

A Conversation with Ron Sexsmith

Frank Goodman (Puremusic 2/2001)

I just spent an enjoyable morning cleaning the house and listening to the first three Ron Sexsmith CDs in order. Hey man, I don't even like to listen to three Beatles records in a row. (Brings up too many memories, for one thing, too complicated.) But Ron is an eminently listenable artist. Why? Melody, my friend. That's what really makes songs listenable, and memorable. And Ron Sexsmith is the mellifluous king. I was talking to Steve Earle about him the other day (Steve seemed admirably glad to talk about someone other than himself), and he said, "Ron writes lyrics better than most people do. But when it comes to melody...well, he's hard to beat."

His songs are also free of self-congratulation and narcissism, in my view. They are humble and introspective windows into the soul of a lovely person. Sometimes he catches a little flack for being morose, but it's undeserved. He's got lots of up songs, and his darker songs are a joy, and are almost always about love, which is a mixed bag at best.

If you count his early *Grand Opera Lane*, Ron's released four CDs, each better than the last. (*Grand Opera Lane* is now available from Canadian online retailer Maplemusic.com. I'm hot for my en route copy at this writing.) They're all on Interscope Records, in this order: *Ron Sexsmith* (1995), *Other Songs* (1997), and *Whereabouts* (1999). By all appearances, Interscope has balked on a fourth recording done in Nashville and produced by partners Steve Earle and Ray Kennedy. When I spoke with Steve about it, he was looking at the idea of releasing it on his own E-Squared label.

Perhaps you know that some of today's greatest stars have heaped enthusiastic praise over the body of Sexsmith's music. His hugest champion is Elvis Costello, who was photographed for the cover of the great English music magazine MOJO clutching the first Sexsmith disc. But the list goes on and on, breakfast jam with McCartney, Rod Stewart cover version of "Secret Heart," and that's only the beginning of his fame among the famous. It's we, the listening public, who have been slow to catch on. Worldwide acclaim has not led to impressive sales, and that's a shame, but let's change it. If ever there was a quintessential artist for the elusive market called pop for adults, it's Ron Sexsmith.

PM: How are you, and how is the family?

RS: Oh, I'm not too bad. I mean, my family went through a separation last year, last summer.

PM: Oh, I'm sorry.

RS: Yeah, but everybody's fine, you know. Adjusting to the new thing...

PM: Are you still living in the same town?

RS: Yes, still in Toronto, just moved a few blocks west from where I'd been before.

PM: First of all, let me say that we're very big on your music here at the magazine, we love what you do.

RS: Thank you.

PM: I'm aware of Rod Stewart's cover of "Secret Heart." Have other artists covered your songs?

RS: A few. I mean, Nick Lowe did "Secret Heart" too, but only onstage. He was opening all his shows with it at one point. Mary Black and Cry, Cry, Cry both recorded "Speaking with the Angels." And there's a huge Danish artist that wouldn't be known here who also recorded "Secret Heart." And there's some indie bands that covered a song or two. I hope there will be some more of that, I guess I'm just not that well known yet. If the Rod Stewart cover had done better, I think it might have opened things up a bit.

PM: Would you talk some about your recording experience with Steve Earle and Ray Kennedy here in town?

RS: Yes. It was great to finally work with Steve, I've known him since '88. I didn't really know exactly what kind of record we would make. Every time I go in to record, I have just as many ballads as I do uptempo numbers and rockin' numbers. When I worked with Mitchell Froom, he tended to lean more toward the ballady stuff, my voice was better suited to that material. When I saw the list of songs that Steve wanted to do, I thought he was determined to have this record rock more than my others. You know, I just kind of went with it, and we did 17 songs in six days. We were really flying. And there's ballads on there as well. I think that, coming off my last album, where we tried to do something really pretty and lavish, I think it was a good direction. This one's a little darker.

PM: Well, Steve's really an independent thinker, in that way. He really doesn't give a damn what anybody thinks.

RS: He's very in your face, it was just really great to be around him. He's very knowledgeable, on different subjects. You could just be talking about something, and it would lead to a whole discussion of the Civil War, battle by battle. And he's a great musician, too. I didn't really know how much into the details he would be, in terms of the structure of the songs and such. I mean, he obviously knows how to put a song together. The whole thing was a good experience. Afterwards, I got dropped, which has been kind of a mess.

PM: In fact, Steve mentioned to me the other day when I ran into him in town that he was looking into the prospect of releasing that fifth album on his own E-Squared label.

RS: Yeah, we're still looking at it. The problem is that Interscope, my old label, owns the record. So that's been the problem, trying to get it back from them, and working out an agreement. Because labels like E-Squared don't have the kind of money that Interscope has. We may look at it territory by territory. We think that E-Squared might be a great

label for us in America, but we're not totally sure that their distribution in other countries would be our best move.

PM: Even in America, they're not known for having success with other acts besides Steve.

RS: Well, he has the name, he's been doing it a long time. It's kind of a no-brainer. I think the last album did quite well for him.

PM: Are there other avenues, other labels, also under review in the States?

RS: Yeah, we're talking to a couple of others down there, and we're getting close to figuring out what we're gonna do. I hope it'll be sorted out by the end of the month, because this label in England wants to put it out as early as March. And I hate waiting around, I already have a whole new album written.

PM: Is it okay to ask who the English label is?

RS: They're called Cooking Vinyl, and they have their little labels all over the world ready. So they would probably handle most of the world, except for North America, with a few exceptions. They do XTC and Ryan Adams from Whiskeytown, it's a cool little label. They're very eclectic. Like, Michael Nesmith is on the label. Kind of all over the place.

PM: Well, God knows, you might be benefitted by the hands-on attention of a smaller label.

RS: I don't think it could hurt. On Interscope, especially with the last record, there were just no plans for me. They're so busy, I might have a better chance if I were a bigger fish in a smaller pond.

PM: You certainly deserve to be a bigger fish.

RS: [laughs] Well, thanks. I'm hoping that one day I'll have some kind of breakthrough. For instance, there's a Jennifer Lopez film coming out that has one of my songs.

PM: Who now is apparently called J. Lo.

RS: Oh, is that right?

PM: Yeah, I saw it on AOL this morning.

RS: Did she change her name officially?

PM: I think so. I didn't click on to see why we're supposed to call her J. Lo now...

RS: So, apparently they're using one of my songs in a romantic scene, so, you never know.

PM: I remember reading some time back that Nick Lowe's first big money was when "What's So Funny About Peace, Love and Understanding" was cut by some grunge band or something.

RS: It was actually done by a crooner, this guy Curtis Steiger. Yeah, that totally bought the farm for Nick Lowe.

PM: Is that the one that ended up on the soundtrack of *The Bodyguard*?

RS: That's right.

PM: I know that you're a big Nilsson fan, me too. What other strong influences come to mind, musical or otherwise?

RS: Ray Davies was always one of my heroes. I've got a song on this upcoming Ray Davies Tribute album that I'm pretty happy about.

PM: Which one?

RS: "This Is Where I Belong."

PM: Ah, yeah.

RS: It's also the name of the record, which I was extra pleased about. I like Ray Davies, I like a lot of the Canadian songwriters, like Gordon Lightfoot. He's probably my favorite songwriter.

PM: Especially that first record, the cowboy record, which many don't know about.

RS: Yeah, I like all the early stuff, I buy all his records. He put an album out a few years back, the production was a bit tacky, I guess, but songwise, it was really great. I go see him every year. And there's Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, and all the usual ones, the Beatles.

PM: Actually, I mentioned something in the beginning of the article about listening to your three discs in a row, and that I don't even like to listen to three Beatles records in a row...

RS: [laughs] Wow. I haven't done that in a long time. Often times, when I finish a new record, I do this pretentious thing where I just want to compare, you know? I go through some tunes with my Walkman, and hopefully the records all complement each other in some way...

PM: I think there's a strong thread of continuity, where, like you've said in other interviews, just baby steps were taken between each one.

RS: That's all I'm interested in, really, just the baby steps. I just start with the song. With Mitchell, we try to do something a little different each time, try to flesh things out a bit. It was all done in a way that made sense to me. And the new album, too, is a departure in sound, a lot drier. But I'm really proud of the work I did with Mitchell. It feels like we went from black and white to full color. Hopefully they'll still be available, even though I'm not on Interscope anymore.

PM: I hadn't even thought of that. That would be a tragedy.

RS: I get emails all the time from people who are still buying them somewhere. Hopefully the stores are still ordering them, and all that. There's not much I can do at the moment.

PM: I'm a friend of Brad Jones, who, aside from playing great bass on three of your records, is a fine producer. I noticed you put one of his acts on your Top Five list last year: Joe, Marc's Brother.

RS: That's right.

PM: Are you conversant with any of his other acts, like Swan Dive, Jill Sobule, or Cotton Mather?

RS: Oh, I know Jill Sobule, I've heard those records. I may have heard the Cotton Mather one, he interested me a while back in one of the bands he was working with. He also just did a David Poe record.

PM: Right, I haven't heard that one yet.

RS: I just love the Joe, Marc's Brother record. That was pretty much my favorite album last year. It was kind of like the Lovin' Spoonful, or something. It had a real joyful energy about it that's missing in a lot of music. Obviously, my stuff has always been a little more melancholy. But I just loved it. And I went to the release party, and I was totally blown away by the show. I don't know if you were there, but...

PM: No, I was out of town at the time. But I'm doing a gig with them at the end of the month, and I'm looking forward to that.

RS: I don't know what they're doing, but it would be nice if someone would come along, and put that album out in a wider fashion, 'cause I just thought it was really strong.

PM: Yeah, I have a rave review of that record in this same issue where you're the feature.

RS: Oh, well, that's good.

PM: Have you any comment on the rather rabid proliferation, in my view, of hip hop music, or on the current pop music picture?

RS: I don't know what to think. I mean, my kids are 15 and 11, so I hear all that music. I've got a pretty good idea of what's out there. Like anything, I think some of it is really quite good. I do feel that there's a kind of, umm... I don't know if it's a dumbing down, or whatever. But, especially in the boy bands, the songs just all sound the same to me. You can't really tell one from the other. I don't see a lot of character in the writing. Those types of complaints I have. I try not to get too negative about it, because I can see that it's striking a chord with my kids, for whatever reason.

PM: The music that struck a chord with us at their age had a little bit more going on.

RS: I think so. It feels like they're going backwards, in a way. In the early 60s, there was a lot of bubblegum stuff, and singers like Frankie Avalon. They had their moment, and then out of the blue came Dylan, and Joni Mitchell, and the Beatles, and everything changed. And pop music started to get taken a little more seriously. I felt like it was moving along quite nicely. Every now and then it would have to reinvent itself, like the whole punk thing, because things were getting a bit out of hand. And that was great, that was healthy. And I think that hip hop was a healthy thing to happen, too, when it came on to the scene. But now I find it's getting a bit tiresome. Did you ever see those horrible talk shows where they have the teenagers that the parents can't control?

PM: Jerry Springer.

RS: Yeah, so they send them off to boot camp.

PM: I've seen that very one.

RS: And the army guy comes out and yells at them. To me, a lot of the hip hop around sounds like that. Like some guy yelling at me all the time. But I have to say I think that Eminem is really quite brilliant. I don't agree with everything he has to say, but when my son has his record on, I find it really compelling, I can't really turn away from it, you know?

PM: Well, that's the first thing I ever heard that made me want to listen to an Eminem record.

RS: I mean, obviously he's purging a lot of stuff, and just laying it all out there. And, like I say, a lot of it's a bit over the top, but at the same time, I think that he's doing it in a way that's exciting. But a lot of that stuff just seems to be bragging.

PM: Sexual bragging.

RS: Right, sexual bragging and macho posing, that kind of thing. But my whole thing has always been about melody. So that's what I'm trying to do in my own little way. Trying to get these melodies out there. That's always been the thing that's drawn me to music, and I'm still looking for it. I'm hoping maybe there will be a turnaround, where things will get less groove oriented and get back to quality songs.

PM: Your lyrics are great, but many of us feel that as a melodist, if you will, you're truly rare. Is it just a natural facility, or do you work hard to craft and create that aspect of your songs?

RS: Well, melody is always the easiest part for me. I tend to come up with them just walking around. I tend to hum to myself when I walk around. So the hard part for me is finding the words, and fitting them with the melody. I think the best songs are kind of a seamless marriage of words and melody.

PM: Sure, the words have to roll.

RS: They have to roll with it, and they can't set off the cringe mechanism, or they can't get in the way. I'm pretty old fashioned that way, and I work hard on that part. Generally what happens is that I'll get a melody or I'll get a phrase, and everything kind of opens up, I can see that there's potential there for a song. And that will take you so far, maybe you'll get a few lines, and the rest is, relatively speaking, hard work. You're thinking about it, and you're scribbling stuff down. There have been times when I've started with a complete lyric, too, and I've had to craft the melody. But in general, the melody seems to come first.

PM: What are you listening to lately, and what might you be reading?

RS: Well, I'm reading my first Dostoevsky book. He's someone that I always wanted to read, and never got around to it. I'm reading *Crime and Punishment*.

PM: That's a mouthful.

RS: Yeah. Well, I always loved Dickens, he's probably my favorite. I think I have four more books to go, and then will have read all of his works. And I heard that Dostoevsky was a big Dickens fan.

PM: Really?

RS: Yeah, apparently he was his favorite writer. So it made me curious about checking his work out. He's a little darker than Dickens. So, I've been reading that. And what have I been listening to?...let's see, there's a songwriter up here in Canada who's one of my favorite writers, his name is Kyp Harness. Actually, I recorded one of his songs on my upcoming album. But he's one of those guys, you know. He's made a few independent records, but the labels won't touch him. It's like Dylan or something, they don't think he can sing very well. But I love his voice, and I love his writing. So I've been listening a lot

to his new record, it isn't out yet. He's trying to figure out what to do with it, or how to release it. So I'm hoping that my covering his song may turn some people on to his stuff. I'm listening to the new Steve Forbert one, I just saw him last night in Toronto. It was good to see him.

PM: He's really good on stage.

RS: Oh yeah. And he hasn't aged a bit, he still looks fifteen or something. So I'm checking that out. I actually like the new U2 album quite a bit. Not everything on it, but the best songs, like "Stuck in the Moment," I really like.

PM: They seem to be back to a more essential bag.

RS: I think the last few years they've spent trying to shake that over-serious image that they were building with the Joshua Tree album. So they did all these experimental, Euro pop things. Some of that I thought was pretty good. I thought that *Achtung, Baby* was a good record. This one seems more like a return to what they are, a band playing songs. I've also been going back and buying some of my favorite albums on CD, that I never had before. Especially since some of my records are still in the old place.

PM: Yeah, they're always the first thing to go.

RS: So I've been trying to get some of them back, anyhow.

PM: Steve Earle is back on the road, and Brad Jones is in Spain.

RS: What's he doing in Spain?

PM: Producing some band, and then he's going to Italy. It's tough. You're my only hope of getting bumped a copy of that unreleased record. Any chance of that?

RS: What, my new record? You could probably get one through my manager, because I don't even have a copy right now of the final sequence. It's changed about four times, I think I'm driving everybody up the wall. You know how it is, when you have too much time to think. So I've been listening to it and worrying about it, and I kept dropping songs and adding songs. We finally put our foot down, and I'm waiting to get my copy of the final sequence.

PM: You've already accomplished so much, especially in the arena of the admiration of famous peers. What goals are still looming?

RS: Well, I'm always trying to just write better, you know? When I think of some of the great songs like "Stardust," I mean, I don't think anybody's come close to that song. I'm just trying to get better. I was at a friend's house the other day, and we were sitting around the piano, he had a Stephen Foster songbook. And it was so great to sit there and play "Gentle Annie" and "Camptown Racetrack," and all those songs. That's what it's all

about for me, ultimately. When I'm gone, I hope that I leave behind a whole bunch of songs. Hopefully, there will be more good ones than bad ones. Maybe someday people will be sitting around a piano...

PM: And play a good old Ron Sexsmith tune.

RS: Yeah. I mean, I'm trying to make good records. But when it's all said and done, they're just moments in time. I did "Secret Heart" back in '94, and that's how I sang it, and this is who played on it, but it's never really been the same since. And some night in Pittsburgh years later I'll sing the best version of it ever, when there's no tape recorders around. So I just try to stay focused, and that's my main goal. And also, I would like to have more of a breakthrough with one of these records, so I wouldn't have to feel so insecure financially. But I'm not too concerned, I'm just trying to get on with the work, and hopefully everything else will fall into place.

PM: Speaking of "Stardust" are you getting that incredible Ken Burns series *Jazz* up there?

RS: Oh yeah, on the PBS channel. The photos are incredible. They'll be talking about something, and they'll show a photo that will emphasize the point. I don't know where they dug that stuff up.

PM: He's a rare historian. I thought *Baseball* and *The Civil War* were good, but this is the best.

RS: And that's another thing I've been listening to, the Ken Burns box set of American Music. It's the companion piece to the TV show. It's a five CD set, with a version of "Stardust" by Louis Armstrong. I've been listening to that quite a bit.

PM: Do you mind if I ask you about your spiritual life, do you have any special affiliations or inclinations in that area?

RS: It's something I'm always trying to work out, I'm not a religious person. I just don't really know what to think sometimes. When I was a kid, I went to Sunday school, and was a Protestant. And I used to have this idea, I was talking about this a bit on my last record, and I always felt like a total freak talking about it. But I used to think that God was in the sun, somehow, when I was a kid. And I used to talk to the sun all the time, on my way to school and stuff. And it's something that I've kept up throughout my life. I remember when I was a courier in my 20's, every now and then I would be reminded of it. I guess that's the important thing for me, to have some kind of dialogue with God. Not so much about going to church, or the guilt that goes along with most organized religions. Most of those churches, all they talk about is abstinence. I think, really, it's all about experience.

PM: Took the words right out of my mouth.

RS: Because most people, they don't want to find things out for themselves. They want someone to tell them the way. I think it's good to find out for yourself, and not take someone's word for it.

PM: Sure, I think life is a spiritual matter, not a religious one.

RS: Exactly. God certainly didn't make the churches. And there's so many different religions, and so many enlightened people that have come to earth [laughs] who inspired people and who were compelling. A lot of them got laughed at and were crucified, and all that.

PM: Mostly.

RS: Mostly, and I think that's true to this day. Every now and then there will be someone who comes along and changes the world, in a way, whether it's Charlie Chaplin, or...

PM: Mahatma Ghandi.

RS: Yeah. I think that's very inspiring. Someone like Christ, for instance. His whole message wasn't "I'm above everybody," he was saying "What I can do, you can do."

PM: Right.

RS: Or "What I have, you can have." I think that's important. And his biggest message was Forgiveness, which I think is one of the greatest words in language. There's a lot that can be taken from each religion, you just have to find out for yourself.

PM: Are there other producers or musicians with whom you still hope to work?

RS: There's a Swedish producer, actually, that my manager works with, we worked on the Ray Davies song for the tribute album. I really liked working with him. He's very forward thinking. The Steve Earle album is very rock and roll, and very rootsy.

PM: Like Steve.

RS: Yeah, like Steve. And I just thought it would be nice, for my next record, to try something that's a little more...I don't know how to even describe it...something that's kind of in both worlds, you know?

PM: Sure.

RS: Because I'm coming from an old school approach, but I don't want to make retro sounding records. So I'm gonna check that out. I would definitely love to work with Mitchell Froom again. Daniel Lanois and I flirted with the idea.

PM: That would be a good record.

RS: We almost made this record together, the current one. The U2 thing was taking up all his time.

PM: Is there a question I haven't asked that you'd like to ask and answer for Puremusic?

RS: I'm not sure, really. I feel like I've been yammering away... [laughs] I can't think of anything offhand.

PM: It's generally a stumper, but I like to ask.

RS: Yeah.

PM: Lastly, you have management, friends, and associates here in Nashville. Can we hope to see more of you in Music City?

RS: Nashville tends to be a place where I get to quite frequently. I used to go down every year for that extravaganza, I guess they have a different name for it now.

PM: I missed the last one, I was in Philly. But yeah, they changed the name.

RS: It's in February, right?

PM: Yes, I think so.

RS: So it's possible I may make it down this year. I don't know if I'll actually play, but just to show my face around [laughs] or something. I'm sure I'll get there a couple of times this year, for shows or whatever.

PM: Well, I hope we get to have a cup of coffee or something.

RS: Yeah, no trouble. That'd be great.

PM: Thanks for being gracious with your time today. I really think you're one of our best songwriters.

RS: Wow, thanks. [laughs]

PM: And I wish you even greater success, for everyone's sake.

RS: Thank you. Well, we'll see. I'm not going anywhere. I keep working at it. Hopefully one of these records will take off. Thanks.

PM: Okay, Ron. Thanks so much, and take good care of yourself.

RS: You, too. Nice talking to you. Cheers.