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DAVID ROSENTHAL
On Taking BILLY JOEL's Sounds Virtual

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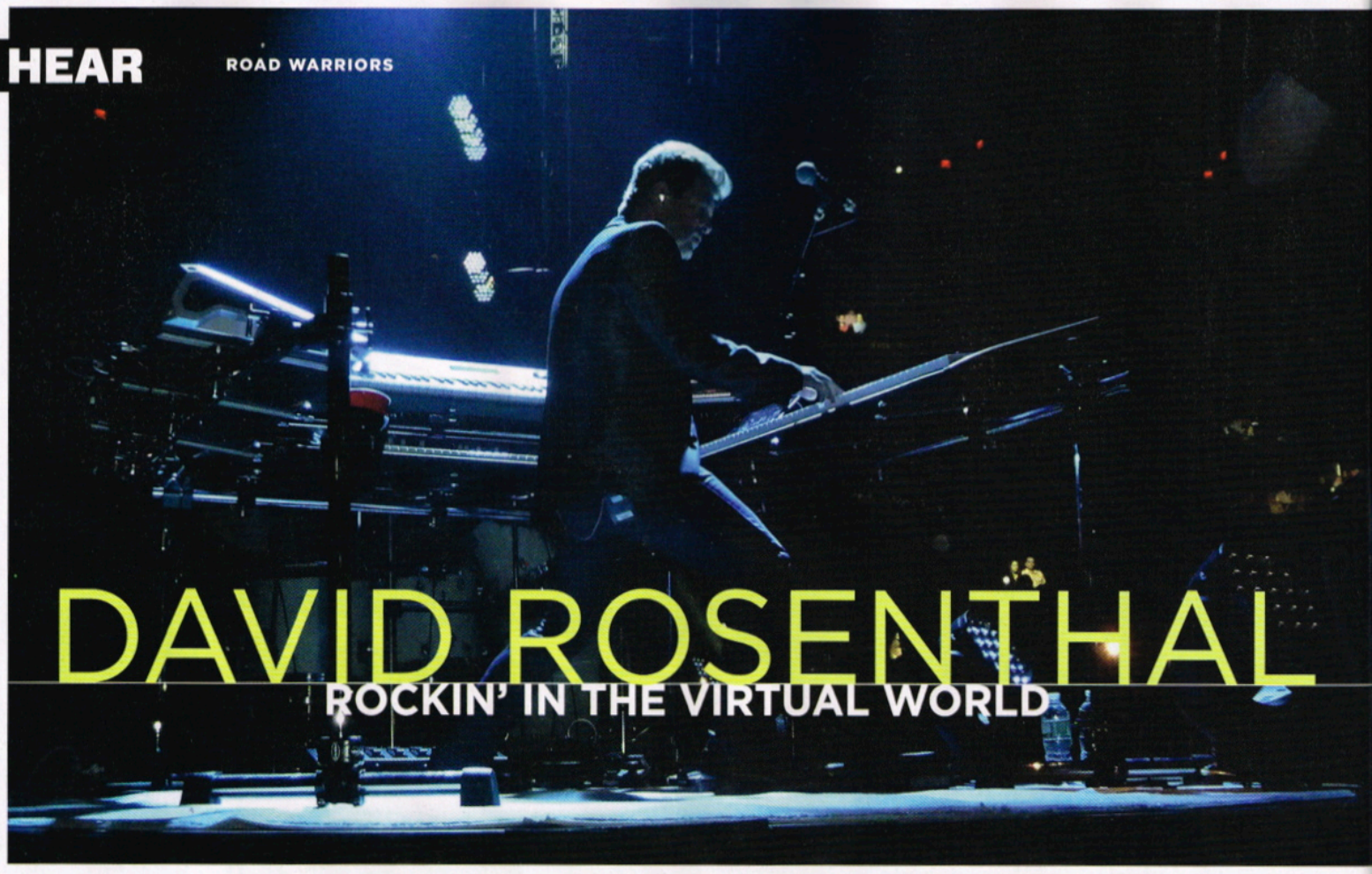

DAVID ROSENTHAL

ROCKIN' IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

DAVID ROSENTHAL IS REVERED ACROSS THE MUSIC BUSINESS AS A CONSUMMATE Berklee-trained keyboardist with the gift of perfect pitch. To be in the middle of Rosenthal's touring rig for Billy Joel is to behold one of the most organized and efficiently routed systems one could imagine. Add his prowess in synth programming, orchestration, production, and musical direction, and you have an indispensible powerhouse.

Rosenthal's early career was spent with heavier acts such as Yngwie Malmsteen, Ritchie Blackmore's Rainbow, and Steve Vai, before he moved on to stints with Robert Palmer, Cyndi Lauper, and Enrique Iglesias, followed by his work on Broadway and with his own bands Red Dawn and Happy the Man. Rosenthal helped Bruce Springsteen's band update their keyboard rigs, acted as musical director for the PBS special *The Power of Music*, and for the Tony Award-winning musical *Movin' Out*, he did everything from synth programming to teaching the pianists how to play like Billy Joel. *Keyboard* visited Rosenthal to find out how the latest incarnation of his rig has evolved from his long-loved synths and sound modules to the largely virtual domain of Apple MainStage and the Muse Research Receptor 2.

When we first met you in 1994, you were known for using the Yamaha TX-816, which amounted to eight DX7s in a rack. Do you still use those patches, and if so, what do you play them on?

All my patches are there in [Native Instruments] FM8. I converted them through sys-ex. They're the exact same patches. I did it on FM7 and then I upgraded to FM8, but the patches load right in. I used Behringer Multigates to silence the TX-816 modules because they're noisy. The tiniest bit of sound would open the gate, but when the modules were idle, it didn't raise the noise floor. They're just noisy. I mean, they were cool, but they were early versions. Now, when I play those sounds in FM8, there's no noise floor at all, but otherwise they sound the same.

What were you using those on in '99 when Billy supposedly gave up touring and then came back?

Billy's music spans 30 years and he always used whatever was new and current. So through the '80s there were DX7s used here and there, and there's no other way to get that sound. It has a character to it—FM synthesis—so it just doesn't sound right if you do it from something else. For example, the bells in "We Didn't Start the Fire"—that's a DX7 patch.

The intro of "This Is the Time" is a DX7 patch. He used to always play that on piano live, but now with the new rig I designed for him, he has FM8. He's playing a [Kawai] VPC-1 controller through two Muse Receptors. His main piano is Ivory American Concert D, but I also have Komplete 9 on the receptors, which hosts FM8 for that DX patch, and also Scarbee's electric piano sounds.

How are you handling set lists and program changes?

I'm using iPads for program changes, with the Unreal Book app and an IK iRig MIDI interface. Basically, you can keep PDFs of all your charts and you can create set lists from them. But you can also attach a MIDI string using hexadecimal code to each PDF, so that when you call up the chart, it sends out program changes. So I exported PDFs from Microsoft Word containing just the title of each song and I have them all in Unreal Book. I put them in the order of this show and we patch through it. I have two for backup, and a third organized alphabetically.

What's the alphabetical list for?

Let's say Billy calls a tune that's not in the set, or maybe one of the iPads dies. I also have the printed set list on the floor so I can still jump from song to song. I set up the same thing in Billy's rig so every song has its own program, even if he uses the same sound. That way, if he wants to change the key of a song, I can change it on that patch. It doesn't affect anything else. And then everything goes by song title.

How do you get your Hammond sound these days?

Well, Native Instruments discontinued B4-II, so now I have a Hammond XK-3C running through a brand new Leslie 147. It sounds great.

What role does the Kurzweil K2600 play in your rig?

It's the main controller, and I also have versions of almost all of Billy's songs programmed using its sounds. They don't sound as rich and as full as on my big soft synth rig, but I had to do a lot of them for the *Movin' Out* musical, and they all had to be sourced from one keyboard. Also, we travel light for corporate gigs, and if I'm doing those tunes with anybody else I just bring that one keyboard.

Another reason is that when it came time to set up this new system, I had to reprogram the sounds for every one of these songs. I now have 81 songs programmed in Apple MainStage. I have to be ready for him to call any song. I used to have them all mapped to different hardware sound modules via Opcode Studio5 interfaces and OMS, and as you can imagine, setting up a song on a new platform is time-consuming. Some songs take me a whole day or two to get right. So when I first started using MainStage, if Billy called a tune I hadn't programmed yet, I had to be able to go back to the K2600 sounds so I could get through it. For that reason, I'm still using the K2600 as a controller. I like the way it feels, too.

As I got smarter with MainStage, I made everything work from one keyboard. Now that I have all the sounds mapped out, I could play any of those 81 songs from one keyboard if I had to. The zones are duplicated on the other keyboards, so I can do my thing and throw shapes in front of the crowd, play a chorus on one keyboard and a verse on another, that kind of thing.

You used Opcode gear for the longest time, even after the company went under. Why?

I used it because it was great. They went under just before USB, so they never came out with USB versions of their MIDI interfaces. But for ten years nobody came out with any product that could do what the Studio 5 could do. So I kept using the Studio 5 for many years to protect the thousands of hours of programming time that went into all those sounds that I had, and because I was waiting for something else to come along that could do it.

So what came along?

MainStage. But the early versions of MainStage couldn't quite do it. Version 1 was okay. Version 2 started to get pretty powerful, but I'm using version 3 now and I have 99 percent of the features that I need.

What would you still like to see in terms of features that you need?

MIDI plug-ins was a suggestion I made, so it was cool when they put it in version 3. Now, I'd like to see multiple aliases inside a patch.

What are aliases?

In order to be memory-efficient, you only want to load the samples for a patch once. Most of my patches are at least 700 or 800 megabytes in size, and they all stream. I might use that sample set repeatedly, but with different MainStage channel strip settings on different songs. So they have a thing called "aliases." The samples load just once, and then when you use a patch again and again, the aliases give you control over the channel strip parameters. But you can only have one alias inside of one patch, and I'd like to use more than that. I might want to double it an octave or have a different version of it that's darker with less velocity or whatever. The Receptors have a similar function, but they let you use the same samples in lots of different patch and multis.

With all the MIDI flying around between MainStage, the Receptors, and your keyboards, have you ever had a big "MIDI panic" moment?

Not very often. When I designed my first incarnation of this big rig with the Studio 5, the concept of routing lots of modules and keyboards was much newer. In the early days there were a lot more issues with stuck notes. It doesn't happen very often now, but it does every once in a while. So I do have a panic switch that sends MIDI note-offs on all channels.

Rosenthal's stage keyboards, left to right: Roland Fantom-G6, Kurzweil K2661 above Hammond XK-3C and Roland PK-5 pedalboard, MacBook Pro running MainStage, iPad running Unreal Book for set list-driven program changes, and Kurzweil K2600X.

Under the Billy Joel stage are fully redundant virtual instrument-hosting systems comprising MOTU UltraLite Mk. 3 and MIDI Express XT interfaces, MacBook Pros, Muse Research Receptor 2 Pro+ host machines, RME A/D converters, and Radial SW8 audio switchers.

What do you envision changing in the rig in the near future?

[I don't see myself] using the iPad for sounds. The issue with the iPad is, it's still a wireless device, and I don't trust wireless in a live atmosphere. A cable can fail, fair enough, but I won't use anything wireless. That said, plug-ins and software synths are really coming into their own. You don't need walls of keyboards and modules. I have all those keyboards onstage, but they're mainly controllers.

Are there any on which you use the internal sounds?

The only ones that have audio connected are the Hammond, which is going through the Leslie, and my Kurzweil K2600X as the emergency backup. I set up two MainStage systems that are running all the time and completely independent of one another.

If one goes down, it won't bring the other with it.

Exactly. If one goes down, I have a Radial switcher, the SW8, which switches eight channels of audio. So if I have a problem I can't resolve, I just have a remote footswitch on the stage that switches me to my "B" system and I keep playing away. Then my tech can re-launch the other one while I'm playing. In an extreme emergency, which hasn't happened yet, if both systems went down at the same time, I have a second Radial switcher, which switches between the active MainStage rig and the audio outs of the Kurzweil, which I could then play standalone. As a last resort, my failsafe is the organ through the Leslie. It's intentionally not part of my MIDI system.

So you technically have a threefold system.

Correct. The downside of using software synths is that, to restart a computer and get back to where you were, it takes an eternity if a song is playing. Even the Kurzweil has a lot of samples in it and it takes five minutes to load. I can't have that. I have solid-state drives in everything and external SSDs connected via Thunderbolt. It's slamming fast, but still not an acceptable amount of time to have my rig down. Hence the redundant systems.

When I programmed my first incarnation of this MainStage/Receptor rig, I was going to use it at the *12-12-12* concert we did. We were only going to do five songs, but I knew that Billy might want to add few others so I programmed up, like, 15 songs. I was all excited, and it didn't work. I was using FireWire 800 and conventional hard drives, and it couldn't keep up with my playing. I couldn't play big chords; it was sluggish. Not latency—it just couldn't stream fast enough to keep up.

So what did you do for that show?

I used my Kurzweil. I'd just spent a year using [Redmatica] AutoSampler to sample all of my huge layers and patches and everything. And then the rig didn't frickin' work! I was kind of losing it there for a minute. But within two months, Thunderbolt came out and then solid-state drives, and I switched over to that and all of a sudden it worked. So now it can keep up with my playing. I don't have polyphony limitations with streaming patches. Little by little I started programming, and then Billy decided he wanted to start doing shows again, and that was as my catalyst. I said, "That's it. I'm going in the deep end. I'm not coming back."

You also used to use real Moog Taurus pedals in your rig.

I had the Taurus 1. The Taurus 2 didn't sound right to me, but the recent Taurus 3 captured the sound right on the money. However, I could get so much more mileage out of MIDI bass pedals and use samples of my Taurus pedals. I ran them through an Eventide Harmonizer--not in series. I split the signal with a slightly detuned version, which gave it a great natural chorus—or more like a doubling effect. I fattened it up, added a little boost at 3kHz to give it a teeny bit more presence, so when there are big guitars happening it cuts. I have a sample of that that I use to this day, mapped to my MIDI bass pedals.

Do you use that sound in the Billy Joel show?

I sometimes use it at the end of a big song on the last chord. For example, the end of "We Didn't Start the Fire" we hit this huge chord. I use it on "Allentown." In the bridge, there's a low pedal tone on the record.

Also, I can do string lines, and I sometimes map stacked chords to single pedals. I haven't had to do that too much with Billy because he plays piano and I play the other parts. But when I played with Enrique Iglesias, a lot of his records were full of keyboards. The chord changes were fairly straight-ahead in his earlier years. So using my Opcode Studio 5, I'd stack up chords so I could play a pad with my feet and I would just know the *F* pedal is the *I* chord, the *G* is the *II* minor seventh, and so on. Then sometimes I'd transpose part of the keyboard so that I could play two lines within the stretch of one hand that would otherwise be impossible to reach.

What would you recommend to normal kids—not gifted prodigies—who are starting out?

Find a good teacher. If you're not getting enough out of your teacher, find somebody else. Every student grows at a different rate, and just because a teacher might be knowledgeable and the student might want to learn doesn't mean there'll be a synergy.

I'm also a big proponent of understanding how your gear works. Ten years from now, you'll be playing on equipment that doesn't exist today. Most of what I use today was unfathomable when I was first learning synth programming. But it's all the same stuff—just in software. I'm able to get the most out of software today because I learned the concepts of audio signal flow, MIDI routing, and synthesis. So don't just fiddle with the knobs until it sounds good. Learn *why* it sounds good.

• Our conversation with David Rosenthal continues.

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