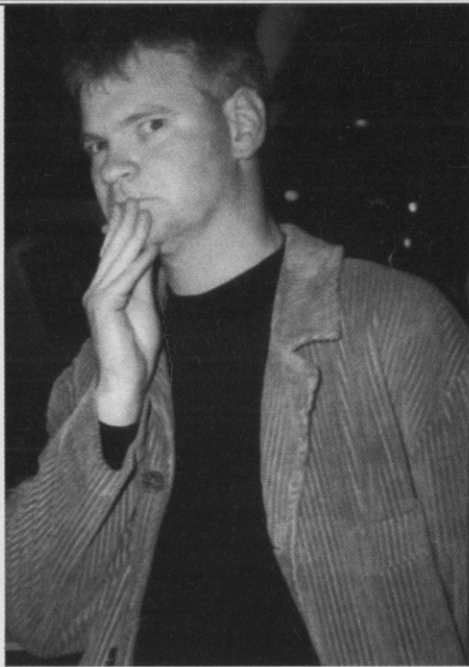


home market?

"It's just the problem of starting again really, I do think if the band wants to be big in America, the band has to live there, or if they want to have a go at doing well in Europe they have to live here. It's so competitive and so commercially driven, and if you're keen to have a career and make some money, you've got to play by the rules. If you move from New Zealand and you're living [in England], you need some money to live on, and unless you're going to have day jobs, you need to play some of the games to get ahead here in the industry."

What needs to happen in the UK, for Garageland to have some impact?

"They're getting close to the point where they really need some radio play, but that's something that doesn't just happen. I'd say the crucial stuff that's going on at the moment is getting interest at radio, so when the single that radio is going to like and everything is right for them to play it, there won't be any excuses for them not to play it."



In terms of the European market, is it a better time for Garageland to be there, having a crack, than when the Chills were there in the mid 80s?

"The Chills came so close to being a really happening thing here, they were right on the edge of being a big band,

it was just unfortunate that when they came back to New Zealand, the band broke up. It's still early days for Garageland, they've been here four months and they've played about 55 gigs in that time, and they're just starting to get noticed. They're at a point now where they've been around for long enough that people identify them as being a band based in London, which means they're almost British, which means they're almost 'OK', so they can be taken seriously. It'll be interesting to see what happens over the next nine months. It's quite weird to be talking about it, because I no longer have any involvement in it, I'm only an observer now."

Also housed in Mushroom's London office, alongside Flying Nun UK, is the Infectious label, which is home to the Irish trio Ash. Infectious Records is run by Korda Marshall, who in January this year also became the head of Mushroom's British operation. Two months later, Shepherd resigned, stating he could no longer tolerate dealing with the business side of running a label; "I wasn't finding that it had any-

thing to do with music anymore."

Did you leave Flying Nun UK 100% willingly?

"Yes, indeed."

There were rumours that Infectious were interfering in the selling of Garageland, and that you weren't happy with that.

"No, there hasn't been any problems like that. The Garageland thing is running really well, the guy that's looking after them is very competent."

What are your immediate plans?

"There's quite a few options, I haven't really got to the point of making up my mind, but no matter what I do I'll probably start another label, and just do it on a much smaller scale."

Will you return to New Zealand to live at some point?

"I'll come back at some stage, but at the moment I don't really know what there is for me to do. I don't know what sort of job there would be for me in New Zealand if I wanted to do music. For now, I'm going to stay here and enjoy this part of the world, and see if I can get something else going."

JOHN RUSSELL

Kiwi Connections

Ron Sexsmith

Canadian singer/songwriter Ron Sexsmith — who has just released his second album, *Other Songs* — is acutely aware of the fact he's currently better known in places as far afield as Japan and New Zealand than in his home country. After years of struggling in Toronto clubs, he is only now reaching headline status there. The enthusiastic response his self-titled debut received internationally cheered him through some career setbacks, and the soft-spoken young man speaks fondly of his first visit to New Zealand last year.

"I'd love to go back and play more dates there. I got to meet Dave Dobbyn, and he actually introduced me at my Auckland show."

Furthering Sexsmith's kiwi connection is the fact he works with the noted production/engineering team of Mitchell Froom and Tchad Blake, who have worked extensively with Dobbyn, Crowded House, and the Finn Brothers. Tim and Neil actually invited Ron along on their North American tour last year. "It was for about 10 days, going from Toronto, New York and Boston, over to the Fillmore in San Francisco and ending in Los Angeles. We talked quite a bit between shows, and they were really good to me, sharing their dressing rooms and so on."

The Finns are just a part of an ever-expanding fan club. The intimate honesty of Sexsmith's lyrics and hauntingly melancholy voice have made him a darling amongst both peers and the international music press. Those singing his praises with genuine enthusiasm have included Costello, Paul McCartney, Chris Difford, Radiohead, John Hiatt, Neil Finn, Nick Lowe, Sheryl Crow (who guests on *Other Songs*), Paul Simon, Edie Brickell (with whom Ron has collaborated), and Shawn Colvin.

Colvin and Lowe are performing his songs in concert, which should aid his negotiations for a new publishing deal. In one now legendary celebrity endorsement, Costello was depicted on the cover of *Mojo*, holding a copy of Ron's self-titled 1995 release, Elvis' favourite record of that year. Sexsmith has taken this in stride, but confesses to anxiety upon meeting McCartney.

"That was the most nervous I've been. Going

up his driveway, I was worried about stupid things like whether I'd picked the right shirt! I was just trying to visualise meeting him, but the cool thing was he was already waiting at the door for me to show up, and that put me at ease a bit. It wasn't like I had to be lead down a hall, but it was still pretty wild. Just meeting anyone, I find a little hard. Sometimes this all still feels so strange. When I was trying to get off the ground, I always felt I would get there, even at the lowest points, but there is so much luck involved too. Having anyone say something positive is a pay-off. You want evidence you're not fooling yourself.

In this hype-driven business, encountering a talent like Sexsmith is a rare pleasure. He is shy and self-effacing, but that masks a fierce determination to stay true to his muse, regardless of the commercial cost.

That resolve caused problems for he and producer Froom at his record label, Interscope, with the first record, but the pair had the last laugh.

"Eventually the record did OK," says Ron. "It didn't sell a lot, but ultimately Interscope was encouraged by the reaction. It created this atmosphere, where 'Yes, we think you and Mitchell did a good job.' It was a lot easier this time around."

Other Songs reunites Sexsmith and the producer/engineer team of Froom and long-time comrade Tchad Blake (Costello, Crowded House, Los Lobos). "I write all different kinds of songs, and Mitchell helps me create a world in which they can all exist and make sense with each other," praises Ron. "Mitchell has a pretty good track record of people like Richard Thompson and Crowded House wanting to keep working with him. Some people on the outside think he's some kind of tyrant, trying to force his sound on everyone, but that's not the case. You trust him and he's really fast on his feet. I'd like to do all my records with him!"

This time out, Blake gets a co-production credit. "They're a good team in the sense they'll pull each other back. They've got a good thing going. I can't think of any other producer/engineer relationship like it."

Often termed a roots songwriter, Sexsmith considers himself a pop artist, citing the ambi-



tious musical textures of Brian Wilson, Ray Davies, and the Beatles, as key inspirations. "We aimed to record these small songs I'd written, then orchestrate them. This one seemed more outgoing, more of a pop record, than the first. I don't want to pretend I walk a straight line, only listening to country or folk. I think my music could go any direction. I could have made a roots rock record or, with a different producer, a Phil Collins type record. My music is a mutt kind of thing! People like Nilsson and Randy Newman, their early records were all over the place, and I like that. At a time when male singer/songwriters aren't making much impact, I think the only way you really can is to be as sure about yourself — even as extreme — as you can, instead of trying to fit into something."

There is a greater musical variety on *Other Songs*, with the first single and video, 'Nothing Good', being more up-tempo than typical Sexsmith songs. 'Strawberry Blonde' sports a gorgeously catchy melody, while the openly honest sentiments of 'Honest Mistake' and 'Pretty Little Cemetery' are truly affecting.

There is no anger or irony in Sexsmith tunes, and that is rare today. "I don't think anyone

would believe me if I tried to sound angry!" laughs Ron. "I think my lyrics are simple because I'm not really good with wordplay. Some stuff — like 'Honest Mistake' — is as direct as you can get. Some people don't like that, finding it claustrophobic. Look at Brian Wilson. When he wrote lyrics, he never tried to be clever. I just go with what I've got and don't mess with it. If it's not poetry, the lyric has to complement the music. People can tune out the lyrics if they want."

With *Other Songs* just released, Sexsmith will first concentrate on North America for touring. He is about to begin his first national club tour of Canada as a headliner, and is looking forward to that situation.

"I've opened for a lot of people (Elvis Costello, Radiohead, even Supergrass) and done festivals. They're fun, but I never really felt I was getting anywhere. By the time the headliner comes on, people have forgotten about you. It's important to have the time to create my own thing. Opening in a big place, all subtlety goes out the window. You have to make the most noise you can, and we don't make much noise!"

KERRY DOOLE