

U.S.-based Dave and Buster's breaks into Canada with 1.5-acre en BIG KIDS

If you're essentially a big child whose idea of fun is combining beer, pizza and whitewater rafting, then Toronto area's latest attraction will suit you exactly. Dave and Buster's, a U.S.-based restaurant and entertainment chain, opens its first Canadian outlet tomorrow. Covering 1.5 acres, this entertainment palace is aimed mainly at

adults and key attractions include the Million Dollar Midway, which features more than 200 games, such as virtual whitewater rafting, skiing and basketball. Situated near the intersection of Highway 400

Angel in harmony with an old devil

SEXSMITH WITH EARLE

BY DOUG ARROWSMITH

Angel-faced Ron Sexsmith has always been almost-famous, admired by the likes of Daniel Lanois but ignored by mass audiences. It may take a deal with the devil to make him a star.

Sexsmith, who was born in St. Catharines but lives in Toronto, is in Nashville taking lessons from life-scarred master Steve Earle, who became the all-American working class hero with his 1988 hard-edged hit, *Copperhead Road*.

"I first ran into Sexsmith on the way to a gig in Toronto back in 1988," says Earle. "He was playing at the El Mocambo and I remember being just blown away by his songs and his voice."

They exchanged phone numbers and tried to stay in touch. "But then the wheels came off my life and I got outta touch with everybody for a while," he explains.

Earle's excess is legend and has sometimes overshadowed his massive accomplishments. He has 12 major albums to his credit and huge critical acclaim, but he is often associated more with his past substance abuse and his six marriages to five women. (He married one of them twice.)

"It wasn't until I got outta jail that I next ran into Ron at some extravaganza that was happening here in Nashville ... where he was [hanging out] with Elvis Costello."

Earle now speaks about Sexsmith as though he is the more experienced artist: "There isn't a song on this next album that I

haven't wished I'd written myself. I just think he's one of the best songwriters that we have, every word he writes is great."

When word got out that Sexsmith was looking for a producer, Earle really got excited. They moved recording to Nashville, which represents an entirely different vibe to New York City, where Sexsmith made his previous records with producer Mitchell Froom, who also worked with Crowded House and is currently producer to Suzanne Vega, his wife.

Sexsmith has made three major albums, a self-titled effort from 1995, *Other Songs* (1997) and *Whereabouts* (1999).

"I was more apprehensive about coming to Nashville to make this record than the last few because I really didn't know how it was going to go with Steve Earle and if we were going to be butting heads," he says. "But it's been really great. When I came down here I thought I was working on a rootsy kind of record with a country tinge, but it's actually turning into more of a pop album."

He agrees that elements of his work are more reminiscent of fellow-Canadian Joni Mitchell than the tough-sounding Earle.

"Especially when you listen to her early music," Sexsmith says. "You get this sense of a big sky kind of thing, the Prairies."

With earlier songs such as *Galbraith Street*, *Wastin' Time* and *Lebanon*, *Tennessee*, Sexsmith proved he could contain this kind of rural melancholy in melodic vignettes. These days, Sexsmith prefers to be known as a pop songwriter but realizes he doubles well



GLEN ROSE / NATIONAL POST

Steve Earle, left, is producing the latest record of Ron Sexsmith, right, in Nashville. The album could be out by February.

as an acoustic folk act. Clearly, he is open to turning an artistic corner of sorts, and letting loose in the studio with Earle may help him decide whether he is mostly folk or mostly pop.

Obviously, something has clicked. In the first six days of recording, they laid down 17 tracks. Sexsmith recognizes the speed of production is partly due to the fact Earle has been around the block more than a few times.

"He just knows how to put a record together and a song together and that's really the job of the producer, to be the outside ears."

In fact, the heavier calibre scene that Earle brings to the recording process has already had an effect.

"I've just tried to come down here with an open mind. There's one song (*Never Been Done*) that I wrote in a mid-tempo, sort of country vein that he thought had a kind of ska potential. It was amazing to see that the song could go in that direction ... sort of like Paul Simon doing ska."

Sexsmith's material has always had this massive potential. With

the release of his debut album in 1995, he became an instant favourite of Sarah McLachlan, Lanois and Costello. He has also reached Randy Newman, probably one of the most important figures in U.S. popular music in the past 50 years.

Sexsmith recounts, in his characteristic kid-like manner, how he recently ran into Newman in Nashville.

"Newman's the master. He was saying nice things to me, that he liked my melodies, so my head was growing to twice its normal size."

But Sexsmith, fresh from a European tour that ended last month, is not about to lose perspective.

"I'm much less interested in that parallel universe of magazine covers and pop radio, even though, these paths may cross with mine ... it's not what drives me. It's still the listener I care about the most."

■ Ron Sexsmith appears tomorrow as part of the *War Child Concert*, 8:30 p.m. at the Opera House, 735 Queen St. East. Call (416) 466-0313.

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