

Music Men

Managing Bobby Vee's career and traveling the world in his band turned out to be more than just a good time for his sons, Jeff and Tommy. It also turned out to be good business.

By Gail Ivers

Prologue

It's the stuff of legends.

International rock stars die unexpectedly while in route to a performance in the Midwest. Local musician with big dreams volunteers to fill in. A star is born and a career is launched.

In a nutshell that's what happened to Fargo native Robert Velline, known today as Bobby Vee.

Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and The Big Bopper were on their way to a concert in Moorhead, MN when their plane crashed in Clear Lake, IA, killing all three. Velline was only 15, but a week earlier he had pulled together a small group of friends to form a band. Calling themselves The Shadows, they volunteered to fill in for the rock and roll legends. Velline was on his way.

Buddy Holly died in 1959. That same year Bobby Vee made his first single. His fourth release, occurring a year later brought him to the popular attention of US buyers. By 1961 he was topping the charts in the US and receiving significant international attention.

In December 1963 he married Karen Bergen of Detroit Lakes, whom he had met at the Detroit Lakes Pavilion in 1960 when he was just starting out. They moved to California and started raising their family while Bobby built his career. But there was something about the Midwest that never left Bobby and Karen's bones.

They went home to Minnesota regularly in the summers to the family cabin. Their children thought of Minnesota as their second home. When their eldest son, Jeff, was 16, Bobby and Karen decided it was time to leave California.

"It probably would have been better for Dad's career if they had stayed in California," said Jeff Vee. "But they wanted us to have those Midwest values."

Stage One

When Jeff was in college, Bobby separated from his management company. "Things hadn't been going that well with the management company. He'd always been really involved in managing his own career," Jeff said, "but when he had a tour of England fall apart abruptly, their agreement came to an official end."

Bobby turned to his sons, Jeff and Tommy, to help put the tour back together. That was in 1992 and the threesome have been a family team ever since.

"We managed to put the tour back together in two years," Tommy said, "which was really quick. We had to interview locations, set up new relationships, make plans – it takes a lot of time." But the two showed that they had what was needed to manage the career of a major star.

"It helped that it was massively successful," Jeff said. The brothers added an Australia tour to Bobby's schedule, a venue he had not been doing. Then came Branson for three years, followed by two years on the road with the Branson show.

Not only were they managing Bobby's career, they were part of the show. Talented musicians in their own right, Jeff and Tommy played in Bobby's band from the 1990s until just this past year when Bobby retired. "Dad could get us on stage," Tommy said, "but if we couldn't handle it we wouldn't have been able to stay."

The exhilaration of performing on stage in large international venues can't be beat, the Vees agree. "It's hard letting go of the music," Tommy said. "There's no way to duplicate that experience."

"We still perform," Jeff said. "Sometimes for fun, like at JoeTown rocks, sometimes for money, sometimes for both. But it's different from what we were doing with Dad."

"I suppose it's like major league baseball versus a local pick-up game," Tommy said. "They're both fun, but they aren't the same thing. It's hard to perform successfully at that level and run this business, too."

Stage Two

Managing their father's career and traveling the world in his band turned out to be more than just a good time. The younger Vees watched their father interact with international companies. They learned how to develop relationships that were reliable and would last. They discovered what made the difference between an exceptional event experience and an adequate one.

In 1996 Jeff and Tommy turned their event participation experience into an event planning business. Today, organizing and planning major musical events across the U.S. accounts for about 50 percent of their work.

"We know how events need to be run, how to make money and save money," Jeff said. "Based on years of relationships, we know what it should cost. People who put on events one time a year are really naive – and I don't mean that in a mean way. They just have no way of knowing what top level performers should cost. We know when we're getting the best deal possible."

A few years ago the organizers of the Royalton, MN *Halfway Jam*, approached them for help. "We got a sense that if it was done right it could grow," Tommy said, "so we agreed to work on it. It's in the seventh season -- different bands, classic rock theme, and people love it."

The two also provide all the entertainment for two casinos: WinnaVegas Casino in Sioux City, IA, and Cher-Ae Heights Casino in Eureka, CA. Talking about the casinos caused the Vees to point out that the music business is not all fun and games. Last spring Sioux City experienced severe flooding. The WinnaVegas Casino was shut down for three months. "We had to cancel \$3 million in contracts," Jeff said.

"All the artists sent their deposits back," Tommy said. "This is where those relationships really matter. We gave the money back to the casino. It hurt, but it didn't kill us. There were people down there who hurt a lot worse because they lost their jobs for three months."

Stage Three

When Bobby told his sons he wanted to cut back, it gave them pause. Not only did this mean a lifestyle change for everyone, it meant a change in their business model.

"Strategically Dad was over half of our income," Jeff said. "We needed to come up with other work. I guess that made us more open to working with the Broadway programs."

By Broadway programs Jeff means specifically *The Midtown Men* and *The Broadway Dolls*, two shows that Rockhouse Productions has been working with extensively. By far, the biggest growth in the company has been associated with *The Midtown Men*.

"Broadway wasn't a circle we were running in," Jeff said.

Tommy laughed. "It's a long way from St. Joe, Minnesota to Manhattan."

The Midtown Men are the four stars from the original cast of Broadway's *Jersey Boys*. The Vees hired the group for an event. "They were struggling with their management," Tommy said. "They were Broadway trying to enter the Rock and Roll world." The Midtown Men asked the Vees if they would be interested in managing the group.

"We thought they were crazy," Jeff said. "But we took a closer look and found we could answer their questions. Then it was just a matter of whether or not we wanted to do it."

"With Dad's retirement we had the time," Tommy said. "And it does take all of Jeff's time. We're booking these guys and handling their PR – you'd never hear of such a thing normally. It's much more common to have two different companies handling those two functions."

But it's worth it right now for the Vees who believe the Midtown Men "are on the edge of what could be a substantial ride," Jeff said. For instance, they are talking with symphony orchestras, many of which are struggling and turning to pop music to bring in new audiences.

The Midtown Men plan to commission musical charts to be written that combine their 60's music with instrumentation for a symphony to create a 90 minute show, Jeff explained. At \$1000 a minute, it's a substantial investment, but one the Midtown Men will recoup by performing the show at multiple venues. The group recently signed on to perform with the Houston, Omaha and Atlanta Symphony Orchestras and is exploring television opportunities.

"That's the kind of thing we're talking about," Jeff said. "There could also be a PBS special and many album projects. These guys have that kind of potential."

More in the development stage are The Broadway Dolls. This group of female Broadway stars developed their show around songs they have actually sung on Broadway...not necessarily on the most popular tunes from their shows. While this makes for a fine theme, it doesn't necessarily make for a great show, according to the Vees.

"Just because they're creditable Broadway singers isn't enough," Jeff said. "People go to Broadway for a play. They go to Vegas for a revue. A revue takes a story...a theme...that speaks to a broader audience."

"The Broadway Dolls have an act that's good enough for New York, but not for the Midwest," Tommy explained. "Their repertoire is their biggest problem – the audience needs to know the music. And their wardrobe needs work – you don't want to be as racy in Nebraska as in New York or LA."

But they haven't given up on The Broadway Dolls. "We have a lot of eggs in very few baskets," Jeff said. "We talk about that a lot and what we should do about it."

Agreeing to work with just any performer or event isn't the answer for the brothers. "We don't want to just be sales guys," Tommy said. "We want to really be part of the show. The musical experience, the magic that got us into this business in the first place is what's important to us."

"If it was just about business we'd have more acts and do less with them," Jeff agreed. "But our focus is to have a few shows and have a bigger hand in their careers."

Stage Four

Rockhouse Productions started in 1989 as a recording studio put on the back of the Vee's family home. "It's a sandbox for our family to play in -- a passionate hobby," Jeff said. "It needs to pay for itself and pay for the building. It's by far the smallest part of the business."

And yet this incidental portion of the company could be the doorway to their next big client, a singer named Emma Kay. "She lives in St. Cloud," Jeff said. "She just walked in the door one day with one of our recording studio flyers in her hand. She has the potential to be the next big thing...and I mean *big*."

“She doesn’t have the pizzazz of the Broadway Dolls,” Tommy said, “but she has soul. She’s soul food. We need that. It helps us do some of the other projects. We do music back-up for her. She writes *great* lyrics.”

But that isn’t enough, according to the Vees. “We’re helping her learn,” Jeff said. “To be successful in this business you have to be active in your own career. We can’t make you into a star – you have to have it already. But we can help make you successful. Emma Kay has all the ingredients. If something hits with her it could really change our direction as a company.”