

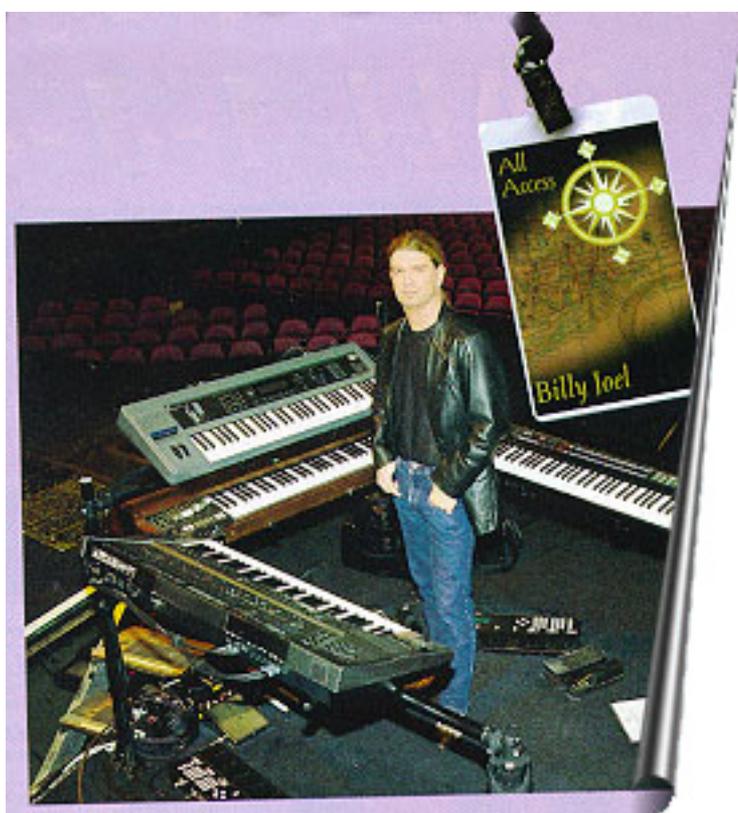
Fall 1999

411

Backstage Pass

Band: Billy Joel

Keyboardist: David Rosenthal



David Rosenthal at the helm of his keyboard rig (clockwise, L to R): a Roland JD-800, a Kurzweil K2VX above a Korg CX3 organ (which feeds an offstage Leslie), and a Yamaha KX76. At his feet are a MIDI step pedalboard, a Leslie preamp, various sustain and volume pedals, and two Lake Butler Sound MIDI Mitigators for sending program changes to a rack of gear underneath the stage.

For the past six years, rock synthesist extraordinaire David Rosenthal has backed Billy Joel in concert. Last April the Piano Man called it quits - touring, that is. Following the 18 month '93-'94 River of Dreams tour and the 15 month '98-'99 "Greatest Hits" excursion, Joel turned to classical composition and Rosenthal returned to his home studio, where he dove into a new Digidesign Pro Tools|24 Mix system. We caught one of their final shows in San Jose, and got Rosenthal on the phone the day after the last gig in New York.

During the show, Billy called out songs by Led Zep, Jefferson Airplane, the Beatles, Elvis, and others. Are those tunes that you play often?

Some of them yes, and some of them no. He has a stable of songs that I've come to know over the years, but sometimes he surprises everybody. The guy knows thousands of songs! Just about any song he's ever heard in his life, he can sit down and figure out in real time. He never practices it.

Do you have a specific sound arrangement that you'll go to when he calls out something new?

I think of the song and what patches I have that might sound right. When we did Zeppelin's "Good Times, Bad Times," I went to my patch for Billy's "Still Rock 'n' Roll." Sometimes I might play organ or pull up a generic string pad. I just wing it.

What's it like to play keyboards with the Piano Man?

He's the greatest at what he does. We have tremendous mutual respect, so it works. He's probably the greatest songwriter of the century, a great singer, and an incredible musician, and I love working with the guy. He loves my musicianship, my ears, and my technical abilities. So it's a really good situation; we compliment each other. I got a great honor when we were working on his song "Hey Girl," which is on his Greatest Hits III CD. In the studio Billy says, 'You play piano. I'm just going to sing.' So I went in and played the piano, figuring that after I left he would replace it. But he didn't. So I'm one of only three people ever to play piano on a Billy Joel record besides himself; the others were Richard Tee and Ray Charles. I'm in good company.



Rosenthal's understage control center includes a Roland D-550, a Roland MKS-70 with it's PG-800 programmer, and a Roland JV-1080, a fully loaded Kurzweil K2500R with a 1U rackmount Glyph containing Zip and 1GB hard drives, two Oberheim Matrix-1000's, a Kurzweil AX Plus, a Voce V3, a Yamaha TX802 and a TX816, two Behringer Multigates for silencing the TX816, a Lexicon PCM 80 with Lexicon's David Rosenthal Music FX ROM card, a Spec Electronics Xtramix CX mixer, a Power Computing Power Center 150, two Opcode Studio 5 MIDI interfaces, and several Furman power conditioners and a regulator. Rosenthal runs Opcode Studio Vision Pro during the performance of "The River of Dreams" and uses Opcode galaxy Plus Editors for synth programming.

MARK VAIL