

**David Rosenthal:
Keyboardist Extraordinaire and Best Hired Gun**

by [Carl J. Woodin](#)

On a beautiful spring day in late April, I had the pleasure to spend some time with David Rosenthal, **Billy Joel's** keyboard player on the *River of Dreams* World Tour. David is very intelligent, funny, and is an accomplished musician. In his 13 years of professional music-making, David has established a multi-faceted career that has led him to numerous stages and studios around the world.

David was born in Manhattan on January 1, 1961 (he said he was very young when he was born). He lived in Brooklyn until the age of 5, when his family moved to Edison, NJ. At the age of 7, David started taking piano lessons. Unlike most kids, however, David **asked** for the lessons! When it came time to purchase the first piano, David saved money from his allowance and contributed \$2.00 to this purchase.

David quickly became a child prodigy. Almost immediately he was site reading music. By age 12, he was in his first band, *Hot Ice*. Everyone else in the band was 17. During this time, David only wanted to play popular music so he refused to play classical music. It wasn't until he, "got serious" and started playing the classics that he began to become the accomplished, world renowned musician that he is today.

David received his Bachelor's Degree from the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston. He was a triple major in piano performance, electronic music, and audio recording. Almost immediately upon graduating, David heard that **Ritchie Blackmore** was looking for a new keyboard player to join his legendary rock supergroup *Rainbow*. David auditioned cold against 50 other players and was selected. What a thrill for a 20-year-old!

From 1981-1984, David toured the world with *Rainbow*, playing arena and stadium gigs, recording three albums (*Straight Between the Eyes*, *Bent Out of Shape*, and *Finyl Vinyl*), appearing in 5 videos, and 3 long-form videos. Of interest is the long-form video, *Japan Tour '84*. This video features a rock version of **Beethoven's** 9th Symphony which was orchestrated by David.

In 1984, *Rainbow* disbanded when *Deep Purple* reformed. Being the ambitious, hard-worker that he is, David quickly moved forward. He joined **Little Steven** (Miami Steve Van Zant of **Bruce Springsteen's** E Street Band) for *the Voice of America* world tour. He also appeared in Little Steven's *Undefeated* video.

Following this world tour, David put his own band together, *Infinity*. He wrote the music, played keyboards, and produced the demos. This group provided the basis for what would later become David's current band, *Red Dawn*. More on that in a bit.

David continued to write songs. Then, in 1986, he was contacted by **Cyndi Lauper's** management. David suddenly found himself on her *True Colors* world tour. This tour included arena shows, an appearance on *The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson*, two appearances on *Late Night with David Letterman*, and the 1987 MTV Awards. While playing with Cyndi's band, David appeared in 3 videos (*Change of Heart*, *What's Going On*, and *Boy Blue*) and 2 long-form concert videos (one was originally an HBO feature presentation).

In 1988, David joined forces with **Robert Palmer** for his *Heavy Nova* world tour. This marathon tour actually claims a world record - 56 shows in 56 cities over 56 days! The total duration of the tour consisted of 160 shows in 7 months. As a comparison, **Billy Joel's** *River of Dreams* tour consisted of 163 shows in 18 months. Following the *Heavy Nova* tour, David didn't think he could ever tour again. However, in 1991, he returned to Japan with Cyndi Lauper for a short tour (3 weeks) which was filmed as part of the American Music Awards Japanese Concert Series. By the way, Cyndi really does have a heavy Brooklyn accent.

Turning our attention to **Billy Joel**, David says that he always loved Billy's music and his songs. He came to Billy's band via **Tommy Byrnes**, with whom he shares a mutual friend (Paul DiLeo, who played with Billy at a benefit concert at Madison Square Garden). Billy had asked **Mark Rivera** to get him a new keyboard player. Billy hates auditions, so Mark set it all up. David was given 4 songs to learn: *Storm Front*, *Pressure*, *I Go To Extremes*, and *We Didn't Start the Fire*. David, who has perfect pitch, listened to these songs through headphones and was able to learn all the music and duplicate all the sounds. For the audition, he rented a truck and brought his equipment with him. He auditioned for Mark Rivera and **Crystal Taliefero**. He was selected over one other candidate.

Tour rehearsals quickly followed. David had 2 weeks to learn 55 songs. Rehearsals lasted 4 weeks, 2 at Sony's studio and 2 in East Hampton, NY. The actual sessions would last a couple of hours each day, but David was surprised to learn that they hardly ever consisted of Billy's songs. They would sometimes play Led Zeppelin songs for an hour! Although this may sound like fun, David was also spending 18-19 hours per day programming his electronic equipment for the tour. It is amazing how much equipment David uses on tour. On the stage, we only see 4 controllers/keyboards. Hidden beneath the stage, there is a double 35-space rack, which houses David's state-of-the-art, custom MIDI system that he designed. **Musical Instrument Digital Interface** is a standard protocol for the interchange of musical information between musical instruments, synthesizers and computers. Also hiding under the stage, you will find lots of synthesizers, hard drives, a Macintosh computer, and plenty more.

David says a Billy Joel tour has a very easy pace. They only perform 3-4 shows per week, and hardly ever travel on show days. The band consists of a great group of musicians, technicians, and crew that are also a fun group of people. For example, on the last night of the tour, confetti was loaded into the air conditioner that Billy has in front of him. When he turned it on, well, you can guess the results. On their last night in Japan, a group of stagehands came on stage and started playing poker on Billy's piano as he performed *Piano Man*!

The most interesting and horrifying event that occurred, of course, was the earthquake in Kobe, Japan. On the days leading up to the big quake, David and the band had felt tremors. David describes them as being "kind of fun." David would meet **Liberty DeVitto**, Billy's long-time, world-class drummer, in the coffee shop for breakfast each morning. When David mentioned the tremors, Lib would not know what David was talking about. Apparently, he had slept through them. When the big quake occurred at 5:45 A.M., David and the band were asleep. As the quake started, David was practically thrown from his bed. The TV fell off its stand. The 45-year-old building was shaking and he could hear steel twisting. After 10-15 seconds, the quake stopped, but the building continued to sway for another 10 minutes. David went out into the hallway of his 10th story room. **Brian Ruggles**, Billy's excellent sound producer, was in the hall calling for everyone to grab the flashlights in their rooms (placed there in the event of such an emergency) and follow him down the 10 flights of stairs. David noticed all the damage in the stairwell as they walked down. When they reached the lobby, there was glass everywhere. Everyone seemed to be accounted for, except Lib. David called up to Lib's room and said, "Don't tell me you slept through that one!" The hotel's coffee shop was open, and the group went in to watch news coverage of the event. A scary moment for

all. Luckily for the music world, David, Billy, and the rest of the band and crew escaped unscathed.

When David signed-on to do the *River of Dreams* tour, he had no idea he would also be playing large stadium shows with the great **Elton John**. David says that playing a stadium show is the ultimate rush. Imagine performing in front of 60,000-70,000 screaming, clapping fans. David was very impressed with the staging of the Face to Face shows (created by the amazing **Steve Cohen**, Billy's long-time lighting designer) and he loved to sit in the audience watching Elton's set.

David really enjoys playing Billy's music. His personal favorites include *Scenes from an Italian Restaurant*, *Ballad of Billy the Kid*, *Angry Young Man*, *River of Dreams*, *Lullaby*, *Leningrad*, *And So it Goes*, and *The Entertainer*, to name a few. David plans on staying with Billy's band when it goes back into the studio to work on new music and/or start another tour.

When David is not touring, he is a heavily demanded session player. His impressive list of credits include **Whitesnake's** *Slip of the Tongue*, **Steve Vai's** *Passion and Warfare* (a Grammy nominee), **Donna Allen's** *Heaven on Earth*, **Stacy Lattisaw's** *Personal Attention*, **Roger Glover's** *Mask*, and **Will to Power's** *Will to Power* (which included the #1 hit single, "*Baby I Love Your Way/Freebird* medley). In addition, David also lends his talent and expertise to producing other bands at his home studio, writing for music magazines throughout the world, lecturing at colleges and music industry seminars, and even working on a high-tech video for Apple called, *Macintosh, MIDI, and Music: The Open Door*. David also received *Keyboard* magazine's 1994 "Best Hired Gun" award for his talents.

The most important aspect of David's career is his own band, *Red Dawn*. As mentioned previously, this band grew out of *Infinity*. They are a 5-piece powerhouse rock band that showcases David's production abilities while spotlighting his amazing keyboard talents. This exciting group also features former **Rainbow** bandmate and drummer Chuck Bürgi (who has also played with **Hall and Oates**, **Meat Loaf**, and **Blue Oyster Cult**), guitar wizard Tristan Avakian, Greg Smith (from **Alice Cooper's** band) on bass, and singer Larry Baud. Their debut CD, *Never Say Surrender*, has been released so far in the UK (on the NOW & THEN label) and Japan (on the EMI/Toshiba label). The CD has been very well received, enjoying unprecedented international acclaim in the press and brisk sales. To get more information about ordering **Red Dawn's** *Never Say Surrender* CD, contact *Streetlife Serenade* at the address found on the back cover of this magazine. As we go to press, David is writing new material for a follow-up CD.

As David says, "I only hope to have half the success that **Billy Joel** has enjoyed in his career." His multitude of talents and experiences should continue to bring him to the forefront of the music business. We wish him the best of luck, good health, and major success for his band. Thanks for the music, David.