



Soul music

Ron Sexsmith explains to David Burke how he's quite happy not having to wear sunglasses when he does the shopping

Ron Sexsmith is one of those singer-songwriters who seem to occupy a permanent position under the radar, a fact that doesn't bother the affable Canadian one little bit but which causes people like me enormous angst. You see, since his eponymous debut in 1995, he has amassed a consummate body of work that merits a much greater audience – more people should love Ron Eldon Sexsmith, damn it!

"You couldn't find anyone less interested in fame than me," he declares on the promotional campaign for his latest album, the very brilliant *Exit Strategy For The Soul*. "The thing that bugs me the most is famous people who are famous for really doing nothing, because they've maybe appeared on a TV show or something like that. I think it's a really useless experience. My level of fame, or lack of fame, makes it really nice. Sometimes people come up to me at the grocery store and say nice things, but it's not at a level where I need security or have to run around with sunglasses on."

Sexsmith's music, by his own admission,

has always been an attitude-free zone and he cites this as a possible explanation for his cult status.

"A lot of people come at you with an ironic spin; they're winking at you; they're coming at you with an agenda. I wouldn't really know how to do that. Some people don't quite know how to take my stuff because it can be really direct. People are like, 'Is he serious?' They're looking for the angle when in fact there really isn't one. There's no spin at all.

"Sometimes I think it's maybe what's gotten in the way of more-mainstream success. There are people getting so far on very little. They can't sing very well, they don't write or play an instrument but they're succeeding because they can put across the image. They can sell it. It's important to be able to do that. I've never really been able to do it."

It's true his lyrics are guileless. Take a song like 'Pretty Little Cemetery' from *Other Songs*. A young boy, visiting a graveyard with his old man, observes, '*Pretty little monument beneath a shady tree/For a little boy who died in 1943/But still in the air all this lingering grief...*'

There's nothing more to it than that and the stark conclusion, '*This is where you go to when you die*'. Simple yet potent. Just like Sexsmith's melodies, which essentially possess a folk element yet are charged with country, soul and, whisper it, pop sensibility. *Exit Strategy For The Soul* boasts a new genre – shadow gospel.

"It's a term I got from the internet. Sometimes I type my name in to see what comes up. I think it was a Christian website talking about some of my older songs and describing them as 'shadow gospel'. And I just liked the way that sounded."

And what does the term mean to Sexsmith?

"I think it's possible to have songs that are spiritual and that have faith without all the offensive rhetoric. I'm not really a religious person. But I've always been a God-conscious person. Ever since my first album I've always written about spiritual things, but not in an overt way or a New Age way. When I was writing this record, something about it felt very different lyrically for me, as if I was writing a gospel album or something.

"I've always had faith in the concept of the soul. As a kid I had a belief in God and, almost ... this ongoing dialogue, in a way. When I was a kid I used to think it had something to do with the sun. You always hear about when people die they see this light. I always felt as a kid that the only way God could keep an eye on everything was through the sun. That was my childish perception of it, but I don't think I'm too far off.

"I don't think of God as some old man with a beard, a judgemental thing, a vengeful thing. I find people's concept of heaven to be very childish, an almost exclusive club mentality – that only people who think the way that they do get in. All that stuff never made sense to me.

"As a kid I always had perfect attendance at Sunday school because I was interested in the stories and I liked the songs. But a lot of it I couldn't really understand. The religions of the world don't really encourage freethinking. A lot of them discriminate in some ways too. For me, God has always been a very strong presence. I've always felt a connection to something. I've felt sometimes that it wasn't there, too. It's the same thing with soul. You can hear it in music and see it in art and in people's eyes. You can tell when it's not there, when something's just cerebral."

Rest assured, it's there in *Exit Strategy For The Soul*. What's with that title then, Ron?

"Everyone keeps asking me about it. Sometimes when I'm waiting for a subway or a train or standing on a bridge, I have this irrational instinct to jump. It's a strange thing but I feel that's also further evidence of the soul as well. Someone explained it to me that it's like a dog on a leash running ahead. I feel that when the soul is close to being where it wants to be, sometimes I have to hold on to a bench or something. And I'm not suicidal or anything. The soul wants to move on, desires to know ..."

Exit Strategy For The Soul finds Sexsmith

playing piano more than on his previous albums. It's book-ended by a pair of minimalist instrumentals, the second of which, 'Dawn Anna', was composed for a film starring Debra Winger. Unfortunately, apparently Winger had a falling out with the producer, who subsequently removed all of Sexsmith's music from the film and replaced him with some hotshot Los Angeles guy.

"I write mostly on piano now. My last record, *Time Being*, was recorded with Mitchell Froom, a great keyboardist. I didn't want to insult him by playing piano because he can really play. I thought an easy way to get a different sound on this album was having me bang away on the piano. I play with good intentions. I mean, I like the way I play, but if you hear someone who really knows what they're doing it's a whole new thing."

Maybe. But it's as much about what goes in as it is about what comes out. Another feature of the album is the understated but overwhelming horn section, all the way from Cuba. At the instigation of his producer, Swedish-born Martin Terefe, Sexsmith decamped to Havana to record the sessions.

"Martin heard horns on a lot of these songs. He felt the best horn players in the world were in Havana. I'd never been there, so that appealed to me. After they'd done the horns, they were going to set up the microphones and I was going to re-do the whole album in a different environment. But the day I went to do that, because it's a very old studio everything kept breaking down and the equipment wouldn't work. Thankfully we got the horns and the percussion.

"Most of the vocals you hear on the album are the original rough guide vocals. Even in New York City a few months after Cuba I wanted to try and re-sing everything. Martin kept saying that while I was maybe technically singing the songs better, the original vocals had a lot of personality."

They certainly do, especially on the likes of 'This Is How I Know', 'Ghost Of A Chance', 'Poor Helpless Dreams' and the intoxicating 'Brandy Alexander', on which Sexsmith shares a credit with Leslie Feist of Canadian outfit, Feist.

"It was never my intention to record it myself. I'd run into her at a party once in Ottawa. I was drinking a Brandy Alexander, which is my favourite cocktail. It's also the famous drink that got John Lennon and Harry Nilsson together at the Troubadour. And so she came up to me and asked me what I was drinking and I told her the legend of the drink. Two days later I got an e-mail from her with this lyric. I went straight to the piano and wrote the music for it in about half an hour.

"About a year later I saw her in Los Angeles. She got out her Dictaphone and I sang it for her. When I heard her version I thought it was great but different from how I'd envisioned it. I thought of it more as a drunken sing-along. It's actually the first time I've ever had a co-write. It doesn't really fit in with the other songs, but it's kind of a needed track on there, a diversion maybe."

Sexsmith hasn't ruled out other collaborations in the future. In fact, he's been frequenting the songwriting-factory cities of Nashville and LA recently with a view to doing just that.

"I'm trying to co-write with people, but not for my own project. I know a lot of songwriters who like doing that. I actually don't like doing it, which is maybe why I haven't had that much success. But I keep doing it with the idea that if someone who does sell records was to do a song, it could be some security in my old age. I could buy a house or something! I have been covered but I'd love to be covered more. None of the songs have been singles. Most recently there's an English singer from the 80s, Mari Wilson, who did a song. I love her.

"I'm always hoping that something will come out of nowhere. I think they're very coverable. People sometimes just don't have the imagination. There's the story of Patsy Cline who, when they were playing her Willie Nelson's 'Crazy', she just couldn't hear the song because she didn't like his voice. I think that happens with me. Someone listening to a song, they may not be able to get past that and think, 'That could be something for me'. Sometimes I think maybe if I demo'd the songs with someone else singing them ... But I have been making an effort to co-write more, until I get lucky. Then I won't do it again."

And who among us would begrudge Ron Sexsmith a piece of good fortune?

