

HE'S KEY

Iselin musician tickles ivories for the stars

By Jim Beckerman

Staff Writer

Call him the piano man's piano man.

For most of each evening of the current "River of Dreams" tour - at Madison Square Garden from Oct. 2 to Oct. 12 - Iselin keyboardist David Rosenthal will be playing electronic synthesizers alongside Billy Joel and his grand piano.

But several times a night, Rosenthal will take his own turn at the 88s.

"A few songs where he sings, I jump on the grand piano," says Rosenthal, from the comfort of an Iselin living room he won't be seeing much of for the next 16 months to two years.

He'll be spending most of those months with Joel, touring the U.S., Canada, Europe, Japan, Australia, the Pacific Rim, and perhaps South America - it is hoped without getting a heart attack-ack-ack-ack.

The last time, he very nearly did.

"That was with Robert Palmer in 1988 - a seven-month world tour," Rosenthal says. "Robert hated to take days off. At one point we did 56 shows in 56 nights in 56 cities. You go insane. At that time I thought, never again. Now, here I am."

Apart from performing Billy Joel evergreens and current hits in venues around the world, Rosenthal will also appear with the bard of Levittown on the Oct. 23 edition of "Saturday Night Live."

"He's such a great guy, and an excellent musician, who's appreciative of the musicians around him," Rosenthal says of Joel.

At age 32, this Edison native has had enough of a music career for two lifetimes.

Starting as a 17-year-old prodigy who wowed a crowd of 5,000 at the Garden State Arts Center, Rosenthal evolved into a youthful keyboard whiz who was hired out of Boston's Berklee College of Music to become the keyboardist of Ritchie Blackmore's rock supergroup Rainbow, into a musical gun-for-hire who toured with Cyndi Lauper, Little Steven, and Palmer, into a recording artist who has appeared on 15 albums, including titles by Whitesnake, Stacy Lattisaw, and Will To Power ("Baby I Love Your Way/Freebird Medley"), into a musical jet-setter with five world tours on his resume, and eight silver, gold and platinum records on his wall.

Not necessarily his records, he points out with a cynic's smile.

"They just stick a label on a record that they're going to throw away," he says, pointing to the platinumized Cyndi Lauper "True Colors" album he was awarded for his participation in Lauper's 1986 tour. "There are five songs on the label, and six songs on the record. I get a kick out of that."

Whether or not those discs are real, Rosenthal's reputation is. These days, his name is on the short list when superstars plan supertours.

"I always have my ear to the pavement," he says. "Fortunately, I've developed a good reputation in the industry. When

something like this [Billy Joel] happens, my name pops up. Basically, they only auditioned two people. I'm making sound simple, but there was also a lot of politics."

Not that Rosenthal sits around waiting for the phone to ring. Right now he's getting ready to launch his own group, Red Dawn, whose album "Never Surrender" has been released in Japan, but has yet to find a distributor here (it's available, as an import, in the CD Dynasty store in Nutley).

"This is commercial, melodic rock, played by exceptionally good musicians," Rosenthal says.

Here's a story to tell reluctant grade-school piano students: At age 7, Rosenthal saved up eight weeks of allowance - \$2 - as a down payment on the piano he desperately wanted his parents to buy.

Why, he can't quite remember now - though he recalls being entranced by Peter Nero, Ferrante and Teicher, and other keyboard chart-toppers from an early age. Two years later, he made his first money as a professional piano player.

"I played 'Rhapsody in Blue' in an old-age home," he says. "I got \$10 and a kiss from some old lady."

Here's another story, this one for all "practical"-minded adults.

"My high school English teacher actually called my parents and told them that if I didn't quit music lessons I wouldn't graduate high school," Rosenthal says.

That was J.P. Stevens High School in Edison. Only by then, Rosenthal was learning more from Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Yes, and other art-rock bands. In 1978, his own band, Crystal Visions, won first prize in the popular instrumental group category at the Talent Expo Showcase of Stars at the Garden State Arts Center.

"I didn't do all that well in high school, because I wasn't interested," Rosenthal says. "When people force me to do something, I don't respond well. When I went to Berklee, I go straight A's."

In music, at least, Rosenthal's tastes have been scholarly to a fault.

In 1984, he spent 2 1/2 weeks reorchestrating Beethoven's Ninth Symphony for his band Rainbow - which they then played at Budokan (the Tokyo equivalent of Madison Square Garden) with an assist from the Tokyo Symphony. "I felt like [Beethoven] was watching me when I was doing the orchestrations," he says. "I felt I was inside his head. It was intense."

In addition to musical talent, it's Rosenthal's uncanny knack with gadgets that has made him indispensable in an age of computers, MIDI'd keyboards, and drum machines. In fact, Rosenthal has written knowledgeably about such things for several music magazines, and done technical consulting for software companies.

"I'm very fortunate in that I've been involved in synthesizers from an early age," he says. "Somebody coming in today would be overwhelmed with the amount of knowledge."

All the same, his biggest performer's nightmare is that his machines will malfunction, as they do every once in a while.

Such as, for instance, the very first stop of his current Billy Joel tour in Portland, Maine.

"Everything worked perfectly in rehearsal," he says. "For whatever reason, during the show, we had technical problems. If I hadn't had 12 years experience, I might have panicked. I had to run down below and do some quick fixes."

Despite his glamorous jet-set existence, he can still find a reason or two to remain in Iselin.

"I guess I'm here because my family's here, in Edison," he says. "I travel so much that when I'm not traveling, I like to be in a familiar place."

"And I can make as much noise as I want to downstairs."

