

A man without a plan

Ron Sexsmith goes from demo session to a new album

By KIERAN GRANT
Toronto Sun

Score one for working without a plan.

Ron Sexsmith thought he'd demo a few new songs when, up to his ears with tour dates for last year's *Blue Boy* album, he went into a London studio with producer Martin Terefe.

Five days later, the acclaimed Toronto singer-songwriter had most of his new album, *Cobblestone Runway*.

"It was amazing to feel so ahead of myself," says Sexsmith, who marks the release of *Cobblestone Runway* with a show at the Phoenix tonight.

"I don't know if Martin had it in his head that he wanted to make a record. I thought we were just going to put a few down so my manager could shop them around."

Sexsmith, 38, is no stranger to a prolific work schedule.

As usual, he wrote much of sixth album *Cobblestone Runway* on the road. But where the Steve Earle-produced *Blue Boy* was a more tough-edged album, the new disc is as brisk and poppy an album as could be expected from the fragile-voiced, emotionally weighty singer.

"I made this record with a group of Swedish musicians, and they tend to have their own take on pop music," he says. "I didn't do anything differently — it's still quite sparse."

Sexsmith says the real changes took place in his absence, when Terefe started "messing around with the grooves, and some electronic elements were brought in to it."

"I was curious, being a fan of his work, to hear what he might do with my stuff. I've always thought of myself in the style of classic pop like The Kinks. I think Martin has always

seen me as more of a soul singer. He heard that in my voice but not in my records. He wanted to capture it."

There were, however, a couple of "shocks" Sexsmith needed time to warm up to. He refers to the number *Dragonfly On Bay Street* as "almost a Eurodisco song."

Gold In Them Hills features a surprise — for Sexsmith, anyway — vocal turn by Coldplay singer Chris

Martin, a late addition to a line of famous Sexsmith-admirers that already included Paul McCartney, Elvis Costello, and Rod Stewart.

Martin started talking Sexsmith up in interviews after seeing him on the Jools Holland Show in England last year. He ultimately contacted him when both artists were touring Australia and invited him to open a show.

"Then the guy who was mixing *Cobblestone Runway*, Michael Brauer, was also mixing the Cold-

play record," Sexsmith says. "While I was away in Austria, Chris came in to play piano and sing back-up. I was shocked when they removed my voice from the second verse and put his in. To be honest, I was kind of upset about it. I'm not a big fan of duets. If I'm listening to a Bob Dylan record, I don't want to hear Bono coming in. It was a kneejerk reaction. We had five different versions. We finally did a complete remix. I think he sings it really well — he's got a better voice than I do. I like Coldplay. They're really aiming for quality all the time."

Sexsmith can't guarantee such a quick turnaround for his next album — though it isn't out of the question.

"I just demoed around 20 new songs a couple of weeks ago," he says.

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— Stan Behal, SUN files

ACCLAIMED TORONTO singer-songwriter Ron Sexsmith.