

As seen in
Berkshire Living



SONGWRITER'S BEST FRIEND

Local boy Bobby Sweet's guitar gently sleeps.

CULTURE

How sweet it is

Sweet Dreams

Singer-songwriter Bobby Sweet makes his way in the land his family has called home for generations

WRITTEN BY AMANDA GORDON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT BARROW



THE SMASHED-IN GUITAR CASE held his father's Ovation Tornado, but Bobby Sweet barely flinched when he saw it under a wheel of a Subaru Baja in the yard at the Dream Away Lodge in Becket, Massachusetts, where he was setting up to play. Seeing panic on the face of the culprit, Daniel Osman, the owner of the Dream Away, Sweet told him to calm down, it was just a guitar, and besides, they had lots of work to do. When Sweet opened the case, the guitar had not a scratch.

"I thought about getting some shellac to preserve the tire marks," he says, glancing at the case recently at home in Washington,

The farthest away from home where he's performed a formal gig in the past ten years is in Saratoga, New York. The record store Tune Street in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, places his music under "Local Artists." He's sold around four thousand copies of his five albums. He just made his music available digitally this summer, which is progress considering he doesn't have a cellphone.

What Sweet does have is fervent fans for his songwriting and American roots style, drawing on folk, country, rock, and jazz, and Latin and African music. Musician Fran Mandeville, of North Adams, Massachusetts, calls it "heart music." Greg Steele, the owner



Striking a Chord: Club Helsinki in Great Barrington, Mass., is just the type of intimate atmosphere that best serves singer-songwriter Bobby Sweet's gifts as a performer and storyteller.

Massachusetts, a few miles east of the Dream Away.

Sometimes it seems a greater force is looking after Sweet and his instruments, including the fiddles he made. And sometimes, it seems Sweet, at a compact 5-foot 8-inches and 150 pounds, contains that force. It's in his velvety voice, gentle brown eyes, thick mane of curly black hair, groomed mustache, and hands that carve beautiful objects and tend homes and gardens. It's in his blood: Sweet, 43, is a sixth-generation Berkshire musician. And it's certainly in his music: melodies and lyrics that breathe with hard-earned experience and hope.

Sweet isn't world famous, but he is a Berkshire treasure. "His sense of art and politics, is, dare I say, very Becket," says Osman.

of Derek Studios in Dalton, Massachusetts, where Sweet makes albums, says, "The songs seep into you." Richard Bennett, a Nashville record producer, adds that his music is "honest, inviting, smart, and organic."

The songs on Sweet's latest album, *Days Roll By*, are reflective yet upbeat, steeped in nature and social action. "Who Cares?" is an instant folk classic: "Peace does not care who makes it/A promise doesn't care who breaks it. . . . It's all up to me and you/Who cares? I do." "Ashes" is already one of his most requested numbers: "Tears must fall to the laughter/That's what makes happy ever after." Sweet invited twenty non-musicians into the studio to record the sing-along, "My Family": "Together we will sink or swim/'Cause it's the same boat that we're in."



Family Matters: The extended family including great aunt Francis (seated with family scrapbook), and Dad (far right). (Opposite) A clipping in the scrapbook shows Bobby's great-grandfather, George "Pop" Sweet, on his fiddle.

Days Roll By was recorded at Derek Studios, with Sweet on acoustic and electric guitar, Pete Adams on pedal steel guitar, Rick Leab on drums, Bruce Mandel on bass, and Doreen Mickle on vocals. They are the BSweet Band and also the country covers band, Dooley Austin, which Sweet formed seventeen years ago. Sweet put out the album on his own label, BSweet Records, as he did his others: *Hope's Café* (1998), *Already Home*

(2001), *Love on the Border* (2003), and *Bobby Sweet Live* (2005).

About two hundred people jammed into the barn at Bucksteep Manor in Washington this summer to celebrate the release of *Days Roll By*. The room glowed with the warmth of a town gathering. "There won't be anything like that, before or after, for a long time," singer-songwriter Sarah Lee Guthrie says. "Bobby creates a great excuse for the

community to get together, and that strengthens the community. He's a local hero." She ought to know: her father is Arlo Guthrie. So why isn't Bobby famous like her dad? "That's the luck of the stars. Bobby has worked just as hard as more well-known people," she says. "What Bobby has is long-term, sturdy. It's what makes a legend out of a man."

Sweet says he's not in it for fame; he just wants to make music. But he would like more people to hear *Days Roll By*. "There are things I love about all the other albums, but this one in particular, it feels like something arrived. I'd like to share that," he says in the lilting speech he shares with his family, even in rhythm and matter of fact in tone (think *Fargo* meets *Ethan Frome*). He feels more ready "if things expand now" than he has in the past. "I'll go where the music calls," he says.

Wherever he goes, his music will have the sound of a Berkshire legacy, a sound captured in his song "Johnson Hill," named after the slope overlooking Becket, the town where he grew up (or tried to grow up, as he likes to say). "My dad lives there, and his dad lived there, and his dad lived there, and they all made music there,"



By OLIVER PILAT
George (Pop) Sweet, the homespun fiddler and square dance caller from Austerlitz, N. Y., may still be in town, or he may have already gone back home. When last seen, he was mumbling about the danger of getting lost or running afoul some city slicker.

IMAGE COURTESY SWEET FAMILY

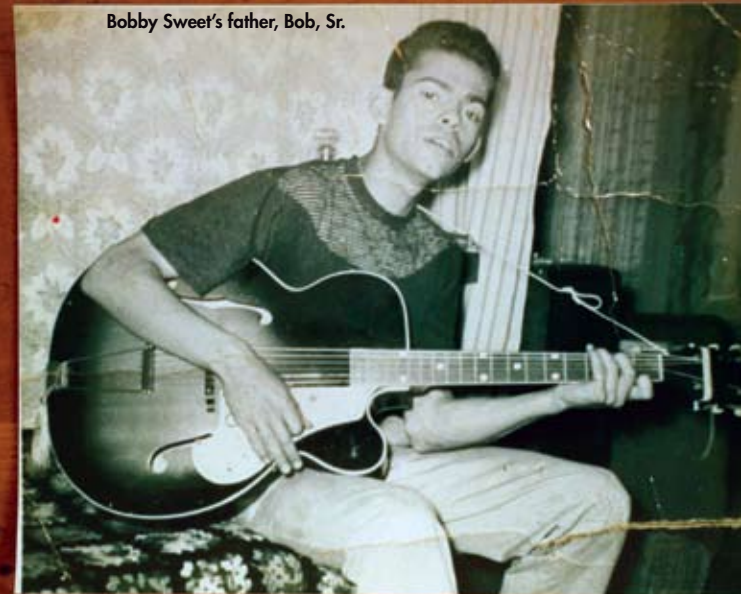


We're Jammin': A family jam session in the living room consists of (l-r) great uncle Bob, Francis and Fred "Pinky" Snow, grandfather Dan, and Pop Sweet.

Sweet says, introducing the song at a recent gig. "I guess you could say this place knows their joys, sorrows, worries, and dreams, just as it knows mine." Then Sweet strums a quiet melody on his guitar and sings: "My

father's father fished that stream/That runs along the track/Always down there chasing rainbow/Dreams just to throw them back/When I find the time to throw out a line/The old man's on my mind."

A good ear and memory (and a love of fishing) are in the Sweet DNA. Sweet's branch came to Becket from Williamstown, Massachusetts, having arrived on the Mayflower. His great-great-great grandfather Hamilton was a Baptist minister, blacksmith, and fiddler. His great-great grandfather Oscar carried his fiddle in the



Bobby Sweet's father, Bob, Sr.

*"Peace does not care who makes it
A promise doesn't care who breaks it.
. . . It's all up to me and you
Who cares? I do."*

"King of Country Fiddlers" 8/1/37 Likes Dr. Koussevitzky, but Suggests Use of Other Hand

Discarding his famous fiddle late this morning to don the robes of criticism, George R. Sweet, self-styled king of country fiddlers, put his stamp of approval on Dr. Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

"A few more years," George said, "and those boys are going to be good. Because I think that the Festival is a great thing, I am willing to offer my services at any time to help Dr. Koussevitzky with his string section."

Would Use Other Hand

King Sweet has but one complaint to make concerning the orchestra.

"It seems to me," he said, "that Serge misses an opportunity. I don't see no reason why he shouldn't use his other hand. Of course, the baton keeps one hand busy, but he oughta be able to

handle at least a piccolo with the other.

"Now that I think of it, there is another thing," he continues. "It seems to me that the Festival people oughta have enough chairs for the orchestra. I saw the other night in the second set there was a 'fella' playing the cornet out behind the tent. Something oughta be done about that.

"None of our players down at the Mayflower dance in Lenox Town Hall next Friday are going to be stuck outside the hall.

"And a word ought to be said for the men at the big bull fiddles who never get a minute to sit down."

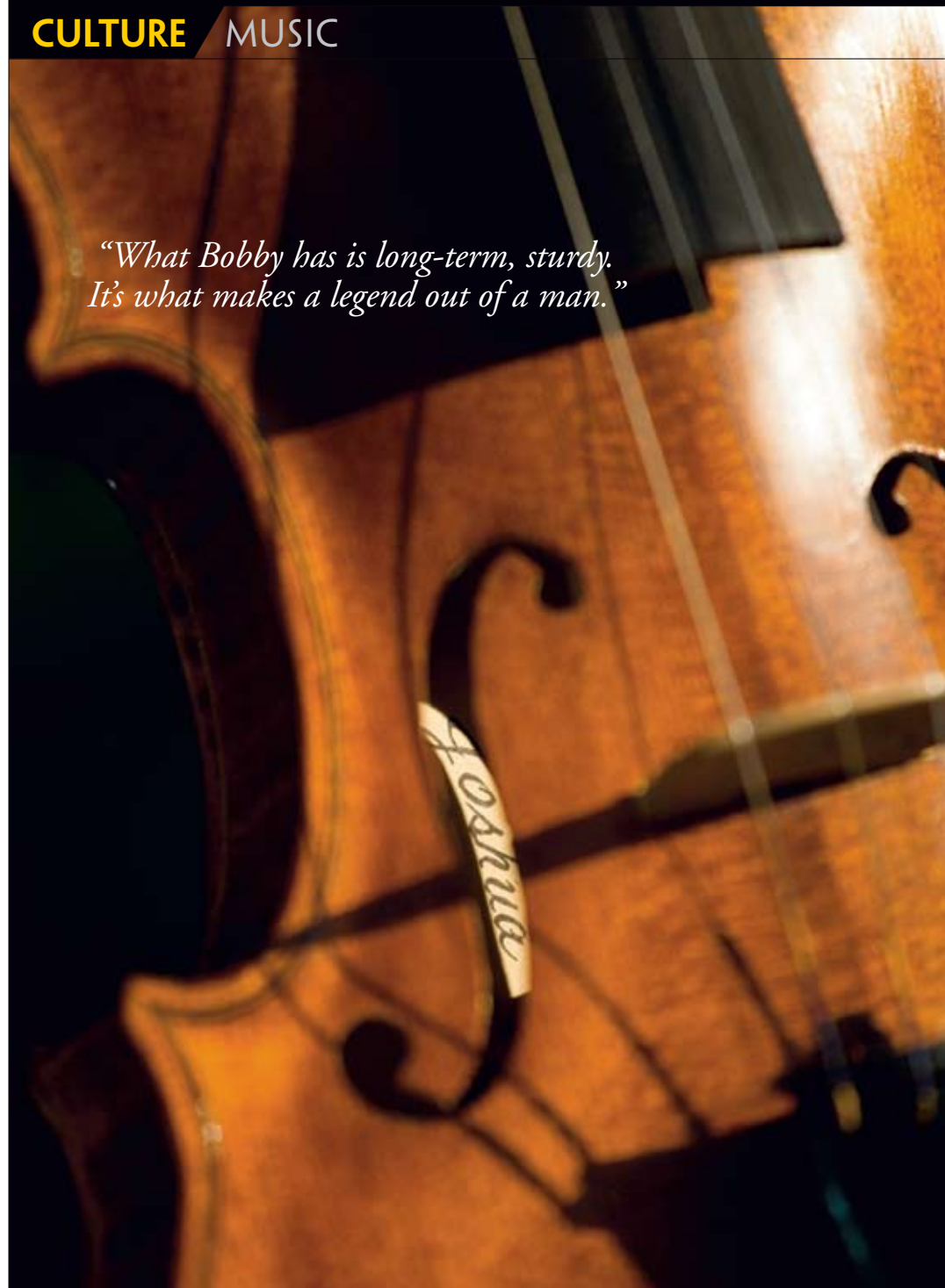
West Stockbridge



In Good Company: The Dooley Austin Band in the early '90s: (l-r) Rick Leab, Jody Lampro, [John Wayne], Doreen Mickle, Pete Adams, [Clint Eastwood], and Bobby Sweet. The band has performed around nine hundred gigs—that's 40,000 songs—together.

IMAGES COURTESY SWEET FAMILY

“What Bobby has is long-term, sturdy. It’s what makes a legend out of a man.”



Street in Becket (his sister Tina still lives there), with his father rehearsing in the living room, his sisters and mother singing, and Merle Haggard, Hank Williams, Conway Twitty, and Johnny Cash playing on the stereo. Sweet was shy except when he was playing music. He stayed home to practice guitar instead of fishing with friends, and he lugged his father’s amplifier on the school bus so he could play honky-tonk songs in the auditorium.

After graduation from Wahconah Regional High School in Dalton, Massachusetts, Sweet worked at the sawmill in Becket, played in bands a few nights a week, and started to make demos to take to Nashville. Then he met Tony Romeo, a songwriter whose first hit was “I Think I Love You” for the Partridge Family. Romeo, who passed away in 1995, became a mentor and introduced him to his contacts in the music business.

From his late teens to his early thirties, Sweet traveled to the country music capital around twenty times. He performed at the Bluebird Café, completed a one-year songwriting contract, and had the thrill of shaking hands on a songwriting/artist deal at the age of thirty-three. “These executives listened to my music, and said, ‘We think you’re what’s going to happen tomorrow. We’d like you to make your home here,’” Sweet recalls. When the deal fell through—the label’s backers pulled out—Sweet was devastated,



Homemade: One of two violins Bobby Sweet has made on his own, this one called “Joshua.”

Union army. Sweet’s grandfather Dan gave him a few fiddle tunes (but not his home remedies, such as keeping his feet warm in a bucket of horse manure). His father, Bob Sr., a master electrician, gave him his first paying job, playing in his band Sweet Country Wine for five dollars a night.

Not in looks but in spirit, Sweet resembles his great-grandfather George “Pop” Sweet, who died the year after he was born. A square-dance caller in the years after the Great Depression, he welcomed the new conductor in town, Sergei Koussevitsky,

the founder of Tanglewood, and taught the Virginia Reel to Ted Shawn, the founder of Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival. Sweet learned about Pop about fifteen years ago, when his great aunt, Francis Snow, now ninety-four, gave him Pop’s scrapbook of newspaper clippings and letters. He studied it and set out to learn more, searching, so far without success, for a book of Pop’s calls.

Sweet’s sister Debbie maintains the Bobby Sweet scrapbook. One of the earliest items is a photo of Bobby at age four with his first guitar. The family lived on Lyman

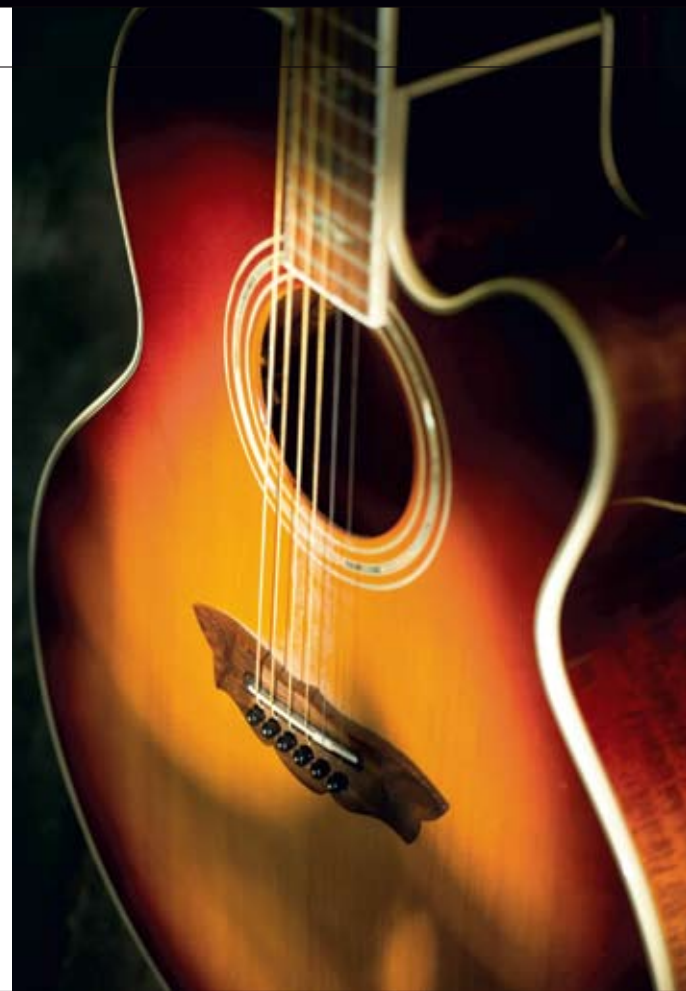


Massachusetts. “He tells heartfelt stories to the people about the people. Sappy, I know.” But he has a sense of humor about his small-town life. “I’m the best-known guitar player between here and Valley Road,” he says at home, about a mile from that road, even though he’s performed with George Jones and Willie Nelson, and shared bills with Vince Gill and Pete Seeger. The campaign of Washington, Massachusetts, selectmen chairman Richard Grillon to distinguish the town for having the highest number of musicians per capita

*“My father’s father fished that stream
That runs along the track
Always down there chasing rainbow
Dreams just to throw them back.”*

amuses him. “So the five hundred and seventy-five people living in the town include James Taylor; Arlo, Abe, and Sarah Lee Guthrie; Johnny Irion; and yours truly. It’s kind of cool,” he says.

Sweet sits down to write every morning, five days a week, as soon as his girlfriend of six years, Wanda Torres, a nurse, is out the door. “I noodle around. I can never tell when a new song is in the guitar,” he says. He writes songs for television and film, works as a recording engineer and producer, and is a sought-after sideman. He also swings a hammer, digs ditches, splits wood, and runs the chain saw. Sweet’s work life is unstructured and varies by season, and it gives him the freedom to write or play music as much as he wants.



but not for long. “I said, ‘You know what? It doesn’t make any sense to wait for some business to decide if it’s good enough to put on CD.’”

With encouragement and financial support from his friends, Sweet made *Hopé’s Café*, and performed his own music for the first time in public at a restaurant in Becket. The positive response led Sweet to start redefining success. In his youth, he had wanted to get out of town fast. Part of him wanted to run away from pain: his parents had split when he was thirteen, and his mother, Constance, died of breast cancer when he was twenty-two. The sad songs he was writing reflected his state of mind. Another part of him wanted to succeed in the big leagues. “The feeling then was, especially my father’s generation, you had to go to Nashville. You couldn’t make headway out in the sticks like this,” he says. His reception in the Berkshires, along with his own maturing and changes in technology and the music business, altered his perspective and the tone of his songs. “That

feeling is gone for me now. It’s very liberating,” he says. “I guess I’ve realized how deep my roots are here and how much that feeds what I do.”

Seeing other parts of the country and the world in his thirties helped him appreciate home. He has traveled to Costa Rica, Colorado, Argentina, and West Africa. On a Habitat for Humanity trip to Nicaragua he served as translator. “The Berkshires is a pretty unique and beautiful place,” he says. He likes the lack of a scene here, with so many artists “tucked away, working off the radar.” He likes not having to scheme to get ahead. And he likes to share what he’s learned on his travels, to counterbalance the gloomy news he reads in the papers. “There’s no crime in the villages in Mali, because if I steal something, I’m really stealing from myself,” Sweet says. “If we invest in each other, we’ll all be okay.”

Some find Sweet old-fashioned. “It’s like he stepped out of a time machine,” says singer-songwriter Kelly Hagan of Lenox,



“So the five hundred and seventy-five people living in the town include James Taylor; Arlo, Abe, and Sarah Lee Guthrie; Johnny Irion; and yours truly. It’s kind of cool.”

Performing gives him satisfaction. It means greeting friends he’s known all his life and seeing his two-and-a-half-year-old niece, Jayda, dancing and clapping, just as he did when he was a boy. It means having his dad in the audience, and his sister Tina selling CDs at the door. And it means bringing people together to help others. Sweet has organized a “Giving Thanks Concert” to benefit Berkshire Community Action Council, a local organization that helps low-income people living in the Berkshires, for the Sunday after Thanksgiving. It’s one way of giving thanks for the community’s support—and for whatever force saved his guitar from being crushed at the Dream Away. **Bl**

Amanda Gordon chooses the Bobby Sweet song “Movin’” from the album Love on the Border to describe herself: “Here I am again in the lost and found/One day I’m up the next I’m down/I’m headed straight then I get turned around/But I keep on movin’.”

THE GOODS

Berkshire Community Action Council, Inc. (BCAC)
1531 East Street, Pittsfield, MA 01201
413.445.4503

Bobby Sweet
Days Roll By
BSweet Music
www.bobbysweet.com

Upcoming performances:
Saturday, November 24, 8:30 p.m.
With trio
Dream Away Lodge
County Road
Becket, Mass.
413.623.8725
www.dreamawaylodge.com

Sunday, November 25, 7 p.m.
With the BSweet Band
Giving Thanks Concert to benefit BCAC
First United Methodist Church
55 Fenn St.
Pittsfield, Mass.