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Right,
keyboardist
David
Rosenthal
of Iselin
tunes up
for a recent
Billy Joel-
Elton John
concert at
Continental
Airlines
Arena



It's still rock 'n' roll to him

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Photos by Alexandra Pais
Special to the Home News Tribune

David Rosenthal was recently awarded a Distinguished Alumni Award for "Outstanding Achievements in Contemporary Music" following a lecture at Berklee College of Music in Boston.

That's what happens when you're part of Billy Joel's band and have toured the world nine times as a keyboard player.

That's what happens when you're performing with Enrique Iglesias and Cyndi Lauper.

And that's what happens when you appear on "Late Night With David Letterman," "Saturday Night Live" and MTV.

But when the 41-year-old talks music in his Iselin basement, he also mentions being inducted last spring into the Hall of Honor at J.P. Stevens High School. Clearly not his biggest accomplishment, but this guy hasn't forgotten his roots.

Whether entertaining crowds in Tokyo, Brazil or Boston, Rosenthal remains a Jersey guy. Not only that, he remains a humble guy.

Considering his accomplishments, that's not exactly a walk through Roosevelt Park.

Rosenthal, who grew up in Edison, completes a four-week tour with Joel today at Continental Airlines Arena in East Rutherford.

In his spare time recently, he has been scoring and arranging keyboard parts and synthesizer programming for the Broadway musical "Movin' Out," a show based on 26 of Joel's songs that opens Oct. 24 at the Richard Rogers Theater.

Music man

The bright lights of Broadway and shadows cast by the Billy Joels and Elton Johns are nowhere to be found though, as Rosenthal sits comfortably in a black leather swivel chair. He is surrounded by a computer-driven digital console with reverb and effects processors, synthesizers and other such equipment in his studio basement.

He even hooked up strobe lights in the ceiling above the console, to indicate what phone line was ringing when the noise level is too high.

Like the equipment around him, Rosenthal remains grounded.

"Music has always been easy," he says. "I've been very fortunate to have seen the world, and playing in front of 20,000 people is still fun. It just doesn't get old. But one of the ironies of the business is that I play around three shows a week for two hours each - six hours a week. The rest of the time is traveling and waiting. And that's become a job.

"I really can't imagine doing anything else. I really don't know what else I would do. That thought is alien to me. I don't let things go to my head," he adds. "I'm just a person like anyone else. I'm just up on a stage entertaining people.

"Whether you're Billy Joel or the guy who builds the stage, we're all just people. I think what helps is I always look ahead. I think people who only look back at their accomplishments are usually full of themselves."

He doesn't have to think back very far to remember one of the major changes in his life. Three years ago he was married. He and Michelle met when he was playing with Iglesias in Sao Paulo, Brazil. She was a model in Brazil.

Below, Rosenthal hangs out prior to the show. He has played keyboard for Joel's band for nearly 10 years.



Perfect pitch

He was introduced to music at a young age.

Rosenthal grew up on the north side of Edison. He began taking piano lessons at 7, and by the time he was 12 he knew more than his teacher. While some kids would skip school to hang out or go fishing, this guy would fake illness to stay home and practice.

He remembers a piano tuner making a visit and being quizzed to identify notes. "A" said the kid as the tuner played a key. "And how about this note?" the guy said. "C" answered the kid.

"Turns out I had perfect pitch," Rosenthal says. "I didn't know what the big deal was. I was just answering his questions."

Faster than you could say J.P. Stevens, Rosenthal had himself a band. Hot Ice was the name of his first group. That was before he graduated from JPS in 1978, while he was winning a state-wide competition with a band called Crystal Vision. By 21, the kid was jamming on stage at Madison Square Garden, performing with the band Rainbow. He started working with Billy Joel almost 10 years ago.

In addition to his Broadway contributions, he also has his own band, Happy The Man. Though this group is a spare-time arrangement, members are working on a record.

"This is really for the love of music," he says of the group, comprising East Coast musicians. "I really don't do much away from music; there are a million facets related to it."

He has experienced just about all of them. Right out of college, he hooked up Rainbow, a hard-rock band that recorded three albums during his stay. A pair of Top-40 singles emerged ("Stone Cold" and "Street of Dreams"), as did a Grammy nomination and sales of more than two million.

Another tour came with pop singer Lauper and her "True Colors World Tour." Following that was the "Heavy Nova World Tour" with Robert Palmer, a marathon that included 56 straight shows in 56 different cities.

"On this level," he says, "you don't often have the luxury of practice. You just have to go out there and be great. But it's like breathing. The good thing is that I genuinely love his music," he says.



David Rosenthal rehearses for a show at Continental Airlines Arena.

Karma chameleon

In addition to the pop music, hard rock and his Broadway endeavor, Rosenthal also orchestrated Yngwie Malmsteen's "Concerto Suite for Electric Guitar and Orchestra." The 307-page score for the 11-movement composition was recorded by the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra.

"I like being a chameleon," he says of his varied works of music. Pausing, he smiles and says, "This is my first entrance to Broadway since I played piano in the production of 'Peter Pan' at J.P. Stevens."

The crowds are just a bit larger these days, but the passion hasn't wavered.

"I'm a perfectionist. I always go the extra yard," he says. "I'm a workaholic, I push myself to be the best."

He also is one of the top keyboardists in the world.

"It still feels euphoric, especially when the crowd is into it, and the band is clicking. The trick is not to lose yourself," he points out. "It would be easy to stop playing and take it all

in, but you have to keep playing. There's always a fine line of concentration and enjoying the moment.

"It's funny," he adds. "I meet a lot of ball players backstage, guys who are Billy Joel fans. Everybody's telling each other how they enjoy each other and how cool it is what they do. But the big difference with us and them is that ball players have to deal with losing. I can't imagine what it would be like to do your best and still lose. For us, doing a concert, nobody walks home a loser."

Not in Tokyo, Brazil or Boston. And especially not in Iselin.

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