



RON SEXSMITH

Going his own way

by Jim Kelly

People like Ron Sexsmith really make life difficult. At least when it comes to choosing desert island discs.

It used to be bad enough when having to choose between the Toronto-based singer/songwriter's wonderful self-titled major label debut and the equally impressive follow-up, *Other Songs*. Now he's added a third: *Whereabouts*. Thanks Ron. Thanks a lot. I guess if I'm ever marooned I'll just have to use my finely-tuned music-journalist instincts: Let's see... Eenie, meenie, mynie, moe...

I spoke to Ron by phone from England, where he was performing solo, opening shows for Elvis Costello. He describes his new record as a little bit more outgoing.

"Yeah, I'm very happy with it," he says. "In general, it's a more uptempo record than the other two. It's the brightest album we've done, the most lush. It's a different album lyrically than the other two as well. So I just hear it as a big step in many ways, actually."

Several of the tracks on *Whereabouts* feature more elaborate arrangements, incorporating keyboards, horns and strings, edging the sound closer to something more like orchestral folk-pop. The album was recorded in New York last summer and mixed in L.A. As with his first two albums, the production team of Mitchell Froom and Tchad Blake again spin their magic, the treatments lending a timeless quality to many of the songs. The violin solo on "Riverbed" (played by Tracy Bonham) sounds like it floated in from another era. With its delicately plucked banjo, droopy-eyed clarinet and gentle strings, you could almost imagine this song cropping up at a poignant moment in some classic MGM musical. Smothered in Sexsmith's warm, quavering vibrato, it's a real gem.

Songs like "The Idiot Boy" and "Feel For You" have been bandied about as possible singles, but Sexsmith acknowledges that his label, Interscope, doesn't always know what to do with him. "I would say I'm a bit of an oddball on that label," he chuckles. "They've never really known what song to go for."

The problem is that Sexsmith, while probably one of the most talented songwriters and recording artists around, doesn't easily fit into any of today's pre-packaged radio formats. Is he rock? Not really. Alternative? Well, no. Adult Album Alternative? Possibly, but not like Jewel or Hootie – thank heavens.

"The general public won't find me in Canada if they're listening to the radio," Sexsmith laments. "They have to be the people who are looking for music, because radio, everywhere really, has been a bit of a locked door for me."

The easy solution would be to slap on a Stetson, rustle up a few steel guitars and fiddles, and drive everything over into amorphous New Country territory.

"Obviously I could have made a record that sounded a lot like the Wallflowers, where I'm strummin' away and it's very roots-rock, but it's just not what I do, y'know? I think it's very important when you're a songwriter to try and be as distinct as possible. I mean, that's why Tom Waits is around today, and he's never had a hit song. So that's all I try to do."

Sexsmith points out that although he's been inspired by such "folkies" as Gordon Lightfoot and Leonard Cohen, he's equally influenced by the likes of The Beatles and The Kinks. "So I just try to incorporate all these different influences into it," he adds.

When the Costello tour ends, Sexsmith will return home to play some North American dates with his current touring band of Rheostatics members Don Kerr on drums and Tim Vesley on bass. In addition to joining Blue Rodeo's Stardust Picnic for some dates, he's hoping to mount his own headlining tour across the country later this summer or fall.

Touring with Costello – who sang Sexsmith's praises early on; this is his second go-round as Elvis's opener – has also been inspiring: "He's always just followed his own path, and here he is playing these beautiful theatres in Europe," says Ron. "I just find it kind of comforting that you can continue to make good records and have people come out to listen to you."


Like many of his songs that visit the theme of keeping love alive against the obstacles the world throws in our way, *Whereabouts* finds Ron Sexsmith continuing to follow his own musical path, bypassing the easier route of pre-programmed radio in favour of making the music he loves. Maybe he's making life difficult for himself, but when the result is a record as strong as this, who could argue with that choice? 

PHOTO BY MICHAEL WILSON