Keyboardist on Billy Joel tour enjoys mixing with 'Piano Man'

By KEVIN COUGHLIN

Billy Joel and Elton John weren't the only keyboard wizards dazzling the capacity crowd at Giants Stadium on Friday night.

David Rosenthal of Iselin might not be a household name like the two rock legends. But the classically trained pianist can make two boasts they probably can't: He once performed 56 straight nights in as many cities - even with food poisoning - and he rode a lawnmower into the music biz.

Cash from after-school grass-cutting in Edison bought his first synthesizer at age 15. Now, after stints with Rainbow, Cyndi Lauper and Little Steven, the 33-year-old Rosenthal owns a 21-synth stack that looms taller than he is and can replicate the sound of a symphony. And he's never had more fun using it than with Billy Joel, now halfway through a two-year, 200-show "River of Dreams" tour.

"The first thing Billy told me was the ground rules: 'Eat, drink and be merry. Anyone not having a good time gets sent home,'" said Rosenthal, fine-tuning his Star Wars sound machinery before the last of five sold-out Giants Stadium shows featuring Joel and John.

A mural of an enormous U.S. flag flanked one side of the stage for Long Island's "Piano Man", mirrored by a huge Union Jack for England's "Rocket Man." Pittsburgh is next for the dynamic duo's 21-date "Heart and Soul" tour-within-a-tour.

A graduate of the Berklee College of Music, Rosenthal admires the "fantastic" keyboard virtuosity of the two supreme showmen. What really floors him, though, is Joel's added talents as a lyricist.

"Elton John had (lyricist) Bernie Taupin. Billy is in a league by himself. Hid did it all by himself."

At 45, Joel remains " a pretty down-to-earth guy," despite his painful split with model Christie Brinkley earlier on the tour. "He went through some rough times during the initial stages of it. He seems to be happier now that it's behind him." said Rosenthal.

Backing Lauper in 1987, Rosenthal appeared on the Letterman and Carson shows. His first break was six years earlier, when he auditioned for Ritchie Blackmore and edged out 50 other keyboard players to win a spot in Rainbow.

This time around, with a proven track record, he was chosen from a list of two for Joel's band. He parlayed a perfect sense of pitch and bonus skills as a synthesizer programmer into a sixth world tour.

Rosenthal had just two weeks to learn 55 Joel songs. It took another 15 to 20 performances until he and his technician, Jerry Pratt of Freehold, had everything programmed to perfection.

With the kick of a foot switch, Rosenthal can summon an alphabetized song list that will make his keyboard spit out everything from sampled violins to horns at the appropriate moments in each tune. When Joel, a baseball fan, tossed a curve ball last week by ordering up "Angry Young Man"- a hit last performed three months ago in London - Rosenthal simply tapped to the "A's" and was off and running.

Rosenthal's biggest worry is that his $100,000 fan-cooled investment might fry on humid outdoor stages where spotlit temperatures sometimes exceed 100 degrees. (Joel has air-conditioning vents atop his Steinway.) Rosenthal himself has performed with fevers of 104 degrees, and a bout of food poisoning during his marathon 56-consecutive-show tour with Robert Palmer in 1988.

"You're completely burned out. It's really not fun," Rosenthal said of that experience, which he survived on adrenaline. "You go through the motions. You play well. But you lose your spark. All you do is eat, sleep, play and travel."

On this tour, Rosenthal said, everything is first-class for Joel's six-member band and 125-member support crew. The biggest challenge is making the same songs sound fresh night after night. Does a world-caliber group ever flub it?

"We've done 110 shows. I don't say they're without mistakes," said Rosenthal, whose blond hair came to the shoulders of his Mets polo shirt. "But at this level, you're paid for how well you cover mistakes. It's okay so long as you make them seem like they're what you want to do."