

Buffalo & Western New York's Weekly

FREE

# blue dog

PRESS

vol.5 no.33

aug.16...aug.22, 2001

www.bluedogpress.com

NEWS, VIEWS & ENTERTAINMENT WITH A BITE

canada's best kept secret:

## Seron Sexsmith And The Lost Art of Songwriting

Pg.8



"I can't keep  
it a secret..."

Backtalk  
Bill Banas'  
Post-Millennium  
Tension

pg.6

Shem the Penman  
After the Nap  
is Over Part III

pg.14

Music  
Mark  
Norris digs  
Nuggets

pg.22

# RON SEXSMITH



tered one, is afforded these three albums – the strongest of which, *Whereabouts*, is firmly lodged in this writer's top 10 list of 1990s releases – by the production and arrangement flourishes of one Mitchell Froom, a respected musician himself (check the Latin Playboys' output if you cling to any doubts) and a knob twiddler of Spector-ian dimension. Froom helped Sexsmith craft tapestries from the whole cloth of his songs by placing them in a joyously lush ambiance, a subtly baroque setting. The partnership was a highly successful one, artistically speaking. Still, the record company didn't see the numbers they were looking for. After surviving the industry-wide merger a few years back, Sexsmith and Froom opted to put their working relationship on hold for the time being, while other producers were considered. That he opted, in the long run, to go with songwriter extraordinaire Steve Earle and his partner Ray Kennedy says a lot about Sexsmith. Most folks wouldn't associate Earle's gruff street poet-meets-druggie outlaw stance with Sexsmith's more reserved and introspective melancholia. But the resulting album, *Blue Boy*, proves that the pairing was a fruitful one; Earle toughens Sexsmith up a touch, and places his songs in slightly less familiar context. Here, Sexsmith tells *Blue Dog Press* how his relationship with Earle forged the sound of *Blue Boy*, how the industry had no time for him, and how the song will survive.

"This Song" seems like a pretty good place to

"Brought a song into this world/just a melody with words/  
here before my eyes/How can this song survive?/It came  
but they've all got knives/How can this song survive?"

**P**icture this. You're a songwriter. You spend years honing your craft, developing your own unique slant on a time-honored tradition, mastering your musical knowledge, eating Raman noodles, and watching your friends abandon their youthful idealism to go for the big money jobs, while you stick to your artistic and ethical guns, figuring it's better to be poor and retain some sort of dignity than to be rich and shallow. Your music is more timeless than that of the majority of your peers; simple things like melody, construction, lyrical development, a sense of time, place and character, mean a lot to you. You aren't one to jump someone else's train, not a fan of the bandwagon-esque.

Surprisingly, given the above, you land yourself a contract with a major international record label. You release a handful of immaculately written and recorded songs, some of the most endearingly honest popular music to be offered since the dawn of the silent, violent generation and their attendant fascination with and glorification of the banal. Music crit-

ics – who are, more often than not, failed versions of yourself – drool all over your records, upping the ante of hyperbolic praise already heaped on you by some of the greatest songwriters of our age, Paul McCartney and Elvis Costello among them.

So you've made it. Your ability to cling to your beliefs and harbor your dreams in the midst of a world-wide culture whose main tenant is cynicism coupled with a rabid capitalist ethic, has finally paid off for you. The rest is all gravy. Right?

Not so fast, bucko. See, we've got a small problem here. Sure, Paul McCartney thinks you're great, and so does that freaky guy with the Joey Ramone haircut who writes for *Rolling Stone*. That's real nice, kid, but nice don't pay the bills, if you catch my drift. To put it plainly, son, I don't hear a single here. The kids aren't gonna' buy this stuff, and this business is dictated by what the kids buy. Nobody is buying your record. Well, not nobody, but not enough somebodies, see? We need to recoup our investment here. Nothing personal, kid. You seem like a nice guy. It's just business.

Welcome to the big time. If you're told often enough that no one cares about singer/songwriters anymore, that the kids want something they can associate with a certain style of dress or haircut, that a marketing image is at least as important as genuine talent and respect for the history of your chosen art form, you can't help but wonder; is there any place in this friggin' world for what I do? Have I learned to excel at something that no one cares about any longer?

Ron Sexsmith has avoided any tendency toward such self-pity, though his story is certainly emblematic of the crisis of faith instigated by the big business world of merger madness and the insatiable desire to reduce all artistic expression to the level of "product."

Sexsmith's first three albums are among the best of the previous decade; folk and pop-based, they are anchored by his rich, emotive voice, subtle arrangements, fertile character-study-centered lyrics, tendency toward musical understatement, and simple, direct tunefulness. A further level of complexity, albeit a song-cen-

start. The refrain, "How can this song survive?" is really touching, because it illuminates the fact that songcraft – the art of songwriting – is something that isn't exactly in vogue today...

Yeah, that's certainly true. But it's almost like the story *Horton Hears a Who*, by Dr. Seuss. In that story, he's trying to protect this little dust spec, and all around him, people are making fun of him. And I feel that way sometimes, that I'm trying to hold down the fort. Or I have this idea, I guess, of what I think a good song is. I've experienced this firsthand, you know, so it definitely has that feeling.

It seems we do live in a world, as you say, "where hate is strong and darkness thrives." My question is, how can songcraft survive?

I think it can survive just by people doing it. Tom Waits has been doing it for all these years. And Randy Newman and all those guys. There are people writing music all around! But it obviously is not what has taken center-stage. For a long time, it's been kinda not the most in vogue thing to be doing, but it's still very necessary, you know.

# THE LOST ART OF SONGWRITING

BY JEFF MIERS

*Because it's not in vogue, I think people who look to music for something a bit deeper are seeking out songwriters such as yourself. In that sense, people like you, who are creating meaningful work, stand out in relief against this background of vapidity!*

Yeah! [laughs] I've been able to build a following of people, who I think just really love music. And you know, there's lots of good stuff too, that breaks through now and then. Recently, David Gray is just starting to break through and that's encouraging. I guess I tried to let all that stuff pass by me – you know, stuff that I have no control over. I just try to work on my little songs here, and if people are hearing them, maybe there will be a larger breakthrough at one point.

*You were comfortable with this sort of fast-paced recording style already, but was it even more so on this album because of (producers) Steve Earle and Ray Kennedy?*

It was a very relaxing environment. Very laid back, very simplified, if you know what I mean. They are both really different, of course. Steve, as you can imagine, is just like he appears. He's very opinionated and he's gruff. Ray is very laid back, but they kinda work well together. But

## it trembles unarmed,

Steve will get excited and come running in the room and say "Oh I've got a great idea," and he'll start planning out the drums and going, "Ok, now if you could start like this..." so he's very much a hands-on kind of producer. The whole recording went that way where we would all start playing the song and we'd all be contributing really. I've known him since '88. He just walked in off the street one night when I was playing in Toronto. I didn't know who he was at the time, but he introduced himself and I went to see his show about a week later and I was like "Wow, this guy's really well-known." We kinda stayed in touch and this was the first serious time we spent together. But I'm definitely a fan. He knows how to write a song, so I felt that he wasn't going to let any bad ones get in there – hopefully. [laughs]

*Your relationship with Mitchell Froom seemed almost like a marriage made in heaven, like he was your George Martin almost. Is it something you'd consider revisiting?*

Oh, definitely. I didn't want stop working with Mitchell, but it was just...on one hand, we felt that in a way, we should take a break, we'd done as much as we could. And there's always the pressure from the label as well, because we didn't have the breakthrough album that they were hoping for. So when Interscope said they wanted me to make a fourth record, at that point, we thought we'd be shooting ourselves in the foot if we were to do the same thing, even though there's a lot of people who think all the three records are pretty much the same, but we feel they're all quite radically different. So we tried to do different things, and again, working with Steve, it's a very different sounding record, it's rougher, a dryer sounding record, darker, you know...

*What exactly happened with all the label stuff? Do you mind talking about that? I mean, now this record is being released on SpinART, right?*

It's coming out on about five different labels. So it's been a sort of long haul. But the ironic thing is that it probably wouldn't have come out any sooner if I had been on Interscope!

*I wonder what makes you continue to believe that music can be a positive force in the lives of people who listen to it?*

I just know I need it in my own life, that it's important...it's not as important obviously as what some people are doing, going into these war-torn countries and helping children and stuff like that. I know there are people who probably couldn't live without music, so that keeps me going and I get lots of nice e-mails from people telling me to keep going and that a song means something to them or they used the song at the funeral of their daughter or things like that. All the time. You often don't even know how to respond to them.

People sometimes will say "All the good songs have been written," and so it's my job to say "Oh yeah, well, take this and take that," and keep coming back at them with more songs.

*Opening the free weekly Sunday concerts at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, Ron Sexsmith will be performing on Sunday, September 9th, at 2pm. For more information, contact the Norigen Hotline (416-973-3000) or [info@harbourfront.on.ca](mailto:info@harbourfront.on.ca).*