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Husband feels
underappreciated/ C4

'I feel like Forrest Gump'

St. Catharines native and
Juno Award-winning songwriter
Ron Sexsmith is humble
to the point of being self-deprecating

By TIFFANY MAYER
Standard Staff
TORONTO

effacing. Sometimes, he's downright insecure.

"I'm insecure about my looks," he admits.

And his voice, even though Elton John says he sounds like an angel.

He is "pretty confident" about his songwriting, however.

As he talks, it's easy to forget that this is Ron Sexsmith, Juno Award-winning songwriter. His eyes remain downcast while he reflects on who he is and where he's been. When he's not fidgeting with a bright red plastic drinking cup, he traces a crack in the pavement with his finger, stopping to pick at a cigarette butt stuffed in the broken pavement.

He has an air of vulnerability, like a little boy needing reassurance that everything will be all right but also constant reminders to stand up straight and tie his shoelaces.

His ageless face and mannerisms belie Sexsmith's adult reality as a 42-year-old, divorced, and the father of two, 21-year-old Christopher and 16-year-old Evelyn.

Rod Stewart has covered him. Elvis Costello has said Sexsmith's music will always have a place in his CD player. He's had breakfast with Linda and Paul McCartney. Sarah McLachlan also counts herself as a fan.

Sexsmith has even experienced the commercial feats usually reserved for the household names of the music business. His song, "Maybe this Christmas," was featured on an episode of teen television drama *The OC*.

However, accolades and commercial successes aside, Sexsmith continues to fly under the radar of the average music consumer. He doesn't question it, though. If he's confused about anything, it's why people think he should be anywhere else.

"I don't really understand what it is about me that they think I should be more famous. So much about music is more than just music," he explains. "It's the image you project visually and I've never really had a vision of myself, like Madonna always has a vision of herself at a certain moment. I'm coming from a more musical place."

"For me, just to make a living at it is pretty huge. I can travel almost anywhere in the world and play music for

Ron Sexsmith paces the narrow hallway at DNA Studios, shifting between the blinding sunlight of an early spring day and the dark, windowless control room of the Toronto recording studio.

Every so often, he stops to stick his head into a room with a baby grand piano, asking if they're ready for him yet.

After a few more laps through the corridor, Sexsmith plunks himself on a leather couch in the dimly lit control room. Up since 7 this morning for a spot on Canada AM, the boyish musician is languishing under the studio's ambient light. It's shortly after noon and his eyes are becoming bleary with fatigue. He wipes them with the back of his hand before clumsily pushing his defiant bed head hair out of their way.

Sexsmith is here to film an interview with Toronto music writer Kerry Doole. He'll also be recording tracks from his new album *Time Being* for iTunes and what the industry folk milling about the studio call an EPK — an electronic press kit.

In the meantime, Doole and Sexsmith's publicist, Joanna Dine, try to figure out if *Time Being*, due out in May, is Sexsmith's seventh or ninth release.

Once the tape starts rolling, Sexsmith adds to the confusion when he says he considers it his 10th.

One fact remains irrefutable, though. Ron Sexsmith is the epitome of modesty. The St. Catharines native is humble to the point of being self-deprecating.

"I feel like Forrest Gump sometimes," he tells Doole when asked about rubbing elbows with the likes of Paul McCartney, Elvis Costello and Bruce Springsteen during his 11-year musical career. "I just stumble into these things. I guess if you stick around long enough, you'll meet your heroes."

Sitting on a curb outside the studio an hour later as he waits for Dine to return with the quarter-chicken dinner he ordered from Swiss Chalet, Sexsmith says he isn't always so self-



Ron Sexsmith is nominated for songwriter of the year at the Juno Awards Sunday for *Destination Unknown*, a collaboration with longtime friend and drummer Don Kerr.

PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE STANDARD

people who have all my records."

What he doesn't have to contend with is the fame that often comes with celebrity. Sexsmith isn't immediately recognizable to everyone he encounters. He can walk down the street without furtively dodging rabid fans or the omniscient camera lenses of paparazzi.

And he isn't complaining.

Still, he wouldn't mind the fortune that usually comes with that kind of renown. "You see me walking down the red carpet and then I go back to a rented house. It's like a costume party, really. It's like that for a lot of us," Sexsmith says.

Borrowed digs in downtown Toronto or not, this is an entirely different universe from the one that's an hour down the QEW in St. Catharines, where Sexsmith and his dream of becoming a musician were born.

These days, Sexsmith's pilgrimages back to the Garden City are "pretty uneventful," happening only for holidays and dentist appointments.

The limited time he is here is spent with his parents, Dorothy and Steve Grodesky, or surveying St. Catharines' ever-changing landscape.

When he does that, Sexsmith isn't looking for what's new. He's taking stock of what's missing: Diana Sweets, the Woolworth's where he'd spend lunch-breaks when he stuffed flyers into newspapers in The Standard's mailroom.

It isn't the landmarks forever immortalized in the collective memory of native St. Catharines over the age of 25 that Sexsmith misses most, though.

He longs for the places whose existence most people would probably be

hard-pressed to remember — a field near his childhood home on Galbraith Street now filled in with houses or the home of his best friend as boy, Brett Rogers, that has since been torn down. To Sexsmith, those places remain quintessentially St. Catharines.

"We used to spend a lot of time dreaming away and drinking tea and (Brett's) house isn't there anymore. It's not a big deal, really, but it's weird when you have a place with so many memories attached to it," Sexsmith says. "I'm very sentimental. I think part of being a songwriter is being melancholy and sentimental."

The son of an absentee father, Sexsmith is the middle of three boys. The first nine years of his life were spent in Western Hill's subsidized housing complexes with Dorothy and his brothers Kevin and Don before Dorothy married Steve and the family moved to Merriton.

Dorothy remembers "Ronnie" as a creative storyteller always deep in thought and content to be by himself.

"He was always in like a dream," she says. "Anything in his hand — a face cloth, a towel, a sock — he'd be talking away. Talking away, making plays and he'd just be going."

That creativity fuelled Sexsmith's fondest childhood memory. When he was 11, Sexsmith started a detective agency with a friend. The two determined boys handed out flyers and waited patiently for cases to crack. Then one day, a call came. A woman asked for their help finding a missing watch. They never did find it, but that didn't stop a sleuthing Sexsmith. He'd scour the pages of *The Standard*, looking for robberies and other crimes, then show up at the scene ready to save the day.



Ron Sexsmith shows off his first guitar and amp that his parents bought him for Christmas in 1978.

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