Ethan Bortnick & David Rosenthal

PIANO MEN CELEBRATE THE POWER OF GIVING

BY JON REGEN

ETHAN BORTNICK AND DAVID ROSENTHAL ARE A POTENT MUSICAL PAIRING IN more ways than one. Bortnick, the 14-year-old singer, songwriter, pianist, and humanitarian has raised more than $40 million for nonprofit organizations and charities around the world. The veteran Rosenthal has anchored piano legend Billy Joel's band as keyboardist and musical director for more than two decades.

Bortnick and Rosenthal met in 2009 and they are currently working on new projects for the stage and studio. *Keyboard* caught up with them to get the inside story on this meeting of musical minds.

Ethan, you came to the public's awareness through your charitable work and television specials. How did this whole journey begin for you?

EB: It all started when I was five years old and my brother Nathan was born. My family found out that he was missing half of his heart. He eventually underwent three heart surgeries to correct the problem. I was just learning how to play piano at that time, and while I was visiting my brother at Miami Children's Hospital, I decided that I really wanted to help the other patients through my music.

So I started volunteering at the hospital and things just grew from there. We ended up doing a big event at the American Airlines Arena that I hosted and Beyoncé and Smokey Robinson appeared at. That event raised over $12 million for the hospital in one night! After that evening, I realized that music can really *change* people, and I felt driven to use whatever talents I had to help people any way I could.

Who were some of the musicians that influenced you as you were learning your craft?

EB: I've been influenced by a pretty diverse list of musicians, from Billy Joel and Stevie Wonder to Bill Evans, Dave Brubeck, Mozart, Beethoven, and beyond. I love everything from classical to pop, jazz, and more. Someone I have really enjoyed listening to lately is singer/songwriter Sam Smith. I love his song "Stay With Me." I also really like John Legend. For me, it's all about great melodies, chord progressions, and lyrics. Those are the key.

How did the two of you originally meet?

DR: Ethan and I first met after a Billy Joel/Elton John concert in Jacksonville, Florida, back in 2009. Later, Billy's band backed him up at a few concerts, including one with Katy Perry and Howie Mandel, and one at the Nokia Theater in New York. I was actually teaching Ethan piano at the time and I was amazed at the pace he was learning at. I remember we did a number of four-hour lessons and his focus was pretty remarkable. In just one sitting, I taught him all about jazz chords and extensions!

EB: I love that David has a classical music background, but at the same time, he can show me tons of things about rock and jazz and chords. He knows so much about so many different styles of music. I'm lucky to have him as a mentor.

And from there you started collaborating on projects together?

EB: David saw some of my live shows and he started giving me feedback on them. When we started working on *The Power of Music* special for PBS, I really wanted him to be involved, so we called him up and he said, "Sure! Let's do it!" So David came to my house and we spent about two weeks working together, picking songs and going through the music. From there we started arranging music for orchestra and more.

Ethan Bortnick and David Rosenthal

DR: I had a great time working with Ethan on that special. And even though I am an orchestrator, we had so little time on that project that I hired an outside orchestrator named Noah Luna who is now a great part of our team.

David, do you play keyboards as well as act as Musical Director with Ethan?

DR: No. Ethan has his own band for the stage and for his television specials. I've been instrumental in helping him find the right players, but my role is really that of a musical director. As a player myself, I get involved in all aspects of Ethan's music, but in this situation, I think its more beneficial for me to be behind the scenes rather than be on-stage as a performer.

What kinds of keyboards do you both use at home, in the studio, and on the road?

EB: I have a 6-foot Baldwin grand piano in my house. I also have a Korg Triton in my studio that I use with MIDI to record into Pro Tools. On the road, I use a Nord Stage along with a grand piano.

DR: I have a Pro Tools HD3 Accel system in my studio, where I use a lot of plug-ins like Synthogy's Ivory for pianos and other things in Apple MainStage. I'm depending less and less on hardware these days, both in the studio and in my live rig with Billy Joel. But in terms of hardware controllers, I still use a Kurzweil K2600 or the PC2X. I also have a Kawai VPC1 that I love. In fact, Billy Joel is using one of those too these days in his piano "shell," in conjunction with Muse Receptors running Ivory.

What projects have you and David been working on recently?

EB: We did two television specials for PBS that David was the musical director for: one was *The Power of Music*, and a shorter, holiday-themed special called *Ethan Presents: A Celebration of America*. I'm also filming a new kids' show called *Ethan's Music Room* for PBS to promote music education. I want to write and learn a lot more about music, and I also want to encourage other kids to enjoy and get involved in it. I'll also be performing live across the country on-tour with my band. So there's a lot in the works!

DR: Ethan and I have a great musical rapport and bounce a lot of ideas around when it comes to choosing and writing material. In fact, right now we're actually on a songwriting spree, sourcing material for Ethan's next album. We recently went to Nashville and in four days, we wrote with six different songwriters and came-up with some great new songs using just a little Zoom recorder to capture the organic vibe of the sessions. We plan to return to do it again soon.

Ethan, you have shown people around the world the importance of helping others. What things can you suggest other musicians do to help out in their own communities?

EB: I think the most important thing is to work hard and follow your passion. I believe that everyone has a talent and something that they enjoy doing. If each of us could use our talents to give back and help other people, the world would be a better place. Wherever you live, there are charitable organizations that you can Google or find online that need volunteers. Whatever you are good at and have a passion for, there are places to put it to work. So if you really want to help, there are plenty of people that want and need it! ♫

VIDEO: Ethan Bortnick plays "Anything Is Possible"

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