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RON SEXSMITH

Springsteen, Dylan, McCartney, Costello and, er, Bubl  are all fans, but in spite of a 20-year career few have heard of the “songwriter’s songwriter”. Meet the camera-shy Canadian with the upside down career.

WORDS PAUL MOODY PORTRAIT TOM SHEEHAN

ILFORD FP4 PLUS

**“THE FIRST
TIME I HAD SEX
I BECAME
A FATHER.”**

For rock’s songwriting elite it’s Ron Sexsmith’s knack of sifting the magical from the mundane that makes this softly-spoken 47-year-old so special. Bob Dylan has raved about him on his radio show, Elton John has said he has the voice of an angel while Bono, Rod Stewart and Bruce Springsteen are all fans. Chris Martin duetted on Sexsmith’s 2005 song Gold In Them Hills and asked him to support Coldplay on tour. The singer’s performance at this year’s Meltdown comes at the personal behest of Ray Davies, a fan since Sexsmith’s 2002 cover of The Kinks’ This Is Where I Belong. Paul McCartney once strummed a version of Wings’ Listen To What The Man Said with him over the Beatle’s breakfast table.

“I don’t think he had a clue who I was,” grins Sexsmith, ruffling his fingers through a shaggy mop of hair. “Chris Difford [*of Squeeze*] and I paid him an impromptu visit one morning back in the ‘90s. But he was very sweet to me.”

Recently, however, Sexsmith’s status as a “songwriter’s songwriter” has received an unlikely upgrade. On its release in March, his 11th studio album *Long Player Late Bloomer* crept into the charts at Number 48, his first Top 50 placing. This upsurge in interest can partly be attributed to *Love Shines*, a documentary about the singer by Douglas Arrowsmith. During its broadcast on BBC4 in March, Sexsmith’s album fleetingly went to Number 4 in the iTunes chart.

Filmed sporadically over a seven-year period, it tells the story of Sexsmith’s topsy-turvy 20-year career, interspersed with Super 8 flashbacks, candid interviews with family and a procession of talking heads including Elvis Costello, Steve Earle, Feist and Daniel Lanois. Throughout, Sexsmith is a troubled presence, using the unlikely figure of metal uber-producer Bob Rock as both sounding board and confidant in a low-key rehash of the latter’s role in Metallica flick *Some Kind Of Monster*.

“To be honest, I didn’t think anyone would be interested in it,” says Sexsmith now, sitting in the unforgiving light of an east

London Holiday Inn Express. Dressed in jeans and plain blue T-shirt, he looks more like a clued-up tourist than someone who last night played The Barbican in front of a sell-out crowd.

Scrupulously polite, his acute self-consciousness is given an added dimension by his doleful demeanour. Notoriously camera-shy, he admits he watched the film through his fingers.

“The director did a good job but he tells a certain story which is very downbeat. But the morning after it was broadcast in the UK I got a ton of emails, mostly from people who hadn’t bought one of my records for years or thought I’d given up altogether.”

On the surface a bright, breezy pop album, closer inspection reveals *Long Player...* to be agonisingly autobiographical, sung in a voice as smooth and enticing as maple syrup. It traces Sexsmith’s emotional journey from his depressed state following 2008’s *Exit Strategy Of The Soul* to a sense of spiritual rebirth, evident in the euphoric strains of *Love Shines*, leaving the impression it’s creation involved one mighty dark night of the soul.

“When we were touring the last album I started getting really depressed,” he says matter-of-factly. “I’d put on a lot of weight and I was drinking heavily. It was the whole Fat Elvis thing. I don’t think there was a show when I wasn’t drunk. I wasn’t performing properly and I felt like giving people their money back. When I got off that tour I wanted to stop completely.”

Ron Sexsmith wanted to be a rock star for as long as he can remember. While most young boys growing up in St Catharines, Ontario (pop 131,989) bonded with their fathers over ice hockey or on trips to nearby Niagara Falls, Sexsmith did it through his record collection.

“When my parents split up my dad left his records behind and so when I was a kid it was my way of getting to know him a little bit. My brother was into road hockey, but I’d sit at home listening to Little Anthony And The Imperials and Johnny Cash.”

By 11 Ron had a new musical idol, an ostentatious piano player from Pinner. “I joined Elton John’s fan club at 11. My mum had his *Greatest Hits* album and I played it over and over again. Everyone else was into Kiss and Alice Cooper but I related >>>



"ON TOUR, DRINKING'S A SOCIAL THING. SEEMS RUDE NOT TO."

to him because he was an unlikely looking star and he had glasses like me."

A part-time job mowing lawns allowed him to buy all of Elton's albums, and Sexsmith's obsession peaked on 7 August 1976.

"It was my first ever concert: Elton John at the Rich Stadium in Buffalo. There were 70,000 people there and it was life changing. It put the idea into my head that I could be a rock star."

By his late-teens, Sexsmith was a committed Anglophile, so besotted with The Who and The Kinks he would even cite chips and Yorkshire pudding as his favourite foods. On graduating from St Catharines Collegiate, however, his dreams of rock stardom had to give way to a more sober choice: working at the local paper mill or making components for Chevrolets at General Motors.

"Most of my friends went to one or the other, but my brother told me about The Lion Tavern where they needed someone to entertain the locals. That seemed a much better option."

Sexsmith was soon a regular at the tavern, playing crowd-pleasing Neil Young and Creedence Clearwater Revival covers, slipping in personal favourites such as The Kinks' Apeman and The Who's It's Not True whenever possible.

"I was having the time of my life just being allowed in a bar. I was so eager to please, I'd blow my vocal chords out every night. Looking back it was the greatest education to learn all those songs, because up until that point I just wanted to be singer."

Life as a rock'n'roll troubadour had to wait, however: at 21 his girlfriend Jocelyne (later his first wife) fell pregnant.

Forced to knuckle down, Sexsmith worked as a courier to

make ends meet, taking his bewildered young son Christopher with him as he pounded the streets. It's a period he addresses directly on Michael And His Dad on the new album, where he sings, "In this cold and damp apartment in the basement/Where the sun does not come through/And all the bills are overdue."

"Those were tough times," he recalls. "But with hindsight, I can see the positives of being a young dad. It made me grow up real quick. It also gave me something to write about."

When, after three years of snatched studio sessions, 1991's cassette-only debut album Grand Opera Lane failed to set the world alight, it seemed as if his chance had gone forever. A year later, however, he got a call from the album's producer: an A&R man at Geffen wanted to see "this Ron guy" play.

"We quickly arranged a showcase but it didn't go well," he sighs. "They felt the songs were good but that I wasn't a good enough performer. I felt I had the worst luck. Then another year later the same guy, Ronny Vance, called me and said he'd got a new job at Interscope. I was the first person he signed."

Released to general acclaim in 1995, at 31 years old Sexsmith's self-titled full debut catapulted him into a world he had previously only dreamed about.

"It's not an excuse but the very first time I had sex I became a father," he says quietly. "Consequently I'd spent my entire 20s fantasising about everyone. For all those years I was just 'dad'. Then suddenly I was travelling on planes and all these girls wanted to be with me."

During the '90s, by his own admission, Ron Sexsmith "couldn't keep his pants on." "When I got on the road it just created this nightly opportunity to be a rock'n'roll cliché," he says. "I couldn't believe my luck. You could be the funniest looking guy in the world but just because you've got a guitar a girl has already decided she likes you because she's heard your songs. There was a lot of fooling around."



"For me that was like having Buddy Holly do it," he enthuses, "because when I wrote it I was trying to write [Holly's] True Love Ways. That was the first time anyone had covered one of my songs and it seemed to set the ball rolling."

Sexsmith's life and career have since stabilised into a regular pattern. Now happily remarried, he has released a steady stream of well-received albums, notably 2002's Cobblestone Runway and 2004's Retriever, and although they've failed to make any significant commercial in-roads his reputation has grown steadily thanks to the stellar wattage of his celebrity fanclub. Along with the accolades, in the last decade everyone from Rod Stewart and Feist (both Secret Heart) to Michael Bublé (Whatever It Takes) to kd lang (Fallen) have interpreted his songs, earning him, at least in Bublé's case, a long overdue payday.

Nonetheless, as Love Shines suggests, it's hard to shake the feeling that Sexsmith sees such exposure as a double-edged sword, expressing dismay at seeing curious Bublé fans check out his material on YouTube, only to comment, "He's no Brad Pitt".

"People would rather see a beautiful person sing a mediocre song than someone who's awkward," he says gloomily. "It's all about spectacle these days. Sometimes you see a show and it's like Cirque du Soleil up there."

Tellingly, it transpires that his favourite cover of one of his songs is by a complete unknown. "There's a version of Thinly Veiled Disguise by a 14-year-old girl who covered it as part of a school project," he says, brightening visibly. "It's amazing. No affectation, really naked and beautiful."

Sitting in this hotel cafeteria, it would be easy to cast Sexsmith as the long-standing understudy who, after years of waiting in the wings, is having difficulty adapting to his new life centre stage.

The sudden glare of the spotlight generated by Long Player... (comparative) success certainly appears to have dazzled him. He admits to being "terrified" before his solo performance of Believe It When I See It on Later... With Jools Holland and expresses relief that the prestigious Barbican show is safely out of the way.

His diffidence is matched by a refusal to engage with the 21st century on anything but the most formal terms: he doesn't drive, own an iPod or a mobile phone, and still listens to records on the gramophone pictured on the sleeve of his new album.

However, it's clear that beneath the mild exterior beats the heart of a rock'n'roll survivor who may still get his day in the sun. "It feels like the right time for me now, which is kind of weird," he says, almost apologetically, as he's about to leave. "I made the right record and people seem to be responding to it. Plus my wife keeps reminding me it's the year of the rabbit, too, which is my sign."

After years of patronage by rock's elite it appears that, for Ron Sexsmith, the stars really are aligned. **B**

The 'many' faces of Ron Sexsmith, pop Zelig: (facing page) onstage with Elvis Costello and Kendel Carson at the 2010 Gemini Awards; (above top) with his former record label boss Kiefer Sutherland, 2006; (above right) on tour with Coldplay's Chris Martin, 2003; and (above left) flying solo, 1997.

And then there was the drinking. "This band has always been a drinking establishment," he says with a hint of pride. "I guess it's the old cliché that when you've had a drink you feel more charming and witty. When I'm on tour drinking becomes a social thing. It kind of seems rude not to."

But readjusting to home life after the debauchery of the road wasn't easy. "Even though I was fooling around," he sighs, "when I came home I would still do the dad stuff. The last five years with my wife I was real miserable, because I was having so much fun on the road I never wanted to come home. I kept meeting all these women I had more in common with and so I was really conflicted."

With his career plateauing and his marriage in trouble, salvation of sorts came with his burgeoning reputation as a songwriter. One day in 1996 he was listening to the radio when he heard Nick Lowe cover Secret Heart, from his self-titled album.

HOW TO BUY RON SEXSMITH

ESSENTIAL



LONG PLAYER LATE BLOOMER

COOKING VINYL, 2010

A decade of artistic frustration, choc-a-bloc with cracking pop tunes, gallows humour and sublime melodies, all with a widescreen production from über-producer Bob Rock. A modern classic.

KEY TRACK: Believe It When I See It

RECOMMENDED



RON SEXSMITH

INTERSCOPE, 1995

Sexsmith's major label debut saw the then 31-year-old set out his stall as a songwriter of rare gifts, his ability to conjure poetry from everyday life (Speaking With The Angel) matched by haunting arrangements and celestial melodies.

KEY TRACK: Secret Heart

FOR THE CONNOISSEUR



OTHERSONGS

INTERSCOPE, 1997

The late night Ron: stripped-back observations of small-town America (Child Star, Pretty Little Cemetery) swathed in acoustic guitars, dream-like melodies and accordion courtesy of Sheryl Crow. One for the purists.

KEY TRACK: Strawberry Blonde