

The Man Behind the Piano (Man)

by Brad Shafran

The following is an interview with David Rosenthal, keyboardist for Billy Joel. David is an accomplished songwriter, producer and programmer. He has toured the world with acts such as Rainbow, Cyndi Lauper, Robert Palmer and Billy Joel. He has also formed his own band RED DAWN.

MTV: You are 37 years-old now and have been on the road touring with various acts since you were 20. What is that like? Is it hard to maintain a life outside of music?

DR: It is, but it hasn't been 17 years without going home. After I did the Robert Palmer tour in 1988, I took a break from touring for almost five years. At that point I said I wasn't going to do it anymore because I was really burnt on it. Then I got involved with RED DAWN and that didn't take off initially like I hoped it would. Then I heard about the Billy Joel gig, and I figured if I was going to go out on the road again I might as well do it in style and on this level. It has worked out great, as this is my second tour with Billy. Last year I did a tour with Enrique Iglesias. I don't plan to do this the rest of my life but, right now, I am at a point in the business where it is very enjoyable playing with the acts that I play with. Billy takes great care of us so it is a lot of fun. But I am not going to be doing it for too much longer.

MTV: When you toured with Robert Palmer you played 56 concerts in 56 consecutive nights. On the Billy Joel tour, the set lists are basically the same every night. Does it ever get to a point where you just don't want to be out there?

DR: Absolutely. With the Robert Palmer tour, when you do that many shows in a row it takes the fun out of it and it becomes so routine. You are tired all the time and all you do is sleep, eat, play and travel. Sleep, eat, play and travel. It takes a little of the spark out of it, and when I finished the Palmer tour, I didn't want to ever go on the road again. But Billy is a family man and he has been doing this a really long time and he travels and tours at a very comfortable pace. Basically, we go out for four or five weeks and then we take a couple weeks off. When we are in the area, he lets everybody go home for a couple days. We only do three shows a week so there is plenty of time off. He doesn't want to kill himself or any of us. Touring with Billy is much more relaxed and it is enjoyable.

MTV: What is a day in the life of David Rosenthal like on the day of a show?

DR: If we travel then we get up in the morning, get to the airport and take the flight. We all travel together and we arrive in the other city, go to the hotel and we usually have a couple of hours to relax. Then we go over for a soundcheck and the first thing I do is check out all my equipment to make sure everything is working. Then we play a few songs just to check out some different things and maybe make a few fine adjustments to the sound. It helps us loosen up and get used to the place we are going to play. After that it is usually around 5:30 and there is a whole lot of sitting around waiting for the show to start. We have some dinner and sit around with each other but it is really the hardest part. It can sometimes be three hours before the show starts. The greatest thing is being up there on stage but it is over so fast. It's two hours and then we are back at the hotel and it takes hours to unwind after that so we usually hang out and have a drink or two at the bar or say hi to some friends. We get up the next day and do it again.

MTV: Moving on to your own project, can you tell me about RED DAWN?

DR: The band consists of Chuck Burgi on drums, Greg Smith on bass, Tristan Avakian on guitar and Larry

Baud on vocals. They are some of the best musicians I have ever worked with, and I was lucky to get them all together and that they were available at the same time. It was my dream project -- they were all songs I had either written on my own or co-written with the guys. It was outstanding musicianship, and it was just a whole lot of fun to do. Unfortunately, the style of music was probably a few years too late for the trend and our album *Never Say Surrender* did well in Japan, but we couldn't get any takers with the record companies in the US. Still, it was a great opportunity, and I hope to make another record at some point of time.

MTV: Is RED DAWN still together?

DR: Everybody is off doing their own things but we keep in close touch. It's on the back burner for the moment, but I know we will get back together and make another record.

MTV: You orchestrated a 307-page score called "Concerto Suite for Electric Guitar and Orchestra." That is obviously a major undertaking. Can you tell me about it?

DR: It was really exciting. Yngwie Malmsteen is a great guitar player. I was familiar with his work, and he always wanted to do something like this. A lot of people talk about doing these types of things but never actually go through with it. He brought me on board because he doesn't read or write music, and I had to transcribe the whole thing and orchestrate it. I had to bring his ideas to life. I spent almost nine months working on it, and it ended up being a 307-page score for full orchestra and choir. Then we went over and had the Czech Philharmonic record it. It was released in Japan and should come out in the US in the fall. It was really exciting because I got to use the schooling I had gotten that I never had an outlet for. To do this kind of orchestration and then go and hear it played back was a tremendous experience, and I hope to do more projects like it in the future.

MTV: At tonight's concert, Billy Joel introduced you by saying, "I can't do what he's doing." Without getting too technical, what are you doing out there on stage?

DR: Billy is a piano player and a great one at that. But the way you play piano, there is a certain way your right hand and left hand function. What I am doing is playing two parts, sometimes three parts because I use bass pedals with my feet as well, [all] at the same time. I divide the keyboard up into lots of little zones so I play the verse of one song on one part and I'll move to another octave and play the chorus. The keyboard doesn't go low to high like a conventional piano would. It's divided up into all these little zones for me to play all these little parts. When you are done, you can never play any other song with that particular set-up except that one. You can't jam because I lay it out so precisely that all you can play is that song. I have to remember what sound is where, and I am playing with both hands functioning as right hands because I am playing two different parts at the same time. It is a completely different approach to keyboards which I invented myself to get all the parts done. Billy isn't into technology, and he doesn't want to have to worry about it. He hears the results of what I am doing and he knows it is very technical, but he doesn't care how I do it as long as he hears it that way every night. I have to be ready instantly for every song because I have every song programmed. It takes me hours and hours to program each song, but I can recall it in an instant.

MTV: With all this technical equipment, you have no room for improvisation or any kind of jamming on stage. Although it is not called for, do you miss that?

DR: Yeah, sometimes. There is a different art to what I am doing. I don't play the exact same things every night. There are some songs like "You May Be Right" which have more room to do some things in, but there are other songs that call for the parts to be played as they were written because they work.

MTV: That goes into the fact that you are out there playing parts that were already recorded.

DR: The audience wants a certain recognition factor. A lot of the keyboard parts are very catchy and the fans

expect to hear things, so they have to be there.

MTV: You played with Billy Joel and Elton John. For a keyboardist and pianist like yourself, was that the highest honor you could imagine?

DR: Absolutely. They are two of the biggest pop guys ever. On some songs, like "Big Shot" and "Innocent Man," Billy brings me up to play piano, and it's a great honor. I also got to play piano on "Hey Girl" which is on Greatest Hits Volume III. When we went in to the studio, Billy said he just wanted to sing, so he told me to play piano. I thought that after the fact, even though I had played on the session, he would go and redo the piano. But he left what I did and he liked it. It was a great honor to play piano on a Billy Joel record because only two other people have done it besides me.

MTV: You said you didn't think you would do this much longer. What happens next? Do you go back to a band like RED DAWN?

DR: If I can go back to RED DAWN and be able to go out there and make a living at it then I would like to do it. I am at a point in my career and my life where I am not willing to starve for my art anymore. I would love more than anything to do another RED DAWN record and even a tour, but it has to make sense in the big picture of my career. It is a tough decision to make. Billy is not going to be doing this much longer, and this is quite possibly his last time out. I am going to finish whatever he does with this. Should he decide to do another record or tour, I certainly would do that. Otherwise, it's time to move on to some different things. What that's going to be I don't really know. Ten years ago I never thought I would play with Billy Joel and, when I was with Rainbow, I never thought I would play with Cyndi Lauper. The music business is very strange and you have to roll with it. You have to have a plan, but you have to be flexible.

For more information on his musical projects, check out www.davidrosenthal.com.