DAVID ROSENTHAL

UNREPENTANT ROCKER

BY ROBERT L. DOERSCHUK

NOW THE TRUTH CAN BE TOLD: David Rosenthal, your choice for Best Hired Gun in the most recent *Keyboard* Readers Poll, nimble-fingered synthmeister on Billy Joel's apparently endless world tour, unobtrusive colorist behind Cyndi Lauper on her *True Colors* dates, inexhaustible sidekick on Robert Palmer's backbreaking 1988 concert trek, master of snarling textures and scary solos with Whitesnake and Rainbow, nearly chucked it all years ago to become a guitar player!

His plea? Guilty, with an explanation. I was 12 or 13 when I started playing in cover bands," he admits. "I'd been taking piano lessons since I was seven. I had gotten my first organ, a Lowrey, and then I got a Farfisa. The only problem was that some of the popular songs on the radio didn't have keyboard. Rather than put keyboards in them, which didn't sound right, I figured I'd learn how to play guitar."

Fortunately, Rosenthal saw the light at the Berklee School of Music, where the picker glut brought him to his senses and steered him to a triple major in piano performance, electronic music, and audio recording. By the time he earned his degree in 1981, he was an all-stops-out, no-apology keyboard rocker with enough talent and attitude to land a gig with Rainbow.

Thus began a long apprenticeship, during which Rosenthal figured out how to survive in a style defined and dominated by the guitar. His flirtation with the instrument in high school proved an invaluable lesson as he adjusted to life in the shadow of Rainbow's notoriously difficult guitarist and leader, Ritchie Blackmore. "I've worked with a lot of great guitar players, from Ritchie to Steve Vai, and in that kind of situation my role is supportive. I'm called on to make the guitar sound bigger while not drawing too much attention to myself. A lot of times you won't even hear me in the mix, but if you mute what I do, the guitars would suddenly sound smaller. That comes from being a guitar player too: I know how to make my voicings intertwine with what the guitar player does. I can watch their fingers and know exactly what they're doing."

An additional asset - perfect pitch - gives Rosenthal an edge in the art of playing behind speed demon soloists. "It helps me follow exactly what they're doing," he says. "I've known I had perfect pitch since I was nine years old, when this guy who was tuning the piano in our house said to me, 'Hey, just for a joke, turn your back to the piano.' So I turned around, and he played a C and said, 'What note is this?' I said, 'it's C.' Then he said, 'What note is this?' He played an A, and I said, 'That's A.' He said, 'I can't believe it!' But I was like, 'What's the problem? You asked me what note it was and I told you.' Even now, I can't imagine not knowing what note something is when I hear it."

Rosenthal has moved far beyond pitch tricks with piano techs. In fact, he's moved beyond the "hired gun"

role to start his own band, Red Dawn, a stadium-rattling quintet in which the synths, for once, take a back seat to nobody. Never Say Surrender, their debut CD, is already out in Japan and the U.K., with a French release planned for June. Much of the contract haggling is done by Rosenthal between dates with Joel on the road; whatever hotel they're in is his office. As if that's not enough, he has written for music magazines in the U.S., Japan, Germany, and Australia, completed a video titled Macintosh, MIDI, & Music: The Open Door for Apple, and lectured at several colleges and industry seminars. Every now and then, we hear, he eats and sleeps.

We caught up with Rosenthal the day after a Billy Joel show in San Francisco. Though he keeps a pretty low profile with Joel's band, he's not one to pull punches in conversation. At age 32, he's seasoned enough to know his business, but not too jaded to rock like a true believer.

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You're out here on tour with Billy Joel, with many months still to go. Yet you're also pushing your own band. How do you put these two time-consuming projects together?

Well, when opportunity knocked, it made sense to go out with Billy. I did put a lot of thought into whether I should do it. I hadn't toured for five years; the last one I did was with Robert Palmer, and one leg of that tour was 56 shows in 56 cities over 56 days. After that I swore I'd never do it again (laughs). But here I am, and this is a great tour. Red Dawn is what I really want to be doing, though, and I'm certainly not putting my band on hold. The only thing I can't do when I'm on this tour is go out and do shows with my band. We do have a finished product, our CD. So what I have to do now is networking, business, and that kind of stuff, which I can do anywhere there's a phone. It slows my momentum a bit, but in the big picture it's gonna work to my advantage because the people I've been meeting and hanging with on this tour will help me get to where I want to go. It also puts me in a financial position where I'll be able to dedicate myself to my band. Regardless of what I've done in the past, the bottom line is that Red Dawn is a new band. It takes time to develop, and you can't make a living, and I refuse to work a day job. So rather than deliver for Pizza Hut, I did this.

What are the guys in Red Dawn doing while all this is going on?

Everybody has other gigs. The drummer, Chuck Burgi, plays with Blue Oyster Cult. Greg Smith, the bass player, just did Alice Cooper's new album. The guitar player, Tristan Avakian, plays with the Turtles. And the singer, Larry Baud, has a cover band that he makes money with. In this day and age, you can't live the fantasy of having your own band and doing nothing else but that. That's just not reality anymore.

How did you learn what you needed to know about the business side of music?

Mainly by doing. I was very lucky to get into Rainbow when I was real young; I had just gotten out of Berklee when I heard that Ritchie Blackmore was looking for a new keyboard player, so I went down, auditioned cold against 50 other players, and got the gig. Once I was in I had the opportunity to observer Ritchie, learn and listen. I thought that lots of things he was doing were really cool, and a lot of other things could be done better. I kept doing the same thing on everything I did after that. It kept adding up; every step of the way, I learned more and more. I also read a lot of books on the music business. They helped with nuts-and-bolts knowledge, but there's no substitute for street knowledge.

What do you learn on the street that you can't get from those books?

People chops. Business is people. It doesn't matter what business you're in; it's always about how you interact with people. Everybody has their own goals. If you understand what everybody else's goals are, you can further you own. And it snowballs. The more people you meet, the bigger your network is. You meet one guy

over here, and a couple of years later he turns up as president of this company over there.

In your earliest days in the business, were you already making moves with the intention of getting your own act together someday?

Well, I was so young at the time. I knew that being in Rainbow was good for my career, and I was having a great time. But I never really had time after school to sit and think about what I wanted to do; I just started doing it, so a lot of it wasn't that premeditated. That's actually one reason why things have gone well for me. It's important to have a plan, but you can't have an inflexible play. You keep revising it as you go.

How does your approach to the keyboard sound differ between working with your own material in Red Dawn and working as a sideman?

The biggest difference is where it starts. With Red Dawn, the idea starts in my head. I know what I want; it's just a matter of how to achieve it. When I'm a hired sideman, 90 percent of my job is to duplicate, so it starts with the finished product on a CD. I've trained my ears pretty well to be able to hear analog vs. digital, what types of waveforms are being used, whether it's a synth patch or a sample; I usually recognize the sound of the keyboard, because every one has a very identifiable sound. I'll listen through headphones to identify what qualities would work best, then I go after them. Most of the time, as a starting point, I'll duplicate the record. But in rehearsal, sometimes that doesn't work with the whole band, even though you copped it exactly to the record. I'll have to make some changes - make the sound a little fatter, add a little something here or there.

Can you think of any examples where you had to do that with Billy?

"Goodnight Saigon." My job in his band is to do all the keyboard stuff that is not piano, except on a few songs where I play piano. A lot of his music is orchestrated, with real horns and strings, and the natural tendency is to go after that with samples. But that ends up sounding a little thin in a live situation, so you need to beef it up with synth strings or synth brass underneath, because you don't have the luxury of using compression, different reverbs, and all that you can use in the studio to give it the attack it needs to cut through on the record.

What did you have to do to prepare for the Billy Joel gig?

I listened to all the songs I had to learn and tried to figure out what types of sounds he likes: What are the common denominators? What things does he consistently use through the years on his records? If you listen to all his records with that in mind, you find common threads, even though he changes his style a lot. With that approach, I was able to zero in on what types of synths I should use, even though I hadn't met him at the time.

You got hired without even meeting him?

Yeah. It was pretty weird. I auditioned for his tour director, Max Loubiere. Billy hates auditions, so he basically said to Max, "Get me a guy." There was a lot of politics involved in getting the audition. They only auditioned two people, so getting in the door was more that half the battle.

Who was the other player?

I shouldn't mention his name, because it wouldn't be fair to him. But he was good. I guess I just fit the bill a little better. A lot of times in these situations, it's not who's better or who's worse. It's who can do the hang, whose personality fits in better. Anyway, the gave me four songs to learn, all of which are still in the set: "Pressure," "I Go to Extremes," "We Didn't Start the Fire," and "Storm Front." I copped them exactly to the record, all the parts and voicings.

There was no written music?

No, it was by ear.

And you had to learn it on your own gear?

I didn't have to, but I did, because I knew that would give me an advantage. By copping all the sounds, and doing all the layering, and getting all the effect correct, exactly the way I do for the show now, I would be going in with a tremendous edge over someone who might just use an M1 and play the changes.

What do you have onstage with Billy?

I have three controllers: the [Kurzweil] K2000, the [Roland] JD-800, and the [Yamaha] KX76. Underneath the K2000 I also have a [Korg] CX-3, which is going through a Leslie 147; I used it a lot on the Red Dawn record too. But most of my sounds come from this double 35-space rack I've got underneath the stage.

You're also running Opcode Studio Vision in the show.

Yeah, on one song, "River of Dreams," which has a choir that I sampled from the record in digital multitrack. That's why I have 32 Meg of RAM in my sampler: There's actually 49 stereo samples for that song. The choir answers everything that Billy sings through the verses. It repeats a little bit in the chorus, but otherwise there are four different verses that have to answer to his vocal. The choir was so characteristic to that song that we really wanted to have it in the performance.

Were there any problems with running Vision live?

I've been using it for a long time, through a lot of evolutions of the software, so I'm very at home with it. But I was nervous about using it live. I still pray every night that it's gonna come up okay. In fact, before the show starts, I do a series of things to reset the [Opcode] Studio 5's and get the Mac ready, starting from restarting the Mac so that everything is exactly the same every night. If any different move is made, anything whatsoever, no matter how little, I'll go back, restart the computer, and reset everything, just so I know that when I go onstage it's in the same state in which it starts each night.

How would you describe your sound with Red Dawn?

Red Dawn is a rock band, with big guitars and big drums. I leaned toward analog stuff on the record, to go for a big keyboard sound as well. A lot of keyboard players in rock bands have been criticized, and perhaps rightly so, for having little thin sounds. After all, it's tough to compete with all these big sounds. But, again, it's a question of selecting the right frequencies and fitting into the right spaces, both in terms of what parts you play and how you create sounds that will work with those parts.

What instruments did you rely on most?

I used a lot of Roland MKS-70. I used the JD-800. Of course, that's not true analog, but it's certainly more of an analog sound than not, although it also has a nice digital sheen. I also used my Memorymoog, my Oberheim OB-Xa, and my Moog Taurus pedals.

Samples don't seem to play a big role in your group.

I did use some samples. I'm a big fan of mixing analog and sampled strings. Same with brass. But if I want a really lush bed, I'll mostly synth strings with a little bit of sample in there for some extra bow. There are a couple of samples I use in Billy's show that I took myself. The bass player also plays accordion; I brought in

my Kurzweil K2000, set up the mike, then figured out what I needed to play for the accordion part in the show and what would be the best parts to multi-sample. I took for or five samples, spread over about three octaves.

There's no apparent sequencing on your album or, except for "River of Dreams," on the Billy Joel tour.

Well, I love sequencing, but I try to use sequencers in different ways. On my record, I always had Studio Vision running in tandem with the multitrack. Every part that I played is in Vision. I left everything in real time: If something didn't sound right, I played it again or did multiple takes. That enabled me to log my performances. A couple of times I would come up with sounds that worked great at the moment, but later, when we got to the mix, if one or two sounds weren't working the way I wanted, or if it wasn't quite thick enough, or if it wasn't sitting in the right spot, I would lock up Vision and add one new sound to my original performance. That gave me a lot of flexibility. I actually did multiple takes of a couple of solos into Vision. If I played an amazing solo but hit one note that was a little weird, I could either get rid of that note or change it. I like doing stuff like that; it's using sequencers for musical applications.

You're primarily a player, yet you don't have a problem with putting together a solo that wasn't actually played?

I don't think people care about that. They only care about what they hear. Look, I don't try to be a hero. Could I redo a solo until it was perfect the whole what through? Of course. But if I've got eight bars of magic, why throw it away and start from scratch? I firmly believe that technology should be an extension for musicality, not a replacement. If you have the chops and the training, you can do a lot of things with technology that you couldn't do otherwise.

Keeping your technique sharp must be one of your top concerns on the road.

You can't! That's one of the toughest things about being a professional musician. My chops are not where I want them to be. They're strong enough for any job that I need to do, but for me to get them where I want them to be, I'd need to go back to practicing six hours a day for a few months. Then I'll have my chops where I want 'em, but I'll also have no life [laughs].

Do you carry a practice keyboard?

I'd like to, but it's a pain to keep bringing it around. Instead, I go to the hall early and play the piano for a while before each gig. When you're on a tour, you kind of lose your chops for playing anything else but the show. You can play the hell out of the set, but when you sit down and try something else, it's not happening. You're so programmed into doing the same stuff over and over again that you do it without even thinking.

You came up in the era of Wakeman and Emerson, a time when keyboard players as well as guitarists had their heroes. What do you think about the state of rock keyboard today? Are there still heroes around, or has it become more of a faceless enterprise?

There are heroes around, but they're not getting much exposure. That's the fault of the record companies. They're very focused on guitars. As a matter of fact, there's even a wave of anti-keyboard music going on: "Keyboards in it? It's not cool!" Now, I like a lot of that music. I listen to a lot of bands that have no keyboards. But what disturbs me is that record companies have blinders on nowadays. When I grew up, there were lots of different kinds of music. If you didn't like this, you could listen to that. Lots of different types of music were given a chance. You don't get that opportunity anymore.

Well, Jordan Rudess, for example, seems to be making a strong impression, at least with our readers.

But look at his deal. He has a very small label. I don't mean to put Jordan down: He's a very good friend of mine, and his record is really great. But how many people are really going to hear it? Could he get a deal with MCA or Geffen?

There's also the question of musical conventions. Most of what you play as a sideman is accompanimental. It's integrated into the arrangement. Guitar players are more up front. It's easier for audiences to latch onto the guitarist, ore even the drummer, whereas the keyboard players tend to be more in the background.

But again, it doesn't have to be presented that way. In my band, the keyboards onstage will have a role that's equal to every other instrument. Everybody has their moments of being featured, and everybody has their moments of being support. That's how I like a band to operate, because I think keyboards are really cool. I wish more people were taking advantage of what they can do instead of using them to substitute for musical ability.