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Ron Sexsmith's friendship and tour with Nick Lowe still a 'pinch-yourself kind of thing'



By [Eric Volmers](#)

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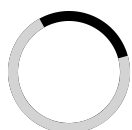
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Ron Sexsmith. Photo by Kerry Vergeer cal

In the mid-1990s, Ron Sexsmith was listening to the BBC in London while on a break during an early international tour.

It was an interview with Nick Lowe, a songwriter Sexsmith had long admired. Near the end of the segment, Lowe began playing a familiar song on his acoustic guitar: Sexsmith's Secret Heart. He was honoured, of course, if a little shocked.



“I almost fell off the bed,” says Sexsmith, in an interview with Postmedia from his home in Stratford, Ont. “And then I was playing a show a year or two later and he came to the show. That’s when I first met him and had a chance to talk. We hit it off right away. I think we have very similar influences so when we did tour in the mid-2000s, we never ran out of anything to say and it was just fun. He’s just a class act.”

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Sexsmith, who will be playing the Bella Concert Hall on June 12 with Nick Lowe, has long benefitted from these mutual admiration relationships. It’s hard to find a story about the acclaimed St. Catharines singer-songwriter that doesn’t offer an extensive list of his notable fans, whether it be Lowe, Elvis Costello or Paul McCartney. With the possible exception of Richard Thompson and Alejandro Escovedo, there is probably no singer-songwriter who has been proclaimed under-appreciated as often as Sexsmith has by the music press. Ever since he released his self-titled major label debut in 1995, his commercial fortunes never seemed to match his acclaim and standing among his peers. It’s something Sexsmith has often quietly acknowledged with trademark Canadian modesty. While on the phone with Postmedia, his wife and tour manager Colleen Hixenbaugh informs him that the Calgary show is sold out (there are, in fact, a few tickets left as of press time). He quickly reports that his solo show in the same venue a year earlier fell well short of selling out.

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“My first album came out in ’95 in North America and it did not do well,” he says. “Radio wasn’t playing it and no one was talking about it. It wasn’t until it got released in the U.K. that all these people I had grown up listening to like Nick and Elvis and Squeeze were all rallying behind me. I don’t really know why that turned out that way. At the time it gave me a leg to stand on, so to speak. Because, well, if these guys like me I can’t be all that bad.”

Even today, Sexsmith says countries such as Ireland, England and Australia “get me, even more than my own country does.” That includes the “old guard.”

“Ray Davies, I’ve sang with him, and Elton John and I email each other from time to time,” he says. “It’s just so surreal because I’m a child of the ’60s and ’70s and that’s the music where my head is at. I never thought I’d get to meet any of these people. Nick Lowe, as well. I remember my brother, Don, bringing home Labour of Lust. He would listen to the records in his room with the door closed so I would have to stand outside the door to listen to all those people. Now I’m on

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tour with him, it's really a pinch-yourself kind of thing."

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For anyone who has followed Sexsmith's career over the past 30 years, it's easy to see why he is considered a songwriter's songwriter. It's no doubt why he has been able to attract renowned producers such as Mitchell Froom, Steve Earle, Martin Terefe and Bob Rock to helm his albums and has had high-profile artists eager to cover his songs. According to the website Second Hand Songs, Secret Heart has been covered by 14 artists. That includes Rod Stewart, Feist, Measha Brueggergosman, Curtis Stigers and even actress Katey Sagal.

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So it's hardly surprising that, while he may have never had a Top 40 hit, Sexsmith has maintained an incredibly high standard over

more than a dozen albums when it comes to crafting songs. That includes 2023's *The Vivian Line*, an album that offered his trademark bounty of memorable tunes. Songs such as the tender opener *Place Called Love*, the wry *Outdated and Antiquated*, the endearing sing-along *What I Had in Mind* and the sophisticated jazz-pop number *One Bird Calling* all sound instantly timeless. Earlier this year, he spoke to the *Toronto Star* to preview his career retrospective at Massey Hall, *Sexsmith at Sixty*, and said Randy Newman once told producer Mitchell Froom that he liked Sexsmith's songs because he "did the work."

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"It's still kind of a mysterious thing," says Sexsmith about his process. "I'm in the middle of a whole new album's worth of songs right now and most of them are pretty close to being finished. It just sort of happens without you noticing it at first. You get these

ideas and melodies and they just start taking shape. The mysterious part is ‘Where do they come from?’ The craft part is being able to take this idea that has been given to me and following it through, trying to complete a thought. I’m kind of a stickler for that. I think that’s what Randy Newman meant... When you listen to a Randy Newman song, there’s no hair out of place. It’s very concise. I’m not anywhere near Randy Newman, but those are the people I look up to.”

While Sexsmith often seems unduly modest about his gifts, he has not been shy recently about taking the music industry to task about a lack of recognition. After touring Calgary’s National Music Centre, he took to [social media to complain](#) that he was not mentioned once in the institution despite his accomplishments. If that was true, it has since been rectified. Sexsmith is now part of the NMC’s Idols and Icons gallery.

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More recently, he complained about being left out of a Massey Hall tribute to one of his songwriting heroes, Gordon Lightfoot. The legend was not only an inspiration for Sexsmith, he was also a fan. In the 2010 documentary about Sexsmith, *Love Shines*, there are scenes of Lightfoot arriving at Massey Hall to watch Sexsmith's concert and congratulating him backstage afterwards.

"I'm just trying to get over that," Sexsmith says. "That was really upsetting to me because I'm such a fan of Gordon's. I went to see him literally every year he played Massey Hall from the time I moved to Toronto until the year he died. I have a deep understanding of his music."

Still, for the most part, Sexsmith says he is happy to allow others to rally on his behalf, including journalists and peers who feel he should be far better known than he is.

"It feels like it's more frustrating for other people than me," he says "I've heard journalists say that. I was already pretty old when I got signed. I was 30, which is old for the music business, so I was just really lucky to get in the door. I've been trying to be grateful ever since that I've been able to do this for a living."

*Nick Lowe and Ron Sexsmith will perform at
the Bella Concert Hall on June 12.*



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