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Movin' Out, Movin' Up

With his uniquely unified rig, David Rosenthal takes his Billy Joel sideman gig to extremes...and to Broadway.

by Michael Gallant

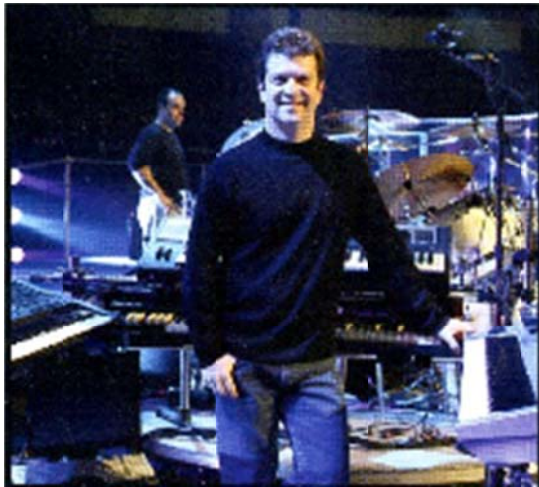
Backing up Billy Joel in front of 20,000 ecstatic fans at the Oakland Coliseum could intimidate even the most stalwart of musicians. From our seats in the crowd, though, it didn't look like David Rosenthal as much as broke a sweat. Pulling organ and analog sounds from his U-shaped rig, the master keyboardist exuded nothing but coolness and positive energy; from "Angry Young Man" to "We Didn't Start the Fire," he burned through Billy's rollicking set with flawless precision.

Though he spends many a night backing up the piano superstar in arenas around the world, David — an expert programmer, composer, and orchestrator as well as player — speaks with a number of musical voices in a diverse array of projects. He orchestrated Yngwie Malmsteen's *Concerto Suite for Electric Guitar and Orchestra in Eb Minor Op. 1*, for example, not only facing the normal challenges such a gig calls for, but also having to create sonic space for Yngwie's signature shredding tone amongst strings, horns and woodwinds. Jumping tracks completely, David's virtuosic band, Happy the Man, blends art rock, fusion, and prog; his synth playing on their latest album, *The Muse Awakens*, is some of the most expressive you'll hear this side of Joe Zawinul. And his latest foray? Broadway — but more on that later.

We caught up with David backstage at the Oakland gig, and again in San Francisco in between studio sessions for Billy Joel's latest project, "Christmas in Fallujah"; for more on that recording, visit www.keyboardmag.com, and for more on David's present and future, read on.

On Tour

To keep up on stage with such a prolific and spontaneous performer as Billy Joel, David must have a solid, adaptable rig. "I've been playing with a Muse Receptor for a couple years now and I'm using it in my live rig with Billy, running Native Instruments FM8 and B4-II," says David. "Billy's music spans 30 years through many generations of sound styles and changing technologies, and it's my job to recreate all of that as we pick songs from any year. Right now, I use the Receptor to recreate a [Yamaha] TX816. I have eight FM8 modules loaded up with my old TX816 sounds and it sounds great. And, of course, the B4-II sounds wonderful — I'm running it through a real Leslie 147, and I use a Hammond XK3 as well." Why the redundant B-3 clones? Among other reasons, David values having a backup: "If everything blows up, I still want to know I have an organ to play."



Though his instruments have changed through the years, David's basic keyboard setup has remained the same for over 15 years. "My configuration using custom stands and MIDI bass pedals feels to me like one instrument now. I can reach over and grab something easily because everything is always in the exact same

position, even if a sound or keyboard changes.

"Each keyboard is a controller as well as a module," David continues. "I like to have a lot of zones spread out over a lot of keyboards, which minimizes program changes. I don't see myself going to fewer keyboards anytime soon. I really use all of each keyboard to accommodate all the zones I need. In any given song, I can have eight to ten different patches, depending on the key range of each sound."

What if David's full rig can't be accommodated at any given gig? "I can always function with one keyboard," he says. "Sometimes when we do corporate dates, we have a scaled down production. For those gigs I just bring a Kurzweil K2600X and I remap things to work as best as possible on that. I just need to change programs more frequently. I love the internal sounds, and I've also sampled sounds from my big rig to load into it for those types of shows." Even though it's tougher to carry around, David's big rig is still his favorite way to play. "I like having the response of different envelopes, oscillators, and filters coming from different types of keyboards because it gives you more of a dynamically changing tonality, as opposed to playing a sample of the whole thing. You lose the richness if you do it all with one keyboard."

After performing the same songs, concert after concert, one might expect a sideman like David to grow tired of an artist's material. "Usually, by the end of a tour, I am really tired of an artist's music," he admits. "But I don't seem to get tired of Billy's music. And fortunately, neither does his audience. It's timeless and it's a lot of fun to play."

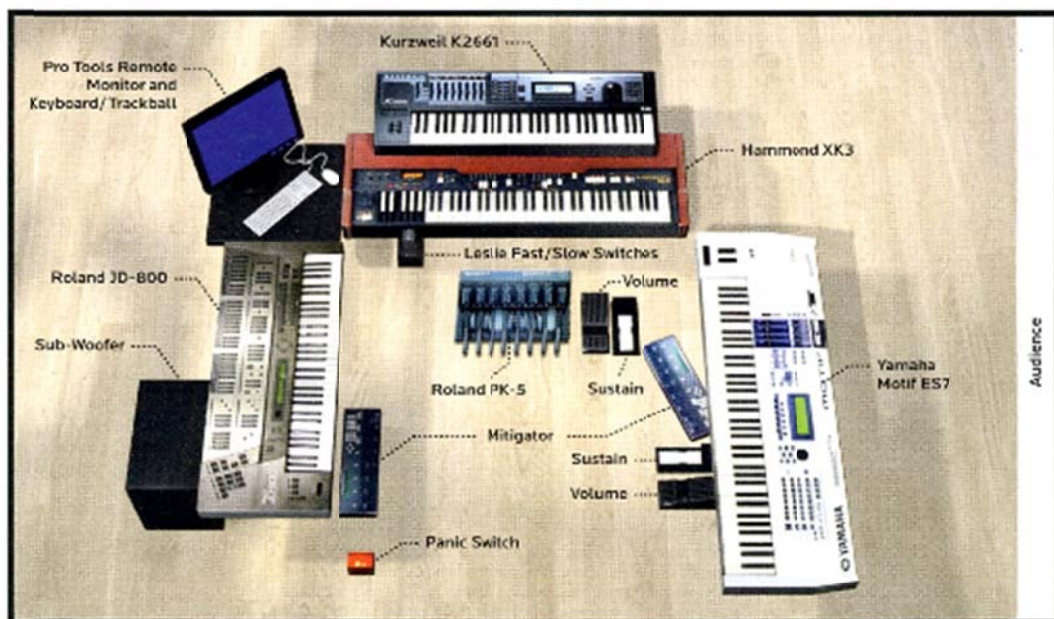
The Nervous Center

To keep his multi-keyboard rig running as a single entity, David still uses his beloved Opcode Studio 5 MIDI interface, which "sends out volume change, mapping, zoning, and everything else to all the instruments." All of this is pre-programmed into the Studio 5 during rehearsals. "I send a program change to the Studio 5 from my [*Lake Butler*] Mitigator [*foot switches*], where I have all the songs set up, and then I put them in the show order for each night. I have two Mitigators, one in the order of the set list, and one which has all the songs in alphabetical order, so if Billy pulls something out pretty quickly that's not in the set list, which he often does, I'm ready for it." Such intense programming took a long time, but was worth it for David. "After countless hours of programming, the whole rig changes in an instant."

The Studio 5 isn't a current piece of gear, though, and David has yet to find anything that can replace it in his rig. "I would like to see a product that can control soft synths, hardware keyboards, and modules with the same power of control as the Studio 5 had over solely external modules," he says. "Obviously, the Studio 5 was pre-USB, so something needs to come out that can interface with today's computers. Apple's MainStage comes close but currently only supports control of internal plug-ins."

David takes great care to maintain his system. "I have the Studio 5 running on an old G3 laptop. I have double spares of both but it's very stable. I found a perfect match between the OS, the laptop, and the Studio 5. It never crashes, and it keeps going. It's certainly not my intent to use it forever, but until there's a system that allows me to have the same level of control over the entire rig, for now, I'm still using it.

"It enables me to use the entire rig and have it function as a single instrument which is really important when you're trying to get multiple textures and recreate layers of sounds," says David. "In Billy's music, where the sounds span 30 years of keyboard technology, I need to use a lot of different modules and it needs to function as one big instrument, not a pile of modules and keyboards. The brain of the system is a critical component to how the whole thing operates."



DAVID'S BILLY JOEL RIG

Above is David's on-stage Billy Joel keyboard setup. Below is David's under-stage rack world: 1. Computer monitor; 2. Glyph 250gig Hard Drives (2); 3. Digidesign 192 I/O; 4. Mouse and keyboard; 4a. PreSonus Central Station (underneath keyboard & mouse, not visible in diagram); 5. Power Mac G5 with Pro Tools; 6. Yamaha DTV55; 7. Apple PowerBook G4; 8. Muse Receptor Pro; 9. Oberheim Matrix-1000 (2); 10. Kurzweil 1000 AX Plus; 11. Apogee AD-16X; 12. Apogee Rosetta 800; 13. Lexicon PCM 81 with David Rosenthal Music FX Card; 14. PowerBook G3; 15. LaCie SCSI hard drive; 16. Iomega Zip 250 Drive; 17. Opcode Studio 5; 18. Kurzweil K2600RS; 19. Roland XV-5080; 20. Roland MKS-70; 21. Roland VariOs with D-50 Card; 22. Glyph SCSI drive; 23. Tripp-Lite SmartPro UPS Uninterruptable Power Supply.



On Broadway

David's first professional Broadway theatre experience evolved out of his work with Billy Joel. "I was the synth programmer and associate music director for *Movin' Out*," he says, referring to the Tony-winning Twyla Tharp dance extravaganza set to the legendary songwriter's works. "It was an interesting show because the music and dance told the story without dialog. I put all the sounds for it together, did the synth programming, and helped with the arrangements as well."

David's years with Billy made him the natural choice for another key role in the production. "Because I'm so familiar with the music, I worked with the piano players they hired to make sure they were playing the parts right. A lot of guys came in thinking they played Billy's music correctly, but they were actually playing piano bar versions — close, but not quite right. There've been four productions of it so far — the original Broadway show, two US tours, and a London production — and I went around and trained all the piano men."

David's success with *Movin' Out* paved the way for another, similarly exciting Broadway gig. "There's a new Broadway musical coming later this year called *A Tale of Two Cities* for which I am the synth programmer," David continues. "We only had room in the pit for violin, cello, double bass, trumpet, French horn, timpani, and a woodwind doubler — basically one instrument from each section — and we had a score that was written for full orchestra. My job was to make them sound like a complete orchestra by creating a score reduction that could be played by three keyboardists. Each synth station had a Kurzweil K2600XS and a Receptor running the East West Platinum Pro XP Library. One keyboardist focused on brass, one on strings, and one on woodwinds. The percussionist played a Kat Controller and a fourth Receptor also with the EastWest Library."

"Getting involved in the Broadway synth programming scene is great because, when I'm not touring, it's like a local gig," says the New Jersey-based artist. "But it's a whole different world."

Oscillate!

Whether he's recreating a vintage sound for a Billy Joel arena concert or building digital orchestras for the next Broadway hit, David consistently demonstrates the highest level of mastery over his instruments. How can up-and-coming synth heads work to achieve his level of programming expertise? "Learn the basics," advises David. "Synths all work the same way. I was fortunate enough to learn on patch cable synthesizers — in those days, if you didn't have your signal flow in order, you couldn't get a sound!"

"The exact same signal flow is going on in synths today, except it happens on chips or in software. You can study until you're blue in the face, but the technology you learn today might not be here tomorrow. Because I've had the basics, I've been able to adapt continuously through my career."

Listening to the right master synthesists is also vital, says David. "Tomita was one of my biggest influences as a young player. When I heard his *Pictures at an Exhibition*, I decided to get my first synthesizer. You gotta hear it! It will change your view of synthesis. He took it to places in the '70s where people still haven't taken it today. He created these massive orchestral works like *Firebird Suite* and *The Planets* and didn't change anything in the compositions. He did them one note at a time on a modular synthesizer and it still sounds amazing even by today's standards."

"It's so important to listen to stuff like that. I had a teacher at Berklee who had an ARP Odyssey in front of the class — it was current at the time I was in school — and he would play a sound and we couldn't see the control panel. We had to sit at our desks and draw a block diagram of how the sound was created, just by listening to it. That was such fantastic ear training. It taught me the different components of synthesis and how they worked together, and it enabled me to hear any sound on any record and understand how it was put together."

Challenges

The biggest challenge David faces when gigging with Billy Joel isn't any particular song. "Keeping the 80 to 90 songs that we could do at any given point in my fingers and in my brain, and being able to pull them up in a minute's notice or less, is a huge challenge," he says. "Sometimes he'll bring up a song we haven't played in a year and we won't rehearse it — we'll just do it. Sometimes he'll just start playing, and you have to come in. I've never had that in any other gig. He loves living on the edge, and I've come to love it as well, doing something without rehearsal in front of 20,000 people."

"I can't even explain how that happens," says David, referring to his ability to instantly recall so many songs. "It's bizarre. But I've learned to trust that it's going to come back. It comes from having really learned the song properly in the first place. Having a good ear helps, because you're relying not only on your memory, but on hearing what the next chord change will be and where the piece is going to go."

Can Billy's impromptu decisions make David nervous? Sure. Does it get in the way of him playing each song with the utmost vigor and precision? Not at all. "You have to learn how to use your nervous energy to your advantage," he says. "A lot of people who are new to performing may clam up, but when you become more comfortable with it, it just becomes part of the energy you have when you're up there. Trust your musical instincts and do what you do."

For more on David, visit www.davidrosenthal.com.