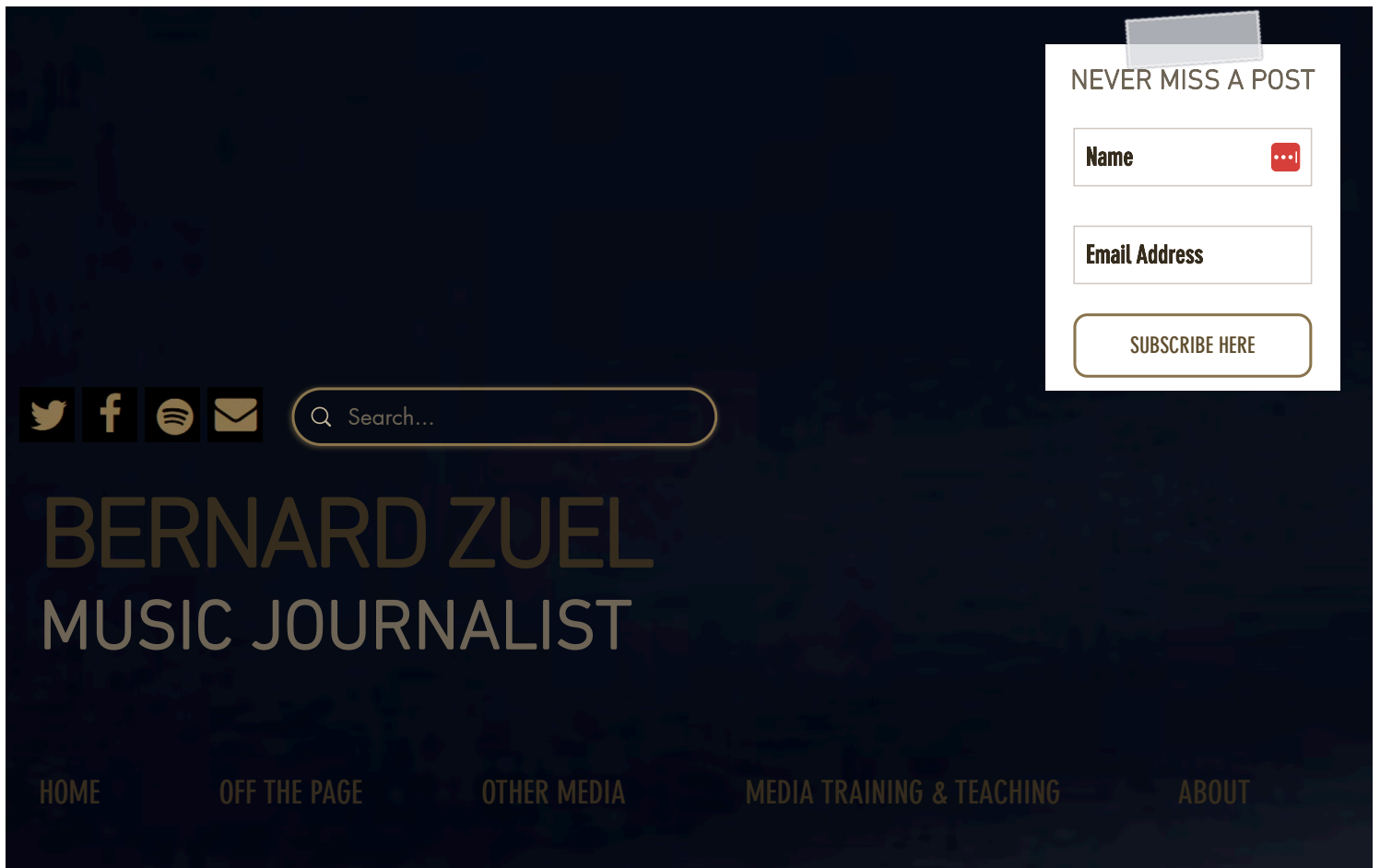




Jan 30

RON SEXSMITH ISN'T HERE TO BE MESSED AROUND, OK? part 2





SOME OF YOU THINK because a person is softly spoken that they are always amiable and quiet, the kind of person who will suffer in silence, maybe resent you but not hit back. At most maybe they'll write a passive-aggressive song one day – ooh, don't hurt me! – so you're safe from any stray Canadian singer/songwriters with gentle voices and cherubic faces.

Hmm. Ron Sexsmith would like a word, and he has his most recent album, *Hangover Terrace*, as exhibit A for the Ron Has Had It With Your Shit trial.

Now it's true that sometimes in Sexsmith's songs, about the past being trashed in particular, there have been strong statements that suggest unhappiness with the way the world is behaving. On *Hangover Terrace*, the song *Camelot Towers* has that barbed reflection, as a new building goes up promising the future but offering "a soulless piece of stone/And you just can't escape it/No trace of beauty". But people mostly escaped or saw the hits diffused.

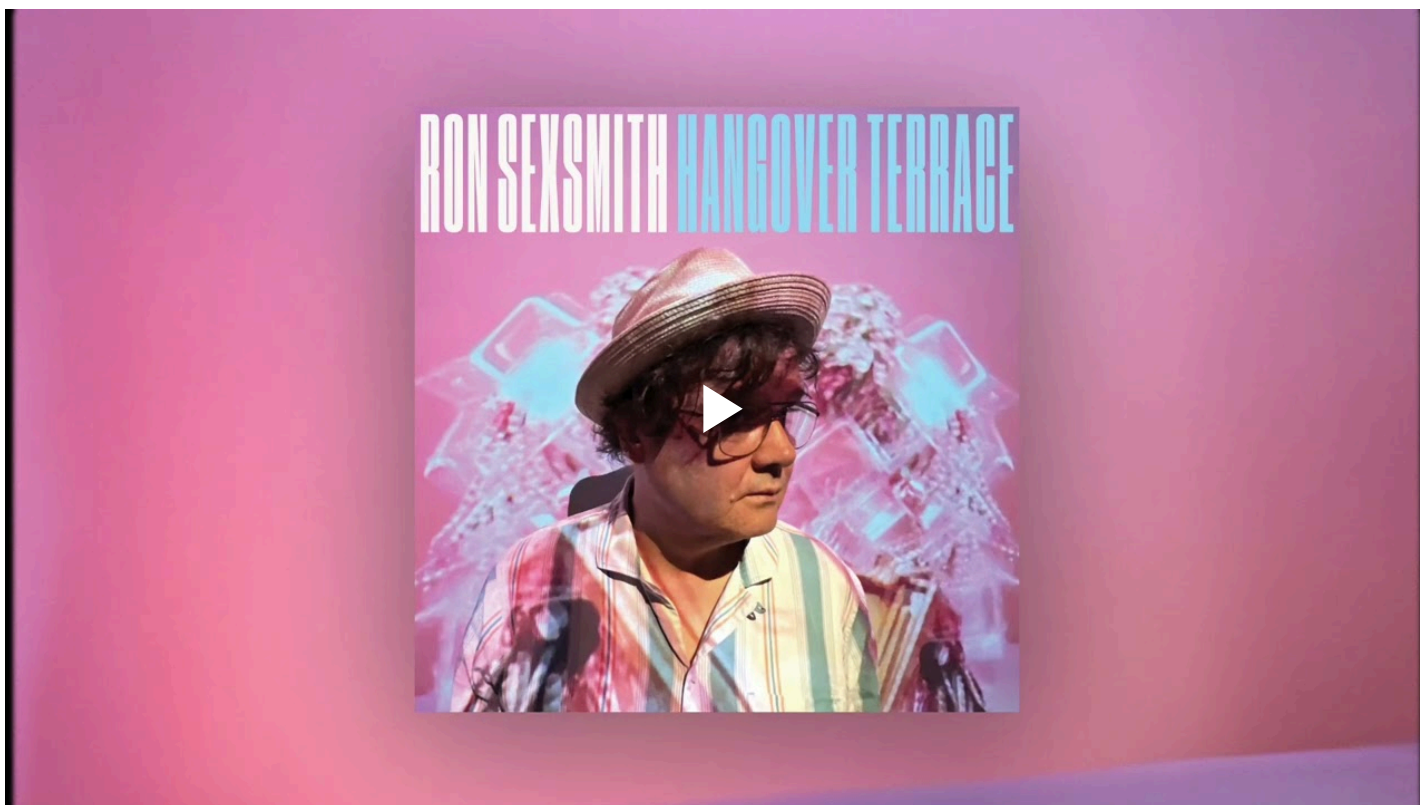
So it is a bit of a shock to see the anger and frustration that bubbles over in new songs such as *Damn Well Please* ("Time's ticking, however out of joint is their nose/Cos I can do whatever I damn well please") and *Easy For You To Say* ("Go on treat me like an outcast/Say I'm no good/They'd have me banished I guess/How I wish they would"), and *Outside Looking In* ("Some friends should come with an expiry date/They no longer spark joy but only aggravate").

Those aren't characters, they feel like him, and the characters he is directing his anger towards aren't general types but specific people. Specific friends. What lies behind those? And his willingness to put these out there?

"Songs like that that have appeared on other records," Sexsmith says, politely disputing and gently deflecting ahead of an Australian tour in April. "I think [2011 album] *Long Player, Late Bloomer* was kind of a disillusioned, grumpy record. But that was disguised in kind of poppy songs."

It's a fair point, and Sexsmith's style of folk-inflected classic pop could make most ugly things pretty to the ear. But I would argue that *Long Player Late Bloomer* was more disillusioned than grumpy, while the sentiments in this new record are more pointed and angry.

"Definitely with this record there was a lot going on. It was coming off the pandemic and the [first] Trump era and I just feel it was such a hard time for everybody, such a surreal period. Maybe not everybody, but I know a lot of people, like myself, kinda went off the rails a bit during that time," concedes Sexsmith. "I had a lot of ..., just the anxiety of the unknown, seeing my shows get postponed, a lot of conspiracy theorists out there, misinformation. And I had some falling outs, some pretty bad falling outs with some friends, and that ended up in the lyrics of some of these songs."



"*Easy For You To Say*, for example was a very cathartic song for me to write and I see it as kinda Dylan's *Positively Fourth Street* in a way. To this day, I don't know who he is singing about and I think with my song, I don't really want anybody to know who I'm singing about either, but I was singing about a few different people on that song. People who I felt had kinda thrown me under the bus a little bit."

Those people are colleagues, though clearly not necessarily pals, in the Canadian music scene, described by Sexsmith in a way that anyone in the Australian music scene would understand, as "it's a big country but the music scene is a small world, a small town in a way, and everyone gossips and whispers behind your back and all that kind of stuff". Still? Even for the two-time Juno winner, four decades into this career?

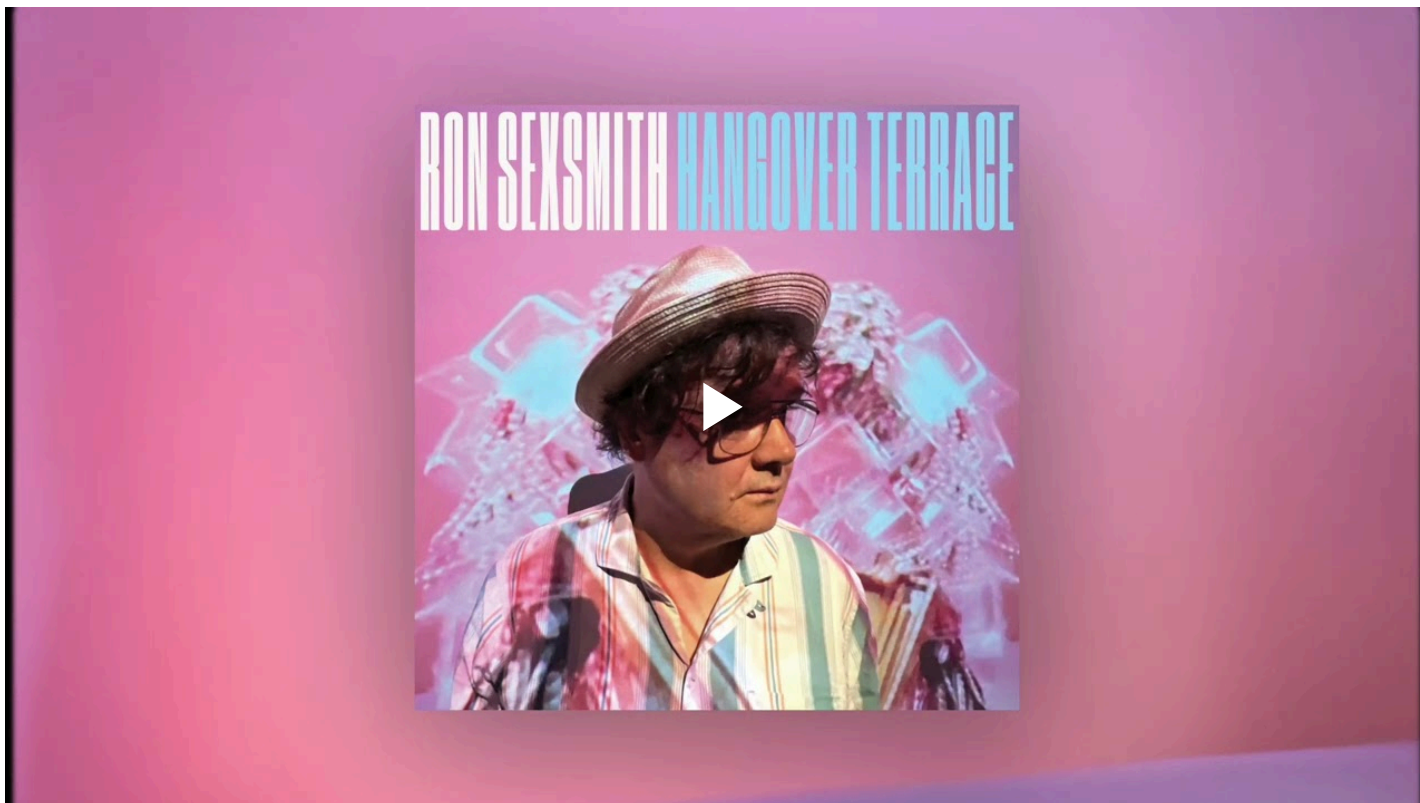
"I always felt kinda begrudging acceptance here. They didn't want me: I got turned down by every label here and then I got signed in Los Angeles and I think a lot of the industry felt like, how did that happen? So I've never felt completely welcomed," Sexsmith says. "I have won awards and I have a good fan base here, so I guess I've got a bit of a chip on my shoulder sometimes. So that song made me feel better from writing it [he chuckles]. But you're right, I don't generally want to be in that headspace. But once I wrote it, I could move on from it."

If *Easy For You To Say* sounds specific but in fact is broad, *Outside Looking In* is the opposite. Though it comes with a favourite flavour, musically.

"*Outside Looking In* was directed more specifically at a person I had a falling out with and again, it felt good to write it. That one I think took on a real Abba vibe," he says, though not in this case one of those classic post-breakup songs written by half of Abba for the other half to sing about them, more the sonic treatment arranged by keyboardist Claes Bjorkland.

Nonetheless it does feel as if whatever other chips he may have on his shoulder, Sexsmith feels people have traded on his kindness, his amiability, his perceived softness. See lines such as "I wear my heart on my sleeve/Where's your heart at?" or "Make me fear treading on toes/When I'm just so sick of it", for example.

"That's fair," he says. "That's how I felt. I felt wounded a bit. It was an upsetting period and when you are a songwriter you are able to put it down into words. That one started off as a Twitter poem actually but I thought it was too good for that and fashioned it into a song. But the other one you mention, *Damn Well Please*, is not really a personal song. I wrote a book called *Dear Life* some years ago, a fairytale, and I was working on a musical version of the book and there is a villain character who is going to sing the song *Whatever I Damn Well Please* and then at a certain point I decided I didn't want the character to sing because it was like Oliver Reed in the movie [version of Lionel Bart's musical] *Oliver*, he doesn't break out into song which is good because it keeps him menacing.



"So I didn't know what to do with that song and it was sitting in a drawer for a few years but sometimes my wife [musician Colleen Hixenbaugh] and I will bicker and it's almost always about my wine consumption and I was getting on my high horse one night and saying, 'well I'm 60 and if I want to have two bottles of wine ...', that kind of thing, defending my bad choices I guess, and I was reminded of that song and thought, I know what to do with it."

A man of a certain age defending his bad choices in the face of common sense, science and a smarter partner? I certainly can't picture what he's talking about. Not me.

"It's funny, the first time I tried it out on stage it got such a huge reception, people felt empowered by it," says an amused Sexsmith. "I didn't want the wrong people to feel empowered by it but it felt good to sing and it's become kinda a fun live song now."

In the musical it may well have been a villainous character, but in the context of this album it feels like part of a story he is telling about loosening some of the binds of propriety and "good" behaviour while coping with other burdens, a mini-series within the album which would include the song *Angel On My Shoulder* (who "Knows how hard I try/Knows I'm hurt inside/Points me in the right direction/Like a bird in flight").

"They are spaced out on the record in a way that kinda tells a story too," Sexsmith says. "All albums are personal but this one obviously is a document of a time that wasn't so rosy. *The Vivian Line* and *Hermitage*, my last two records were

very romantic and kinda country life I guess, and this one I felt like I got kinda spit out of the pandemic with a few less friends and some scars. But I don't feel that way now. I really love this record and I'm sort of happy that the lyrics are raw. I didn't want them to feel claustrophobic, because I think a lot of people get what I'm singing about or they've had those feelings too."

Given he believes in a god that isn't judgemental, but people aren't like that, how does he cope with that difference now, post-Covid, post-(some) friends?

"It's hard to know really what to do. I get judgemental too, right, but I'm always aiming to be a better person and be more benevolent. It's not always possible," Sexsmith admits. "Looking back on my life, as a dad for example, I was away so much and I was carrying on doing all the stupid things musicians are known for, and I feel bad about that. So I have a lot of regret. At the same time I feel that my whole life was ... as a kid, growing up when I did, I would read all the magazines about rock 'n' roll and it just seemed like everything about that lifestyle appealed to me. Then all of a sudden I'm in my 30s and it's happening, I couldn't believe my luck. I went on the kind of crazy rollercoaster ride for a long time, but even in that I think I was always nice to people; I was never a jerk or anything.

"But we reached a point in the culture where all that kinda stuff is basically frowned upon, which is totally fine, but I fell on the wrong side of things sometimes. And I think a lot of that is on this record too."

Was that something useful in the end?

"I think I had to learn and go through all this stuff and make the records and write these songs. And they are all true," he says. "I think I have arrived at a place now where I'm kinda accepting of everything: I've got a good relationship with my kids, I know who my real friends are and who they ain't, stuff I learned the hard way."

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BCEC Plaza Auditorium, Brisbane, April 19

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Theatre Royal, Castlemaine, April 24

Rosemount Hotel, Perth, April 26