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With Heart, Head and Hips

His rhythm as irrepressible as his hair, Sherwood Lumsden writes great lyrics – and honky-tonk music you can't sit still to, says Antonia Morton.

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Catch Sherwood Lumsden on stage – preferably someplace intimate like the Great Canadian Theatre Company – and you know you're watching a true performer. Here's this good-lookin' blond with a guitar and a twangy tenor voice, making the crowd laugh out loud at his story of the smuggled bathroom copy of *Utne Reader* that inspired his pairing of Elvis and Jesus.

When he gets into that song, the fun really starts: he's the kind of musician who throws his whole body into playing his guitar, dancing on stage with it. But eye-appeal aside, his lyrics are the kind you have to pay attention to – particularly in this song. It's no small feat to take on two icons at once and be really funny, deeply irreverent ("God's been talking to the devil 'bout amalgamation"), and, yes, even kinda serious and moving.

The crowd loves it: toes tap all over the joint. CKCU country music critic Chopper McKinnon, who's followed Lumsden's career for years, says: "Sherwood has a really irrepressible rhythmic delivery, even on the slow songs. I can't see him play without wanting to dance, and I'm not a dancer."

Lumsden's straight-from-the-heart delivery, which sounds as if he's just personally reinvented honky-tonk, is a big hit. But it's his lively songwriting that may make him a star. When it works, there's a real poetic intelligence to it – not to mention an easy intimacy with country styling, both lyrical and musical.

For the last couple of years, his shows have been a blend of favourite old songs from his first CD *All I Need* (1996), and new material from what's now his second – the rather unimaginatively titled *Hey, Hey*, which debuts today.

On the topic of his development as an artist, Lumsden is characteristically self-deprecating. "Erratic and show," he says wryly, running his hand through a dandelion tangle of hair. (Lumsden's unruly fair curls are as irrepressible as his playing; even on album covers and publicity stills, it looks as though his hair has been tamed, with difficulty, just long enough for the photo shoot.)

When he isn't in performing mode he's not exactly shy, just a lot less wired. It's as if the extroverted performer and the introverted writer take turns sharing the same body: all that cockiness seems to get summoned up when he goes onstage, and get packed away again when he comes off.

"I always tried to write. but I was well into my twenties when I took a writing workshop – and found all my short stories came out like songs," he said. Was he the kind of music-in-the-blood kid who twanged his first guitar at the age of 7? "I probably did do that, but didn't pick it up again afterwards until I was 26!" he admitted. "I came to playing music pretty late."

What matured him as a performing musician, he said, was touring abroad – which happened mainly because his first CD slipped through the North American genre cracks. "I realized that nobody liked that honky-tonk folk style in Canada – it wasn't country, and it wasn't folk. But they liked it in Europe , and I grabbed hold of that."

Lumsden and his longtime friend and backup player Cameron Terrill spent three weeks touring Germany and Holland to rave reviews: German critics, who seem to know good rockabilly when they hear it , enthused over his freshness and vitality.

"I'd been playing on and off in Ottawa for about ten years, but never consistently enough to actually get any better in performance – I'd always put my energy into songwriting," Lumsden said. "But playing 18 shows in three weeks made us a lot more solid."

McKinnon agrees. "Doing that trip, playing in front of total strangers, really boosted Sherwood's confidence," he asserts. "He's a professional musician now – before, I don't think he was doing it full-time enough for music to top his resumé."

That resumé, of the starving-artist/jack-of-all-trades variety, runs from growing up near Smiths Falls ("I've always played country, being as I'm from a farm," he drawled in his Ottawa Valley twang) to getting a degree in economics from the University of British Columbia. He spent three summers with a travelling carnival; worked in a mine in Northern Ontario ("I was a pretty bad miner, I used to bump into things all the time"); and did a longish stint as a supply teacher ("A new audience every day of Grades 7s and 8s really helped my performance skills"). Now 30, he brings in the bread and butter as a court monitor ("Weird and interesting; it's dry stuff, but pretty fascinating") while preparing for this summer's European tour.

A lot of that experience comes out in his songs – especially in *Hey, Hey*, which in many ways is much more personal than *All I Need*. The first CD was a mostly blithe collection of hurtin' love songs, which could lead a fan to assume that Lumsden has

spent his personal life in a series of catastrophic *affaires du coeur*. He laughs shortly: "Well, country songs are like that, it's defined by the genre. Loss in love is really a metaphor for loss in life, when all your expectation and dreams aren't met."

It's failure to achieve, though, rather than loss, that seems most dominant in *Hey, Hey*. Lumsden's scope broadens from romantic relationships to include personal tales about his mother, his brother, and the old family farm.

Several also deal with the artist's ambivalent attitude to what William James called "the bitch-goddess" of material success. Songs like *I Ain't Quite Got It* and *Honky Tonk Man in Chinatown* deal in different ways with the longing for money and respectability – a longing that's eternally at odds with the musician's desire for freedom from material ties.

The jaunty, assured *Soon As I'm Through*, in particular, seems to express a longing (however tongue-in-cheek Lumsden meant it) for a saner, tidier life: "I'll sit down and do my taxes / Wash the towels and read my faxes / Soon as I'm through missing you." Sounds almost like secret urge to live in a suburban duplex, rather than in the tower of song.

That urge seems expressed again in a lovely song Lumsden has seldom performed (probably because its theme of late-onset maturity isn't a sure-fire crowd pleaser): *A Touch of Grace*, a gentle, melodic ballad to reconciliation with life. Coming right after this, the fierce bravado and jerky rhythms of *Wilder Now* – rougher and tougher, with its theme of cutting loose – has a really desperate edge.

Sadly, two or three songs on *Hey, Hey* (including the title track) fall off the end of the listenability bell curve. But Lumsden's new CD is more reflective and mature than his earlier work, and musically more cohesive as well. As McKinnon says, "It's obvious that a lot of work went into its production."

Still, for all the charm of his words, musical arrangements and voice – which (especially when he retires the twang and sings *au naturel*) has a seductive quality that can give real pathos, or real devilry, to a song – you definitely get the best value for your Sherwood dollar catching him live.

He's got great music, intelligent lyrics, and a delivery with real sex appeal. To paraphrase a comment of McKinnon's: Sherwood Lumsden's music comes from the heart, gets a good working over in the head, and emerges at the hips. It's two parts Jesus, one part Elvis.
