almost as if choreographed, the result being not just great music to hear but lots of fun to watch as well. At one point, while Clipman played the drum kit, GT walked up behind him with another set of drumsticks and, through some agile and deft maneuvering, took over the drumming from him, literally ending up in his seat without a single beat being missed. Another visual treat occurred when Clipman, playing a djembe (a large tribal drum worn with a strap around the shoulder), stood center stage and the other two musicians eventually joined him on the drum, with all three pairs of hands playing a different but syncopated rhythm track! Amazing! As an added bonus, the incredibly talented Gentle Thunder herself performed a number on a massive Japanese taiko drum, which if you haven't seen someone play one of these majestic sounding (and looking) instruments, you really need to do so. The combination of her ballet-like movements and the thundering drum beats had the entire audience mesmerized.

However, the single most engaging part of the evening was the abundant and unmistakable joy with which these three played and the obvious friendship and love they feel for each other. I never saw performers smile and laugh so much and I'll tell you that it sure was infectious. More than once I caught myself grinning like the Cheshire cat. In short, it was the most fun I've had at a concert in many a year, filled with unbridled moments of musical magic fueled by three artists who have true mastery over their instruments.

If you ever get the chance to see Gentle Thunder, Will Clipman and AmoChip Dabney, don't hesitate for a second, provided you love music that sways, rocks, soothes, and kicks out the jams, all with equal aplomb. Thinking back to that special night when I was one of the lucky souls to hear and see them, what comes to mind is that famous line "A splendid time was had by all." I can almost guarantee you'll have one too!