

Sentimental bloke

Ron Sexsmith is never afraid to be optimistic about how low life can leave you, writes **Bernard Zuel**.

Like a cherubic rhinestone cowboy, Ron Sexsmith has spent much of this year on the road in the US, touring with the darlings of Britain's sensitive rock scene, Coldplay. (Chris Martin, Coldplay's lead singer, is a Sexsmith fan and appears on the Canadian muso's most recent album, *Cobblestone Runway*.)

Phoenix, Arizona was among the ports of call on the tour. Cue knocking on a dressing-room door.

"It was kind of like a *Simpsons* episode in a way," says Sexsmith. "You know how they have those cameo appearances? I was just in my dressing room and there was a knock at the door and when I opened it Glen Campbell was standing there. It was so surreal. My mum was such a big fan and I used to watch him do television shows as a kid. He looked great; he looked better than we did."

"He had come to see me because his son was a big fan and he'd come back to ask if it was alright to bring his son back to meet me. That was so odd. That was our star-studded moment."

Though Sexsmith is one of the finest songwriters around, he remains a fan, someone who gets a thrill out of meeting his own heroes.

"Oh yeah, I still get pretty excited," he says. "On tour, for example, Gwyneth Paltrow [now being squired by Coldplay's Martin] is around a fair bit and it was really exciting meeting her."

"In this business you never know who's going to come through the door. I've been really lucky that a lot of these people who have been my heroes somehow have found out about me and said nice things

about me and that's been very encouraging."

Songwriting is a pretty solitary existence at its core. People forget that you do need that kind of affirmation from your heroes and your peers.

"I've always found the notion of the solitary songwriter romantic," says Sexsmith. "There are a lot of great song-writing teams, but the ones who wrote alone and did such great work blow my mind. For me, it's a tradition I really respect and want to uphold."

Romantic it may be, but the solitary life doesn't always work for those around a songwriter. Families, lovers and friends can find themselves slipping out of the picture, sometimes without any intention on the part of the writer.

It's something Sexsmith knows too well. When we last spoke two years ago he had recently broken up with his wife of 15 years, their two teenage kids finding themselves shuffling between parents at weekends and looking to join their father on tour during school holidays. A chastened, even demoralised, Sexsmith told me he thought he was the wrong kind of person for anyone to fall in love with. He would inevitably disappoint.

He laughs at that now. "That's what I told my girlfriend," he says. "I'm in love now. I met a girl a while back who's in a band called By Divine Right [guitarist Colleen Hix, laugh]. We're now living together and she comes out on the road with me sometimes."

"We can relate together, while before it was like my wife and I were in totally different worlds."

"But when my family fell apart

I'm 39 and I've been around enough to see that there's always constant change.

- Ron Sexsmith

I really did think this is the wrong business to expect a relationship. And I'm fine on my own. I'm not a very needy person. So I was quite surprised to find myself in this situation again. Hopefully, I won't mess this one up again."

The songs on *Cobblestone Runway* were written between the marriage and the new relationship but they are suffused with more optimism than gloom. In *Former Glory*, the opening track, he sings "and though love's become a dying ember/it will burn brighter than you

ever dreamed ... your light will return", and later he declares "though our troubles seem like mountains, there's gold in them hills". It's as if Sexsmith were trying to convince himself things were going to get better.

"It was, looking back on it, a little odd to find myself in that situation after being in that family for 15 years," he says. "Plus, I was living with my accountant. I had all my stuff crammed into one room and I felt like I had moved back in with my folks. Then I got dropped by my

label, there was so much uncertainty, and it felt like I was starting over ... It's not like I was forcing hope on myself but I did genuinely feel things could only get better."

After his four beautiful albums with their underlying sense of guilt, regret and sadness, some of us may be concerned that a contented Sexsmith will come over all Lyle Lovett. (In a stellar career, the only Lovett album that falls short is *I Love Everybody*, which he made, while, briefly, happily married to Julia Roberts.)

It's reassuring that Sexsmith has never really been afraid to put a bit of optimism in with his observations about how lousy life can be - it's an approach shared with his favourite author, Charles Dickens.

"[Dickens] got criticised for some of his writing because he would get sentimental about life. He was a romantic, and I think I am too, but he never shied away from the reality as well," says Sexsmith. "Some people say I write downer songs, too. And I'm always trying to defend the fact that I try to write hopeful songs."

"It's not sunshine and lollipops, but I'm 39 and I've been around enough to see that there's always constant change. I know there are people good at writing angry stuff but for me I try to keep it simple and with the lyric, if it rings true that's what you want."

This reminds me of Sexsmith's recent revelation that the unlikely figure of Bing Crosby was a big influence on his life and singing style.

"I would see him when I was a kid and he was an old man and I didn't get it - he was an old square," says Sexsmith. "But when I got older and my mind expanded, I started to seek out his music and writers like Hoagy Carmichael, and became such a big fan."

"People forget how important he was. His whole style was very revolutionary - throw out the formality and maudlin operatic singing and be very casual and croon."

Sexsmith isn't far off crooning himself and, although his voice isn't as smooth as Crosby, he sings softly, intimately. More importantly, while there may be flaws in the voice, there are none in the delivery.

"Some of the greatest singers of all time haven't been technically great singers," says Sexsmith.

"Some of these [technically perfect] singers - I don't believe them; it doesn't feel real. But when you hear Bing sing *Pennies From Heaven* or *Stardust* you feel there's a mind at work there, someone who thought about the lyric and understands it."

"And that's important to me. Singing is my whole life. Even when I'm doing my own songs I try to step outside them and deliver the song, have respect for the song and put it first, rather than putting my ego or my voice first."

Ron Sexsmith plays at the Basement June 24 and July 1.

