

Soul man with a plan

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Special to Sun Media

Ron Sexsmith has a less than startling confession to make.

"There's nothing very Cuban about what I do," the veteran singer-songwriter deadpans.

Sexsmith's revelation comes as he dissects *Exit Strategy of the Soul*, the ninth album of original material from one of the great treasures of contemporary Canadian music. And it follows discussion of songs like *This Is How I Know* and *Brighter Still*, tracks recorded for *Exit Strategy* in Cuba, complete with Cuban horns and percussion.

"I was," Sexsmith continues, "pleasantly surprised. My producer, Martin Terefe had suggested it; he had just made a record in Havana and had been pretty blown away by the musicians he'd encountered down there. But it's not something I ever would have thought to do."

Teamed with the low-key Canadian master of melancholy melody, the spirited Cuban players add a distinct new flavour to the songs of an old friend. Songs that are, as always with Sexsmith, a veritable lesson in the art of writing the perfect pop song. Not very Cuban, perhaps. But very Ron Sexsmith — with a slight twist.

"That's very important to me," Sexsmith says of taking his songs in new directions. "I know there are some people who say, 'He just makes the same record all the time.' But I believe each one has its own character. I certainly don't want to make the same record all the time. I always want to find a way into a record that will take it some place different. Not radically different, I guess — not like making a reggae record or anything. But each one is distinct."

Sexsmith points to such details as changes in his singing style that become apparent when one revisits — and it is well worth a return visit — the self-titled album that put the unassuming Toronto-based artist on the map internationally over a dozen years ago. Sexsmith still professes affection for that disc — "I don't think

at the time it sounded like anyone else's record in the world," he proudly states — but notes that the songs from that album that continue to be a part of the live show have taken on many new lives since 1995.

As indeed has Sexsmith. *Exit Strategy for the Soul*, for instance, finds the artist transplanted to

Cuba and rediscovering the live-off-the-floor rough edges he so admired in influential works such as The Beatles' *Let it Be*. (The rough edges on *Exit Strategy*, Sexsmith freely admits, come primarily via his enthusiastic piano playing.) Yet, with each life, constants have remained. The soft-spoken vocals. The sublime melodies. And, as the latest album's title implies, an enduring fascination with faith and the human soul.

"I've always written about spiritual things," Sexsmith explains. "I'm a God-conscious person. I was a Sunday School devotee — perfect attendance three years in a

row. Though, it's sort of insane to take all that stuff literally. Most religions don't encourage a lot of forward thinking — it's always about guilt and following blindly.

"I've always believed in the soul. I've always believed when a person dies what has animated the body leaves and goes somewhere else. And I especially believe in the soul when it comes to art. Not in the so-called 'soul' singers out there now that just offer a lot of acrobatics and bend songs out of shape. But soul like great gospel music, or someone like Leonard Cohen."

Or perhaps Feist, with whom Sexsmith wrote one of *Exit Strategy*'s songs. Or, dare we say it, Ron Sexsmith, an artist whose voice continues to change — and who continues to build an unparalleled body of work as it does.

"With every record I feel like I'm making a movie," Sexsmith concludes. "I'm making a complete picture — a record for the guy like me who likes to listen to a whole record."

Rough edges, Cuban infiltration and all.



RON SEXSMITH
Recording in Cuba

Scene setter

Ron Sexsmith with Meaghan Smith

• **Where:** Bronson Centre, 211 Bronson Ave.

• **When:** Tomorrow, 7 p.m., \$32.50 advance