

Ron Sexsmith – in conversation

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By Kelly Waterhouse

I would like to thank everyone who attended the Saturday night performance of Ron Sexsmith at the Gambrel Barn, as part of the Elora Festival's Jazz and Popular series. I thank you because it was very nice of you all to show up just to witness one of the best Canadian songwriters as he took to the stage to serenade me personally. Though the place was packed with attentive fans on a glorious summer's eve, I am completely confident when I say that Ron Sexsmith was singing specifically to me.

I know this to be true because in every word he sang, there was a piece of my soul reflected in his poetic lyrics. I don't mean to suggest anything crass here. I am referring to the intensity that words hold when they are expressed by someone who feels them, who has lived them and nurtured them to the written page, giving them life in the language that defies borders: music.

Sexsmith is a writer's songwriter. I like to think that he was speaking to me writer to writer, a person who loves deeply to a person who loves deeply, a human being to another human being.

Secretly, I think he knew I was in need of inspiration, of direction. Whether he sang of life, relationships, loss or the state of the world around us, he sang what I felt. By the quiet respect of the attentive audience around us, I suspect other people had a similar experience.

Backed up by a keyboard player and drummer, Sexsmith stirred the emotion of the night with his acoustic and steel guitar and with beautiful ballads played on the piano, both of which he approached as if they were old friends.

A shy, humble man in stature, Sexsmith's voice lingers with a vulnerability that reaches inside to that quiet place in your mind where all your dreams are safely tucked away. He reminds you that things are possible, that love endures, that in sadness there is light. If it is true what philosophers say, that the world is set to experience a spiritual awakening of compassion and humanity, then I believe Sexsmith has the role of Poet Laureate for this time.

The evening was a blend of Sexsmith's treasure box of songs, from albums like "Retriever," and "Exit Strategy of the Soul" through to an excellent compilation of new tracks from the very recent release of "Time Being."

The new songs "Reason For Our Love," "Never Give Up," and "Snow Angel" reminded me of his particular gift to take themes that seem so overdone and transform them with lyrics that are both intelligent and sincere, lasting and yet, fresh. Sexsmith made me want to stay up all night writing, pushing myself to be better. "All In Good Time," reminded me to have patience.

"Gold In Them Hills" captivated everyone in the Gambrel Barn with a collective, silent sigh. That song, I am sure, was written for my husband and I, and it is a song I will play for us many, many times in the years to come. In the same vein, "Brighter Still" is a theme song for the optimist in all of us.

Sexsmith's humorous "barn jokes" helped this seemingly shy performer connect to the sea of faces before him, (even if he was only talking to me).

Though I am always horrified when audience members insist on shouting out their musical requests, (as if the artist on stage is actually taking requests), I was more annoyed that people were interrupting the private dialogue between Ron and I. But Sexsmith was such a gentleman, and obviously an old-hat at such intrusions, that he went ahead and played what these dedicated fans requested.

Oh sure, "The Sun Has Gone," was not for me, per say, but it was a great request. The entire set list and the encore performance was a journey through a musical career that is far from over.

Sexsmith reminds me of all the things I love about Canadian music, though I don't know that he needs to be labelled by his flag. His words are sincere and smart, but unlike anyone else's. His identifiable sound defies labels and genres. Despite his jokes that he has never made it past the top 500 hit list in his home and native land, he confirms that the voice of our songwriters defies boundaries.

Sexsmith's reputation in the international music circles proves that; many artists owe their success to his writing. Young songwriters everywhere should take heart that every effort is worth the struggle.

There is a comfort to Sexsmith's sound that is as much a part of my world as long car rides to the cottage or warm sweaters on cold January nights. He makes me feel at home. In the Gambrel Barn, in a row of strangers and neighbours I could not help but think how lucky I was to have this precious conversation, writer to writer, even if everyone was eavesdropping. I could not help but look around and realize how grateful I am to live here. I sure hope the Elora Festival continues to open our doors to such talents from near and far, and in doing so, continues to open our minds.