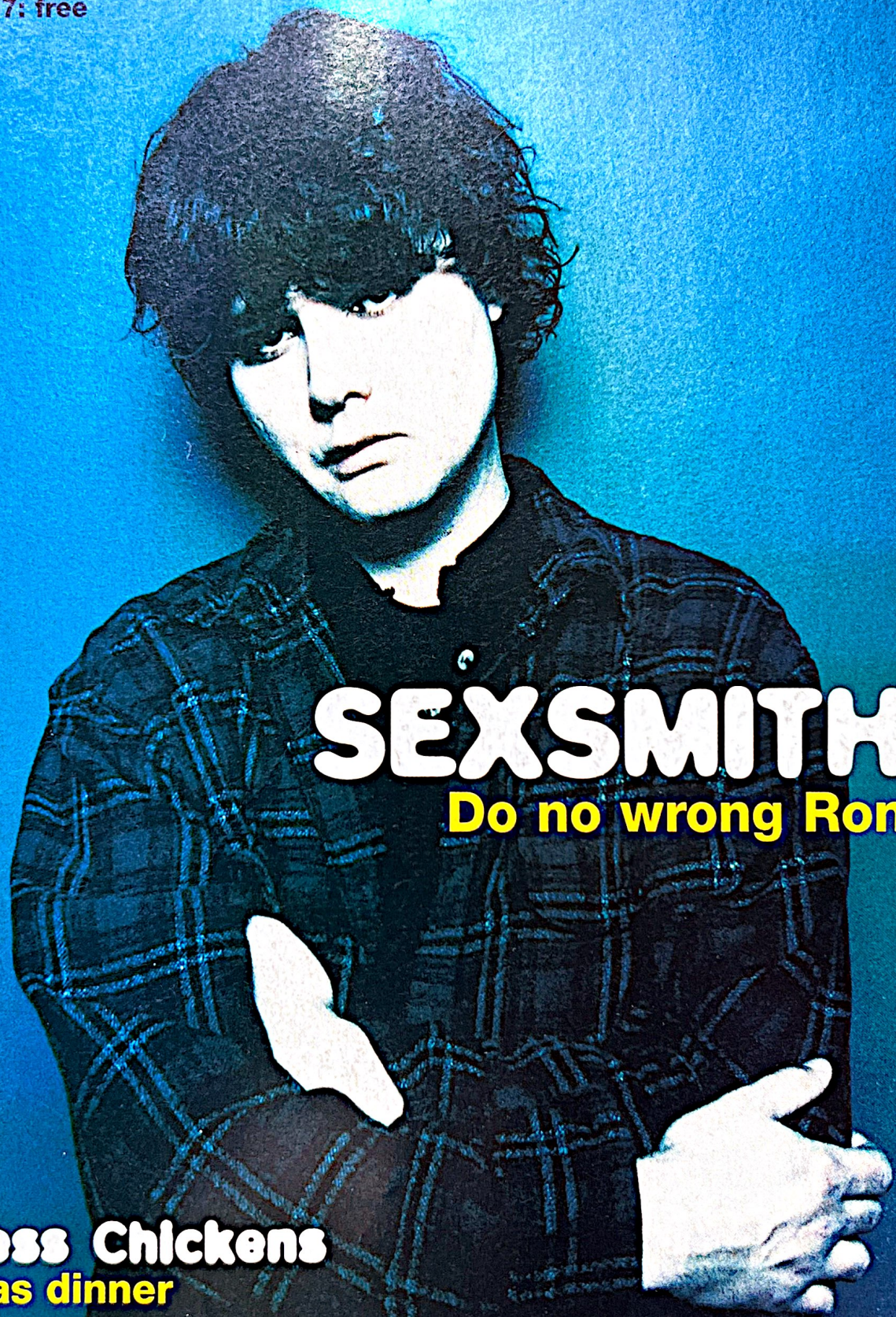


Real Groove

december 1997: free



SEXSMITH

Do no wrong Ron

Headless Chickens
Christmas dinner

Al Hunter & Greg Johnson
Life in B natural

Speaking with the Angels

Ron Sexsmith, songsmith

The last couple of years have been something of a whirlwind for Canadian singer/songwriter Ron Sexsmith. After 15 years performing, the 33-year-old has suddenly found himself signed to a major LA label, his work being championed by the likes of Elvis Costello, John Hiatt and Radiohead. He's had breakfast at Paul McCartney's house, even getting to jam with the ex-Beatle (on Wings songs).



This affable character with the gentle, haunting voice never thought he'd get out of playing bars in Quebec. Now he hasn't seen his children since August, and won't get any time off till December.

Although recognition has come suddenly, Sexsmith spent the 80s wondering if he'd made the right decision when he decided, at the age of 21, to take his music seriously.

"I'd had my first child and I wrote 'Speaking

With the Angel' then, and a lot of songs. It was like this light that went on – I knew what I wanted to do. We had to get to Toronto. So to earn money, I played the bars in St Catherine in Quebec, where I grew up. But I sort of wore out my welcome, I played them so much. When we got to Toronto, it all started from there. But the 80s were a big struggle for me. There didn't seem to be an opening for me in the music scene."

Sexsmith released an independent album, produced by Bobby Wiseman, a Toronto music maverick in Blue Rodeo. "That tape found its way to LA a year after we put it out. Someone at Geffen liked it and got the ball rolling. He really liked 'Speaking With the Angel' and signed me to a publishing deal.

"I then spent the first year demoing songs. At the end of that, the publisher was a control freak. He came up with 10 he liked and started sending them around to labels. He didn't send one to Interscope, thinking they were into Nine Each Nails. We got a few bites, like Polydor liked it. They flew me to New York, and I played to the president in his office. He said, 'So – would you like to sign to Polydor?' I couldn't believe I was hearing those words, after all those years trying to get a record deal. We went out celebrating.

"As a courtesy, my publisher called Jimmy Iovine at Interscope. He thought, we better check him out. So the following day they flew me out to LA. So I'm sitting in this boardroom, waiting for an hour and a half for Jimmy Iovine. But I wasn't nervous, because I had a deal on the table. I just played some songs for him and he offered me a deal. That was exciting – it turned into one of those bidding wars you hear about. That was weird to be in the middle of. Jimmy flew me and my family out to L.A., took us to Disneyland – it was craziness. Ultimately I went with Interscope because it seemed to make more sense."

Interscope linked him with Mitchell Froom, the producer of Crowded House and Richard Thompson known for his love of low-fi technology and authentic sounds. "Making the record with Mitchell was a great experience for me. We thought we made a really good record. Then the nightmare began – no one liked it. My publisher hated it with a passion. Still does. He's my ex-publisher now. It

turned into this mess. We then recorded with Daniel Lanois... it got ugly. Mitchell said, if I make this record with you I want you to be willing to stand up for it.

"It became clear that no one really knows what works. There's so much second guessing in the industry. I kept standing my ground. They sat on the album for about a year."

Two tracks were recorded with Daniel Lanois, one of which, 'There's a Rhythm' was eventually added to the album produced by Mitchell Froom. "I'm okay about it now, but then it was a real insult.

How do the two producers compare?

"Daniel's a lot more intense in the studio, he doesn't really have a plan when he goes in. You start from scratch. It takes a lot of time, and I don't really like being in the studio that long. Mitchell's much more methodical – you pick the songs, arrange them, then try and get a good performance. Know what you're doing, otherwise you just waste time. Lanois, we'd do 12 mixes of a song, and I couldn't tell one from another. But he makes good records.

For the followup, remarkably called *Other Songs*, Sexsmith stayed with Froom and engineer Tchad Blake.

"There's a bit more of pre-production. We sat down and picked the songs. Right away it seemed it would be more of a pop album, we were going to bring clarinets in and things. It was really exciting. Mitchell comes up with ideas, and it's interesting to hear someone else's take on a song. I don't like the word, but it's more organic, more real instruments and things. He's more of an old-school song arranger on this album.

"When we talking about making the album, we were talking about *Village Green* by the Kinks and stuff. Where they'd have a catchy song, but underneath they'd have these little melodic parts going on. That's where Mitchell excels."

Sometimes Froom gets criticised for placing his stamp too overtly on albums he produces.

"Mitchell isn't like this mad scientist, he's very concerned I'm liking what I'm hearing. Notice that everyone he works with again and again. If he was overbearing that wouldn't be the case. If you listen to their records, you can tell that Mitchell and Tchad have worked on it, but still, my record doesn't sound like a Los Lobos record, or Suzanne Vega.

"With Lanois you can definitely hear him. On the Emmylou Harris he's all over the place, and the new Dylan. I love the new Dylan – the last one with Lanois sounded a bit stiff. This one seems more bluesy and soulful.

"Mitchell's very laidback – but he's very opinionated, very Scroogy. Just driving in the car with him, listening to the radio. 'Oh what is this?'" And he loves music. Tchad is very opinionated too,

that's why they work together well. It is Mitchell's job to try things, but maybe when he's getting overbearing, Tchad will say, "You're going to ruin it" under his breath. There's a push and pull thing going on. Tchad's really into sounds. He'll go to the streets of Bombay and record people. On the first album he recorded a bunch of tree frogs. It's fun – if you listen to the old Kinks or Beatles records, things are happening. It's all about character."

In his live shows, Sexsmith firmly declares himself a Canadian, with interpretations of songs by his more well-known compatriots.

"I'm a huge fan of Gordon Lightfoot, he's my favourite. We do the Leonard song ['Heart With No Companion'], but I can do a whole night of Gord. I don't know any Joni actually, her songs are too complicated. We did a big Canadian tour with the Tragically Hip, before every concert they'd be playing all these great Canadian artists. I was really proud of it."

Living under the shadow of the US always

"We thought we made a really good record. Then the nightmare began. No one liked it."

seems to be a problem for Canadian bands.

"It's intimidating. Coming from Canada, we're in the middle between Britain and America. There was a period where Canadian bands tried to sound British, it was silly, they even sang in British accents. And there are these Americanised Canadian bands.

"You'll notice every Canadian artist who has made a dent in the world has been a solo artist. You have to be something you can't get anywhere else. No one sounds like Anne Murray, or Gordon Lightfoot, or Leonard Cohen. Tragically Hip haven't done well outside of Canada, the Americans probably think, well, we've got an REM.

"The only bands who've made it big outside of Canada are Bachman Turner Overdrive and the Guess Who. For a long time, that's how Americans saw Canadians, like Bachman Turner Overdrive, these big husky guys with guitars. They were great, so were the Guess Who.

"I haven't made a big dent, but in a small way.

Like Bruce Cockburn has, in a small way. I'm operating on that level."

You've been lucky that your first album was championed by people such as Elvis Costello.

"That support gave me a leg to stand on when the record company started to give us trouble. Then it boomeranged. John Hiatt said good things. It was amazing, I didn't expect that to happen. When I took the record home, I liked it but the voice was so far up in the mix, I thought it would drive people up the wall.

"The Squeeze have been very supportive. I got to meet McCartney though Chris Difford. Chris invited me to stay at his house. He said, you'll never guess who lives up the road. I took a wild guess: McCartney?

"He said, maybe we'll go up there tomorrow. Next day he gives them a call, on a whim. They happened to be home. Linda picked up the phone. They had heard of me through Elvis. So they invited us over. I couldn't believe how simple it was.

"Paul was at the door as we pulled up. The whole thing was so surreal. We sat round the table while they had breakfast. He kept bringing the conversation towards me, because I was the new guy. And I had a lot of questions for him – mostly about Wings! I asked him about the chords of 'Warm & Beautiful' and he couldn't remember it. I had to sing it for him.

"It was so cool. We got to jam. I got to sing 'Listen to What the Man Said' with him playing. I felt I had a right to be there, because I was such a big fan, not just of the Beatles, but of Wings."

Is it difficult dealing with this critical acclaim after the years of struggle – trying to decide what to do next?

"I'm trying to see the big picture. There are so many examples of people having massive hits, then disappearing. I'm encouraged with the way it's gone since the first album. It feels like it's growing and maybe I'm gonna have a career.

"But I know Alanis is gonna have a hard time. How many has that record sold? 30 million? Is it the biggest album of all time? If the follow-up sells half that, it'll be regarded as a flop – which is completely insane.

"Canada has this way of eating its own. She broke in the States before Canada. Same with Crash Test Dummies. The press have been supportive to me in Canada, but I've still got a long way to go before being well known there.

"I've got a bunch of new songs I'm excited about. I don't know what it's gonna be, but it's not going to be a big departure – Brazilian rhythms, say. Hopefully I'll work with Mitchell, and create something where I'm in my own little world. That it's a natural extension of the last two albums."

Chris Bourke