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David Rosenthal

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A MUSIC PLAYER PUBLICATION

DAVID ROSENTHAL

BILLY JOEL'S LONGTIME KEYBOARDIST AND MUSICAL DIRECTOR TALKS ABOUT THE ART OF PREPARATION

JON REGEN | *Special thanks to Claire Mercuri for her assistance with this article.*

IF YOU'VE SEEN LEGENDARY SINGER, SONGWRITER AND PIANO MAN BILLY JOEL DURING THE PAST QUARTER CENTURY, chances are you've also seen and *heard* his ace keyboardist and musical director David Rosenthal. Since 1993, the New Jersey native has accompanied Joel on sold-out runs at storied venues such as Madison Square Garden in New York and the Colosseum in Rome, Italy. But don't let his casual smile and apparent ease fool you: Rosenthal is as serious as a surgeon when he hits the stage, executing a well-choreographed dance behind his cascading keyboard collection. From the individual sounds he has painstakingly programmed over his nearly three-decade run with Joel, to his pinpoint accuracy in performing some of the most memorable keyboard parts ever recorded, Rosenthal never misses a beat.

The night before yet another sold-out Joel show, Rosenthal sat down with me in midtown Manhattan to talk about how his attention to detail has made him one of the most in-demand musicians around.

Did you come from a musical household?

No. I'm the only musician in my family. But for some reason, when I was six years old, I asked my parents for a piano. Their response was, "Pianos are expensive!" [*Laughs.*] So I saved up my allowance and contributed a little bit. And that's when they realized that I was serious about playing the piano.

So you took piano lessons?

Yeah. I began studying when I was seven years old. Right from the beginning, my teacher told my parents, "Your son is learning *extremely* fast." I remember the first time we had our piano tuned, I was fascinated. I watched everything the tuner was doing, and when he was finished he said to me, "Hey kid, just for fun, let's see what happens. What note is this?" He played a note, and I said, "That's an *A*." And he freaked out. So he played another note and I replied, "That's a *D*." My tuner said to me, "You have perfect pitch!" And I replied, "What's that?" I didn't think anything of it. I just knew that when my piano teacher would show me something, I would do whatever he asked me to do.

What kind of music were you listening to in your formative years?

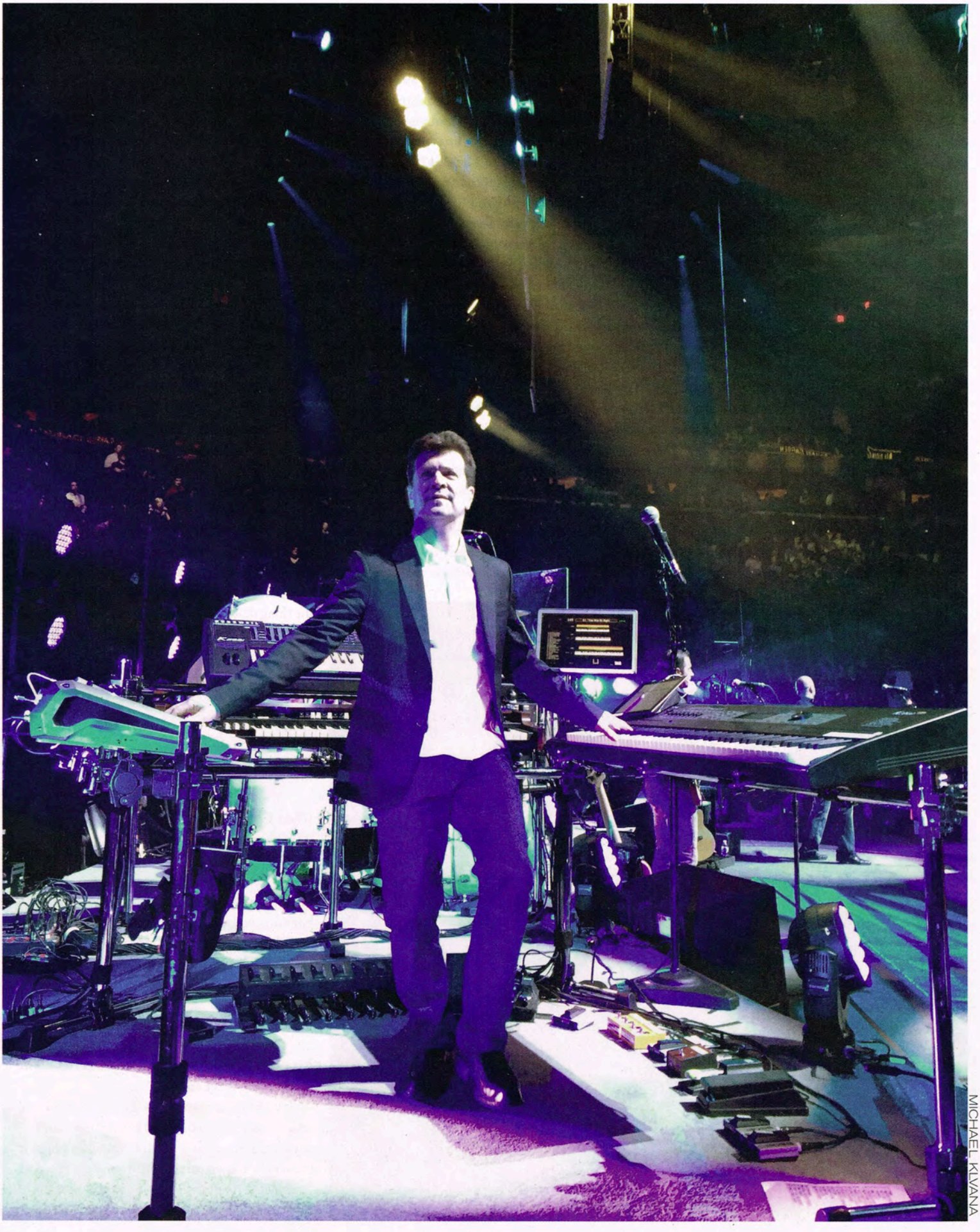
I listened to a lot of Top 40 pop radio at the time. I was born in 1961, so we're talking about the late 1960s and early 1970s. When I first started taking piano lessons, my parents gave me records by Peter Nero and Ferrante and Teicher. Later as I got more into the piano, I copied things from people like Billy Preston, and other blues and rock players. I really liked the Johnny Rivers' single "Rockin' Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu" and, of course, records by Billy [Joel] and Elton [John], too. Later I started taking a liking to more complex things with synthesizers like Yes and ELP. Keith Emerson, who we just lost, was a big influence on me, as was Uriah Heep's Ken Hensley. Also Chick Corea and Kit Watkins from Happy the Man were big influences.

Besides taking lessons and listening to records, were you also playing in bands?

Yes. I played in bands from a very young age. I was in my first rock band when I was 12 years old. All of the other guys were 17! They wanted me to go out and play gigs with them because I held my own in the audition, but my parents said, "Only if you guys rehearse at our house, so we can keep an eye on things." So we rehearsed at my parents' house.

What kind of keyboard gear were you using back in those early days?

The first keyboard I had was a Farfisa organ. Later I got a Rhodes. I really wanted a synthesizer, but my parents thought they were toys and a waste of money. They told me, "If you want one, you'll have to pay for it yourself!" So I went and cut lawns for two summers to afford a Roland SH-1000. I will never cut another lawn for as long as I live! [*Laughs.*] I was really into pitch bending, but the Roland didn't have a pitch bender. So I had it modified to use a pitch-bending ribbon from a Micromoog.



MICHAEL KLVANA

So you were a keyboard geek from the very beginning!

I was. I got so into it. My parents didn't really want me to have a career in music, but since they saw that it was the only thing I cared about, they sent me to music camp at Glassboro State College in New Jersey. It was at that camp that I got to experiment with a Moog Modular synthesizer, and also where I first heard [Japanese composer and synthesist Isao] Tomita. That's what really put me over the top. I must have been 13 or 14 when I first heard him. I thought to myself, "Game over. This is what I want to do." Tomita's sound was so incredible; the things he recorded in the 1970's still hold their own today.

At that time, while I was starting to listen to bands that had more keyboards and synths in their music, I was also getting more and more into classical piano. When I became a teenager, I realized that I wanted to get better on my instrument, and I had considered going to the Manhattan School of Music. But after visiting Berklee College of Music, I took one look around and said, "I'm going here!" I loved the vibe and the atmosphere of Berklee so much; I knew it was for me. I loved it there.

What subjects did you concentrate on in music school?

I focused on piano performance, synthesis, and audio recording. I approached it like a triple major. I had a band called Morning Thunder with [guitarist] Steve Vai, where we did original fusion music along with music by Happy the Man and Frank Zappa. It was that band's demo that Steve actually sent to Frank Zappa to get his first gig with him.

Did you graduate from Berklee?

I did, but I actually left during my final semester to audition for the band Rainbow. I only had a few classes to complete when I left, so I finished my degree via correspondence.

How did the Rainbow audition come about?

Back in 1981 when I was 20 years old, a friend of mine at Berklee knew a friend of [Deep Purple and Rainbow guitarist] Ritchie Blackmore and heard he was looking for a new keyboardist. So I sent Ritchie a recording of my senior classical piano recital at Berklee, along with a tape of my cover band. I ended-up getting called to audition for the band, and not knowing what to expect, I went-out and bought all of Rainbow's albums. Up until that point, the band had three other keyboard players, so I listened to all of them, looking to see what each of them had in common stylistically. I figured if I could understand that, I'd understand what Ritchie liked in a keyboardist.

I went to Long Island, New York, to audition for the band along with tons of other keyboard players in a typical "cattle call" setting. I brought all of my gear with me—my Farfisa, my Roland and my Fender Rhodes. When I arrived, I saw that Ritchie had his own keyboards set up. He had a Hammond organ, a Minimoog, a Clavinet and some other things. Now I had never *played* any of those keyboards, but I knew all about how they worked because I had studied synthesis at Berklee. When I showed up to my audition, Ritchie said to me, "Forget your equipment, you're playing mine!" So we jammed for around 15 minutes in a sort of free-form format, and then it was over.

Later that night they called me and said, "It's down to you and another guy. You each have three hours for your audition tomorrow." So I asked myself, "How can I get an edge over the other guy auditioning?" And so I called every Sam Ash Music Store in Long Island until I found one that had a Minimoog on their sales floor. I went there with a pair of headphones and sat for hours, learning my way around it. When I went to my 'call back' the next day, I was flying all over it!

During my second audition, Rainbow bassist Roger Glover said to me, "Okay. We're onstage in front of 20,000 people. Ritchie breaks a string and you need to fill space. Go!" So I played something on the Hammond, then I played another thing on the Clavinet, then I riffed on the Minimoog. What was really interesting and something that I only found out later was, the thing that tilted the audition in my favor was that I was *fearless*. I was the only guy that really *played* when given that scenario by Roger. So when I was 20, I got the gig with Rainbow. I recorded the *Straight Between the Eyes* album and did a world tour of arenas with them. It was a lot of fun. We eventually did another album *Bent Out of Shape*, another world tour, and a live album too. I stayed until they disbanded, when Deep Purple re-formed in 1984.

What keyboards were you using on that first Rainbow tour?

I had a Hammond B3 organ, and two Minimoogs because I had to be able to go back and forth between them. In those days, synths didn't have any memory, so you really had to prepare sounds in advance for songs later in the set. I also had a Clavinet and a Roland Paraphonic RS-505 string synthesizer, and an Oberheim OB-Xa, which was brand new at the time. On that one you could play chords and save patches!

After your stint in Rainbow came to an end, what came next for you?

I did a lot of different things. I did a world tour with [Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band guitarist] Little Steven and his Disciples of Soul. I also put my own band together and produced a band called Hammerhead in Europe. One thing led to another and I got the call to audition for Cyndi

BILLY JOEL ON DAVID ROSENTHAL

JEFF SHOCK

"David's keyboard expertise and his extensive knowledge of theory have been invaluable to me over the years. I rely on him to guide us through sound checks, rehearsals, and especially when learning to play material that is vague or unfamiliar. He knows my material better than I do in some cases. When I can't recall how I composed a certain piece, David will always know the right notes. He keeps me honest." —BILLY JOEL

Lauper's *True Colors* world tour in 1986. The sounds I had to get with Cyndi were *completely* different than the ones I was using with Rainbow, so the gear I was using reflected that change. I toured with Cyndi from 1986 to 1987. Then I joined Robert Palmer for his *Heavy Nova* tour from 1988 to '89. That tour actually ended up in the Guinness Book of World Records. On the first leg we did 56 shows in a row in 56 different cities! After that, I started concentrating more on studio work from 1991 to '92, playing and recording with people like Steve Vai, and Whitesnake, as well as my own band Red Dawn. Then in 1993, I got the call to audition for Billy Joel.

How did that audition come about?

I had heard that Billy was looking for a new keyboard player, so I got the call to go to a closed audition between just me and another keyboard player at SIR Studios in New York City. I was asked to learn four songs, which included "We Didn't Start the Fire," "Pressure," and "I Go to Extremes." I didn't sleep. I worked around the clock getting ready for the audition, learning the songs and copying all of the sounds from the records. Then I rented a truck, hired a keyboard tech, and set up all of my gear at the audition. When it was time to play the songs, I nailed them. From what I heard, the other keyboard player just learned the chord changes and jammed along to the tunes! So, long-story short, I got the gig and soon was off with Billy and the band for the *River of Dreams* tour in 1993. That tour lasted for 18 months, and I've been in the band ever since!

Do you remember what keyboards you brought to the audition?

Billy's music spans 30 years, so I had to be able to replicate everything from analog to digital to FM to sampling. For my audition, I brought four keyboards and an entire rack of modules along with me. Once I *got* the gig, I had to learn 55 tunes and program all of the sounds in two weeks to prepare for the tour. Billy came in on the first day of rehearsals and really liked the sounds I was getting. I did my homework. I learned all the songs, came in prepared, and had all the sounds together. So Billy was happy.

How did you go about getting the sounds right for your first tour with Billy?

I put on a good set of headphones and I pulled out all of the parts off the records! I didn't have time to memorize everything, so if a song had a tricky bridge or other parts that were difficult, I would make some cheat sheets. But otherwise, I would go over things again and again to commit them to memory. Often times I would also memorize parts while I was working on creating the sounds for them.

It's ironic that you first joined Billy Joel for a tour of the last album of pop music he ever recorded!

Well, I actually *did* get to record a few tracks with him. We went into the studio to record "Hey Girl" for the *Greatest Hits Volume III* album. And that was really cool. Billy came into the studio and said to me, "You play piano. I'm just gonna sing." I figured that after I left, he would replace the piano. But he kept it. So I'm actually one of only three people besides Billy to ever play piano on a Billy Joel record. The other two are Ray Charles, and Richard Tee. That was pretty cool.

Since you joined Billy's band, you're playing many of the same songs, but the gear you are using to play those songs has changed dramatically. What does this influx of new technology allow you to do now that you couldn't do back in 1993?

Carry a lot less gear! Everything lives in the computer now. Because I had so meticulously programmed all of the sounds for all of Billy's songs, I was able to *capture* those sounds using the Auto Sampler plug-in. So while I'm using things now like MainStage, EXS24, Omnisphere, Komplete, the Arturia collection and the EastWest sound library, many of the sounds that I'm using for Billy's show

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THE ROSENTHAL RIG 2016 BY DAVID ROSENTHAL

DAVID ROSENTHAL

Onstage with Billy Joel, I'm using a Kurzweil K2600x, a Kurzweil K2661, a Hammond XK3c, a Roland Fantom G, and Roland PK-5a MIDI Pedals. Note that the keyboards are *controllers only*; all audio is coming from Apple MainStage. The only exception is the Hammond XK3c that is running through a Leslie 147 that's under the stage. It's not part of the MIDI system, that way if my whole rig blows up I know I can always still play the Hammond!

From right to left, my pedals are as follows: under the K2600 to the right of the volume pedal (but not shown) are Inc [increment] and Dec [decrement] pedals for program changes on the K2600. The iPads do the program changes for each song, and the Inc and Dec pedals change the patches within the song when needed. I also use volume and sustain pedals for the K2600; a footswitch that turns my mic on and off for talking to the band, monitor guy, or FOH; and a footswitch that disables the MIDI output of the K2600. This is done by using a MIDI A/B box (shown in front of the footswitch) with one side not connected to anything. The two JR-2 Remote footswitches are for the Radial SW-8 switchers. The left JR-2 footswitch switches between the A and B MainStage systems. Both systems are running all the time, so the B system functions as a real-time backup. The footswitch changes which system's audio outputs are being sent to the house. If the A rig freezes or has any kind of a problem, I simply hit the A/B switch to switch to the B rig and I can keep playing while the A rig is restarted. The right JR-2 footswitch switches between the outputs of the active MainStage system and the outputs of the Kurzweil K2600. In the unlikely event that both computers go down, I could then use the K2600 sounds that I have programmed and get through a song while both computers restart. In this situation I would also disable the MIDI output of the K2600 so that I am not sending all kinds of MIDI data to the computers while they are re-launching MainStage.

Other pedals include a Panic footswitch which sends a Panic command (all notes off on all MIDI channels) to both MainStage systems in the event of a stuck note, a sustain pedal for the K2661, a volume pedal for the XK3c, Roland PK-5a MIDI Pedals, and a fast/slow footswitch for the Leslie 147.

Above my keyboards on the top left of the K2600 is the main iPad. This is used to change programs for each song using an app called *unrealBook*. The songs are entered in the order of the setlist, and then I can easily step through the show from song to song. I also have a backup iPad (on the top right of the Fantom G) that can also change the programs if the main one fails. During the show the backup iPad has all of the songs in alphabetical order, so if Billy calls a song that's not in the setlist, I can find it quickly and jump to that song.

The Macbook Pro on the stage is for screen sharing only. This computer is not running MainStage; rather it is networked to the under-stage computers so that during the show I can keep an eye on what's happening with the MainStage computers. I can also use the onstage Macbook Pro to edit the under-stage computers remotely during a rehearsal or soundcheck.

My under-stage rack houses two identical MainStage systems. The monitors on top are for the A and B systems respectively, but there is only one keyboard and one mouse that can be switched between computers using a KVM switch. The rack also includes a Furman PL-Plus DMC power conditioner, two OWC Thunderbolt 2 docks (one for each system), two OWC ThunderBay 4 Minis (one for each system; each one houses the 2 external SSD's that I use for each MainStage system), four MOTU Ultralite AVB's (two units for each system to accommodate all the outputs that I send to the house), two MOTU MIDI Express XTs (one for each system), two Radial SW8 Switchers (the top one switches between the outputs of the A and B MainStage systems, and the bottom one switches between the outputs of the active MainStage system and the outputs of the Kurzweil K2600), two rack-mounted Mac Pro computers (one for each system) with 8 cores and 64GB of RAM, a Netgear Ethernet router and Ethernet switcher, and a Tripp Lite UPS (uninterruptable power supply).

My Leslie 147 speaker is enclosed in an iso-booth road case. The Leslie is mounted in the center of the case with all four mics mounted and locked into position. The case is intentionally larger than the Leslie so that the sound isn't choked by the sides of the case by being right up against it. This gives it a natural sound with a nice Doppler effect. All of the connectors are on the outside of the case so the case just rolls on and off the truck and gets connected.

are the ones that I programmed back in the very beginning. I'm just able to use them in a modern way. In the beginning, I had to carry tons of different modules and use numerous keyboards. Now, I love playing multiple keyboards; it's a ton of fun. But in the old days, they were also used for their *sounds*, which meant I had to map all of the keyboards and volume changes, and I had to carry a mixer, which later became a digital mixer. Now all of those things, along with the ability to use samples, synth plug-ins and effects, are built into Apple MainStage. The keyboards I play onstage now act as controllers only.

Give me an example of a sound from one of Billy's songs that started on one keyboard, and how you're playing it today.

There's a keyboard solo in his song "Angry Young Man" that Billy originally played on a Minimoog. I copied the sound from the record on my own Minimoog and sampled it back when I joined the band in 1993. But I wanted to give the sound just a little more *meat* to cut through in the mix live, so I layered the original sample with a JD-800 guitar patch and one from the Kurzweil K2000 as well. Layered together they make the Minimoog sound huge.

When I'm creating my patches, I'm always asking myself, "How will these sounds be heard in the mix?" Because they're not heard alone: They're heard along with Billy's piano, or they have to cut over a wall of guitar or other instruments. In order for the sounds to translate in an arena or stadium environment, they need to sound larger than life yet still sit properly in the mix.

What impresses you most about being in the Billy Joel Band?

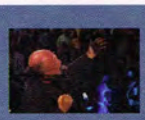
Billy's great to work with. He's a great musician and he's *all* about live performance. He loves throwing songs at us that we haven't rehearsed or ones we haven't played in a long time. He loves being totally in the moment and having us just "go for it." If it's not perfect, that's okay. He likes living on the edge, and because of that, no two of his shows are exactly the same. And that's cool.

What do you think it takes to succeed today in the ever changing and competitive music business?

First of all you have to learn your instrument. There's a lot to know as a keyboard player.

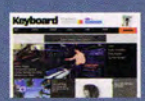
I'm a piano player first, and I know music theory. But I love the infinite palette you get with synthesizers. When I was studying at Berklee, I wanted to learn everything there was to know about synthesis and keyboards, so I could re-create any sound I heard in my head or on the radio. So I try to inspire young musicians to not only learn music, but to learn about technology and everything it can do. Don't just learn what happens when you hit a button; learn *why* it's doing it. None of the technology that's out today was available when I was a student, but the concepts are exactly the same.

I do my homework. When I learn the chords to a song or I program sounds, I don't just get close; I make sure they're right. I go the extra yard, and I crack the whip on myself pretty hard.

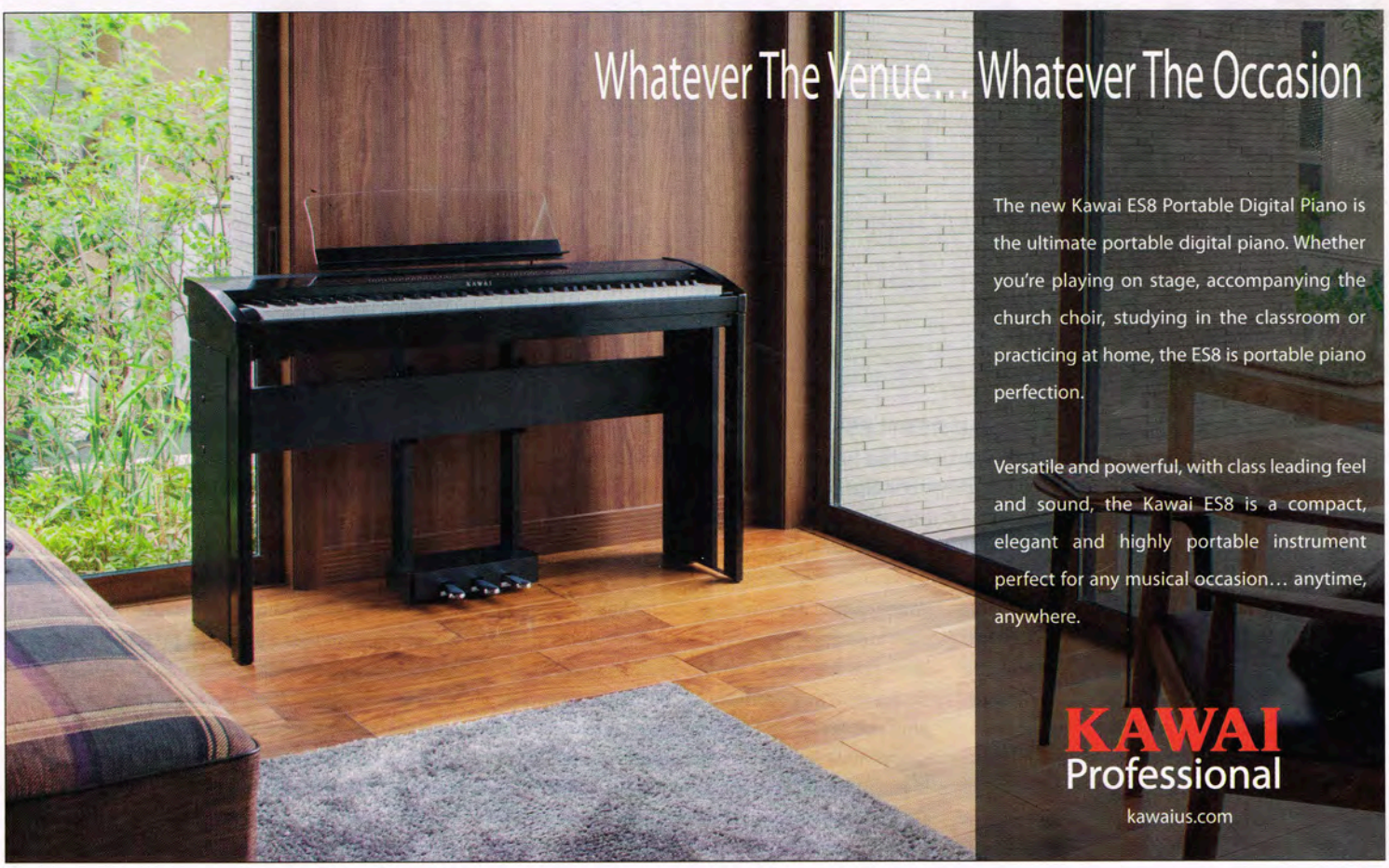


VIDEO: David Rosenthal with Billy Joel: "Prelude/Angry Young Man" Live at Shea Stadium

Billy Joel: Hey Girl



Visit www.keyboardmag.com/july2016 for exclusive photos of Rosenthal's keyboard rig as it evolved through the years.

Find out more about Rosenthal at davidrosenthal.com

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