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ROCKIN' RON SEXSMITH

stops in Fredericton



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RON SEXSMITH HOLDS NOTHING BACK

Singer gets personal in interview before tour. By Melani Taylor

Speaking, Ron Sexsmith has the power to enthrall. There's a rich quality to his voice that relaxes the listener or invigorates them, depending on his intonation. And Sexsmith is more than aware of his abilities, using them to his full advantage.

A Sexsmith lullaby may be the cure insomnia the world over have longed for. And the best part - no nasty side effects.

On tour to promote his latest album *Time Being*, Sexsmith is at ease on the phone. There's sunshine in his voice, but then he's calling from sunny Los Angeles with a few hours before a show.

Enchantingly open, he says being on the road is tough. He has a fear of flying to contend with, but he says despite the challenges there are benefits to being on tour. "It makes your life simpler for a certain amount of time. You know what you're doing. Here I am in LA swimming in the pool. It's weird when you do this for a living you get invited to all these parties. We've been drinking so much, it's insane."

Sexsmith is quick to add, "It's not like we're getting drunk, it's just more out of boredom and you're waiting all the time. It's just a weird way to live your life because you feel like you never have to grow up."

Despite his alarmingly youthful looks, Sexsmith is no boy-cherub. He's definitely an adult, with two grown children and a plethora of musical awards to prove it. A veteran, Sexsmith has been working in the music business for over 20 years.

Now living in Toronto, not far from St. Catharines where he was born and raised, Sexsmith dreamed of becoming a singer when he was a young child.

"I was the proverbial kid singing in the hairbrush looking in the mirror." Though he has always been passionate about the music, Sexsmith began his performance career for less altruistic reasons.

"A big reason for a lot of guys is that they want to attract girls. Most of us are kind of nerds. You got a guitar on stage and you think a girl will notice you. My priorities have shifted since then."

He adds, "I sang an Elton John song in high school and all these girls were sticking notes on my locker. Before that, no one gave me a second look." Needing no further motivation, he began forming bands. "Paper Moon, Midnight Scribes and Hex, which was a really bad name, but we were a hard rock band!"

As much as he played, Sexsmith didn't start writing songs until he was 21.

"My son was just born and I had all these songs coming into my head. It took over me and for the first time in my life, I was writing songs. I knew my purpose." After a lot of work, Sexsmith was signed.

"I didn't get signed until I was 30. Being a musician, it's not the most realistic thing to do when you're a guy from St. Catharines. My parents were concerned, others were sceptical. But



you need both of those kind of people to motivate you." Since then, Sexsmith has been hard at work, even when he looks like he's slacking off.

"My landlord lives next door to me. I think every time he sees me, I'm in my pyjamas drinking coffee and working on the piano. Musicians have tremendous downtime, when you're seemingly at rest, but you're really working."

"These songs don't write themselves," adds Sexsmith. With many songs under his belt, artists from around the world clamour to cover his tunes. *Secret Heart* has been covered by Feist, Nick Lowe, Curtis Stigers, Eddi Reader, Jack Johnson and oddly enough Rod Stewart. "You're right, [Rod Stewart] that was a little weird."

Sexsmith is always flattered when an artist becomes interested in one of his songs.

"*Secret Heart* has been covered a lot. Sometimes I wish that people would look at other songs, but that's starting to happen little by little." As a composer and lyricist, Sexsmith creates songs that can easily be remade.

"I'm always going to want to sing my own songs. But I've always written them in an old fashioned way so that they could be covered or

easily work in other genres." Writing songs is a very personal experience, though Sexsmith tries not to make it too personal.

"Sometimes it's unavoidable. But I've never wanted my songs to be a diary for people to read. I try to be aware that it's a song and that it should be universal." Categorized early on as a melancholic pop artist, a label Sexsmith says is not quite fair.

"It's not really that accurate. I think a couple of albums had that element to them. The third album or thereabouts was written towards the end of a relationship, so it was sad. But in general I try to rock out." When creating a list of successful Canadian pop musicians, most people refer to the radio. They think of musicians like Avril Lavigne. As Sexsmith does a quick rendition of *Sk8ter Boi*, it is much improved. (Avril: Call him.)

"Radio has always been hard for me, and it's been hard for a lot of people. I've never felt that radio is on the side of art or musicians. It's owned by all these corporations with strict playlists. And I think radio detests its audience. It doesn't think that they can take anything new, so

they play the same old stuff," says Sexsmith.

Sexsmith adds that there are radio stations, like CBC who play a wider variety of music.

"I'm always happy if I get something on the radio. I'm always excited about whatever new record I'm working on and I'm always excited that the music is going to reach people." Name recognition is not something Sexsmith strives for.

"I'm very happy with my level of fame or lack of it as I call it. I'm recognized in the strangest places. I'm not at the point where I'm a household name and I don't need to be known like Lemon Pledge." Though he still receives praise from the most unlikely individuals.

"It was the coolest thing. I came back from being on tour from the US in February and the first message on my answering machine was from Elton John telling me my album was his current favourite. It's hard to talk about it without gloating." Sexsmith has always had a special affection for artists like Elton who he considers musical craftsmen.

"As a kid I was in the Elton John Fan Club and the first concert I ever saw was Elton's. So I just thought it was cool that he would take the time to call me." Of course, this isn't Sexsmith's first brush with fame. He's been similarly praised by Coldplay, Bono, Radiohead and he's also met Paul McCartney and sang an impromptu duet with him.

Bewilderingly, Sexsmith still suffers from a complete lack of ego.

"I think like a lot of artists I've got low self-esteem. Like a lot of people, I shouldn't say artists, people have low self-esteem. I'm always on stage worried." Despite long-term assurances from everyone that matters, Sexsmith says self-deprecation is part of the business.

"I was looking at YouTube and there was a shot of me playing live and I decided to read through the comments. One person wrote 'It's too bad he's not better looking.' I thought it was funny but regretted looking at it right away." He adds, "I'm just too curious not too."

His vulnerability and lack of ego create openness on stage that other artists lack. He hasn't allowed his talents or his experiences to separate him from his audience. He is defiantly normal in a way that is pleasantly surprising.

"I'm kind of an open book. I've never really found a question was too personal. I think it's the best way to be." ■

This week, check out Sexsmith up close and personal. On October 14 at 8 p.m., The Playhouse Theatre in Fredericton is proud to present Ron Sexsmith and Jill Barber. Tickets are \$32 in advance and \$37 the day of the show. Visit www.theplayhouse.nb.ca or call 458-8344 to order. Another show will follow in Moncton on October 16 at 8 p.m., at the Capitol Theatre. Advanced tickets are \$30 and \$35 the day of the show. Tickets are available at 856-4379 or by visiting the box office, or online at www.capitol.nb.ca.