

A Christmas selfie – for a cause

Andy Kim comes home to Montreal with Ron Sexsmith and guests

by Jeff Heinrich



L-to-R: Ron Sexsmith, Mark Holmes (Platinum Blonde), Alan Frew (Glass Tiger); Kevin Drew (Broken Social Scene), Derek Downham (The Beauties); Andy Kim. Live at the Corona Theatre, Montreal, Dec. 13, 2014. © Jeff Heinrich

Damn the auto-focus assist – it made me miss a shot.

In the crowd down by the stage at the Corona Theatre on Saturday night, my teenage daughter scowled and turned away when I aimed my camera in her direction, her reverie broken by the orange pulse from my point-and-shoot.

I wanted to catch her beaming face as she stared up in awe at Ron Sexsmith, the baby-faced balladeer from Ontario. He'd been her musical idol for over a decade, even since we started playing his Cobblestone Runway double-CD on the drives down to the cottage in the Townships.

We have all his albums, and my daughter can sing a lot of the songs by heart: On a Whim, Former Glory, Lemonade Stand, Strawberry Blonde, Gold in Them Hills, Secret Heart, Michael and His Dad, the list goes on. We'd never seen Sexsmith play live, however – missed him on those rare sorties he made to Montreal to play the International Jazz Fest.

So here he was, finally, on stage under the coloured lights, playing a few songs for Andy Kim Christmas, an annual benefit concert for needy children. Now in its 10th edition, the all-star show branched out from Toronto this year (where it sold out) for a one-time gig in Montreal, Andy Kim's hometown.

You remember Andy Kim from the '60s and '70s, right? Our city's answer to Neil Diamond, with top-40 hits like Baby, I Love You; Rock Me Gently; and of course Sugar, Sugar, the song Kim co-wrote for the TV-'toon band The Archies back in '68. (Ah, the nostalgia. That song – a smash hit that was later named record-of-the-year by the RIAA – was my first exposure to teeny bop music when I was all of six years old. I still have the 45-rpm single, with Melody Hill on side B.



Pure teeny pop in under 3 minutes: Sugar, Sugar, the original single from 1968 written by Andy Kim and Jeff Barry and performed by The Archies. © Jeff Heinrich

Now a svelte 60-something, with longish dyed black hair, a well-cut suit and lots of silver jewellery, Andy Kim and his 10-piece band saluted the hometown crowd at the Corona with a handful of hits. Then, after three-song sets by his special guests, he dueted with Sexsmith on the '68 song *How'd We Ever Get This Way*. In between, we got performances by:

- Local heroes Patrick Watson (like me, a Hudson boy; he sang John Lennon's Happy Xmas solo at the upright piano), Sam Roberts (West Island-raised, wiry little guy, reminded me of Springsteen), and Amy Millan (the lovely voice of Stars; apologized for looking flustered, blamed a last-minute babysitting snafu);
- '80s rock throwbacks Alan Frew (Glass Tiger; also wrote the grammatically challenged Vancouver Winter Olympics anthem *I Believe (in the Power of You and I)*); and the glam-pusses Platinum Blonde (singer/bassist Mark Holmes did a showstopping solo rendition of *You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch*, and during the band's closing number, *It Really Doesn't Matter*, guitarist Sergio Galli looked like he was going to flip his wig);
- Toronto indie-music prince Kevin Drew (Broken Social Scene). Watching the Spinal Tap-ish Platinum Blonde set beside me in the crowd and seeing the "WTF?" look on my face, he answered with a gleeful shout: "Why not?").

All the musicians were there *pro bono*; the three-hour show was a benefit for the [Starlight Children's Foundation](#), a charity whose mandate is to "lift the spirits of seriously ill children and their loved ones." [On the train-ride down from Toronto](#) on Friday with his posse of musicians, including Sexsmith, Kim praised the cause and all the sponsors who helped make it happen. They also got in a little *a cappella* singing, ending with Sugar, Sugar. Good vibe.

My daughter and I felt a bit shortchanged at Saturday's show by the man we'd really come to see: Sexsmith. Only three songs, just like the rest, and none we recognized. One was seasonal (a cover of Chris Rea's *Driving Home for Christmas*, with Sexsmith sporting a Nez Rouge pin in his lapel); one was something new off his upcoming album (a song of unusual chord changes called *St. Bernard*, which the singer explained is "my favourite dog"); and finally there was his duet with Kim. It was just enough to give us a taste of what Sexsmith is like as a performer (understated, straight-up, WYSIWYG) but far from what we've come to expect of him as a songsmith (bloody brilliant).



Ron Sexsmith performs "Driving Home for Christmas" with Derek Downham and backup singer, at the Corona. © Jeff Heinrich

For the finale around 11 p.m., everyone came back on stage for a rousing rendition of Rock Me Gently. At the far edge of the stage, Frew managed to lasso Sexsmith and Holmes into an impromptu selfie, which was kind of cute, and before we knew it the show was over. "I need a drink," Kim said, leaving the stage without an encore.

After all was sung and done, I must say that as a first-timer I don't totally get all this love for Andy Kim. Sure, he has a pedigree as pop royalty on the Canadian music scene, has sold millions of records, is still in fine voice, seems like a swell guy and has attracted some hip admirers over the years. He and Sexsmith taped a Christmas-themed duet together a decade ago that sort of gets at their friendship and the moral centre that binds them ([Whatever Happened to Christmas?](#)) Maybe having an annual gig is just a good way to bridge the generation gap, bring some lovin' to the airwaves (Kim, too, has a new album coming out this winter), and simply celebrate being Canadian, proud and free. Any excuse for a party, I suppose.

Like Drew said: Why not? Merry Christmas, everyone.