

[Menu](#)[Search](#)[Sign In](#)

Day 6 · Q&A

How Ron Sexsmith ended up singing with Leonard Cohen in an Indigo basement

The songwriting legend is celebrating his 60th birthday with a Massey Hall show Thursday

[Oliver Thompson](#) · CBC Radio · Posted: Feb 29, 2024 7:00 AM EST | Last Updated: February 29, 2024



Ron Sexsmith's first album was self-released in 1986. (Kerry Vergeer)



Day 6

Canadian music legend Ron Sexsmith looks back on a remarkable career with a 60th birthday concert at Massey Hall

Canadian songwriting legend Ron Sexsmith has turned 60, and will be celebrating the milestone with a concert at Massey Hall Thursday.

A favourite of legends like Paul McCartney and Elvis Costello, Sexsmith has headlined the iconic venue multiple times.

But Sexsmith still finds playing there a privilege, partly due to his annual trips to go see Gordon Lightfoot at Massey every year.

- [AUDIO Ron Sexsmith's very personal Forever Endeavour](#)

"It just became sort of my favourite thing really to do as a Canadian, to go to Massey Hall and hear Gordon's voice," Sexsmith told [Day 6](#) guest host Manjula Selvarajah. "Back in the old days when I was a courier where I couldn't afford a ticket and I would listen to the show by that stage door ... It was one of those venues that I felt I could get there someday."

In a career spanning setlist, the songwriter will be pulling from his four-decades-old songbook.

In a conversation with Selvarajah, Sexsmith elaborated on his long career, and some of the stranger collaborations he has had with other musicians.

Here is part of that conversation.

What is it about this particular milestone, turning 60, that made you want to have this retrospective type of concert?

A few years back, 60 was looming, and I was kind of dreading it, like a lot of people would. But I didn't want to dread it, I wanted to try to sort of embrace it ... I thought maybe I should do just some kind of playlist, or I thought maybe the label might be interested in doing some kind of retrospective album, but there's not, with my career, there's not a lot of incentive, you know, from people to do stuff like that.

WATCH | Ron Sexsmith reflects on his career at 60



Canadian musician Ron Sexsmith reflects on his career at 60 | Spotlight

► 2 years ago

Canadian singer-songwriter Ron Sexsmith reflects on his career as he returns to Massey Hall in Toronto for his retrospective show Sexsmith at Sixty.

And so I really started thinking, maybe I could do a show and get my band. I haven't played with my band since 2018.

When you talk to, most sort of musical enthusiast music critics, they'll say that Ron Sexsmith is a critical part of the Canadian songbook. What do you say to that?

It's hard to know. I've tried to contribute to the Canadian songbook. I mean, from day one, I was very upfront about where I came from when I traveled abroad. And I definitely feel the love when I travel to the U.K. and Ireland and all these places because when I was starting on the heroes were like Leonard and Joni and Neil and Gord, and that meant something to me to try and walk in their footsteps.

- [Why we seek out sad music, even when it makes us cry](#)

But it's hard to know really where I stand in the whole thing. And, you know, sometimes I don't really know if my contribution has much value, actually. And I mean it. You live in your head so much, you really don't know. You know how it all sort of shakes out in the end. But I've definitely tried to have a body of work. I'm really proud of the music I've made, and I feel my career has been pretty interesting, you know? I mean, I've met most of my heroes. I've had my songs covered by a lot of people. So many things happened that seemed unimaginable when I was a child.

You are a musician's musician. You've collaborated with a ton of musicians: Coldplay, The Kinks, John Prine. Is there someone you've absolutely loved playing with over the years?

One of my heroes was Nick Lowe from England. I mean, we had the Elvis Costello albums, which Nick, you know, he produced some of those and he was the first person I ever heard actually cover one of my songs. But we've done a bunch of tours together, and you know, we generally will sing a song or two during the encore, and we just have a really, I think, a good sound. I always thought we should have made a record or something together, but we speak the same language musically. We have a lot of the same influences.



Operational since 1894, Massey Hall reopened in 2021 after three years of renovations. (Cole Burston/The Canadian Press)

I hear you got to perform with Leonard Cohen. And, if I have this right, in the basement of an Indigo?

He came out with a book, and so the people at Indigo felt would be nice if I came down, you know, there's going to be this sort of celebration, and you know, the Barenaked Ladies were there.

But when I arrived at the bookstore, they took me down to the basement. As I got off the elevator, I could hear people singing and [was] a bunch of other people all singing with Leonard kind of in a circle. But I was shy about it. So I was sort of hanging back against the wall. And Leonard saw me and he walked over and he put his arm in my arm, and he brought me into the circle, which was one of the nicest things. And someone handed me a guitar.

I have the superpower of remembering lyrics ... so I just started playing all these obscure Leonard songs. And Leonard was right beside me. And so when it came time to actually go out on the street, we were playing for about 5,000 people or something. Leonard, you know, he said he didn't want to sing, but I could tell that he wanted to sing. So when we got up there, you could actually see this on YouTube. We start playing *So Long*, *Marianne*, I sing the first verse, and out of the corner of my eye, I see Leonard there. I said to myself, 'Well, nobody wants to hear me singing a song.'

WATCH | Ron Sexsmith sings with Leonard Cohen

So I whispered the first line into Leonard's ear, and he got up and sang and everybody went nuts. And so if you see it at the beginning of every verse, I go whisper in his ear because it had been so long since he'd done that.

Q&A edited for clarity and length. Interview produced by Laurie Allan.



TRENDING VIDEOS

1:50

2:26

1:16

2:41

VIDEO

Meet Matéo, the 6-year-old Quebecer who boards a plane to school every day

CBC News Nova Scotia

VIDEO

Court documents shed new light on case of missing N.S. children

CBC News Nova Scotia

VIDEO

#TheMoment a grizzly bear attacked a travel blogger's tent

The National

VIDEO

'That's a shark!': Scuba divers encounter great white off Nova Scotia

CBC News Nova Scotia

VIDEO

Trump's visit to Nova Scotia

The National

RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

Mother of child killed at Woodstock raceway wants answers

Rachel Cave
News - Canada - New Brunswick

15-minute standing ovation for Dwayne Johnson's The Smashing Machine in Venice

Lindsey Bahr
News - Entertainment

Ottawa tells CRA to fix its call centre problem so more Canadians can reach an agent

Sophia Harris
News - Business |

Kraft Heinz splitting into 2 brands, a decade after megafood merger

Dee-ann Durbin
News - Business

Canadians' chair

Francine
News - Nova Scotia