

REVIEW – James Bay at Queen's Hall



It propels the latest one-hit-making, slightly distinguishable individual into an award that pretty much nobody wants: it's the Critics' Choice award. Yet, funnily enough, the critics don't choose who gets it. Who does? I certainly didn't.

This Critics' Choice fame is reminiscent of that given to Tom Odell in the past.

The only difference this time for James Bay is his top-hat wearing, chisel-jaw identity that, for the former, several members of the audience are trying to copy.

Of course, in typical Critics' Choice tradition, there is nothing here that oozes originality. It's the prosaic that comes from live pop artists these days, struggling to build up the momentum of the crowd amid a monotonous shower of ballads and borderline rip-off hooks, and a sea of phones to capture those very mundane moments.

James Bay's rocket to fame is a little disconcerting. The singer-songwriter has just sold out his second night at O2 Academy Glasgow, not to mention that he has also sold out three nights at the 5,000-capacity Brixton Academy.

The 62-million Spotify streamed hit emphasises one thing: follow the guidelines to allow you to write a pop song and it may miraculously gain velocity as it reaches A-list Radio 1, then people buy the album for that one song.

'Hold Back the River' is what everybody is waiting for, and even the songs that sound remotely similar to it lift the crowd up prematurely. Of course, Bay leaves it to the end to a

standing ovation, glancing at the last of the small venues he'll play for a while.

But if there's anything James Bay can be charged with, it's the matter of not complicating things.

Take Tom Odell as an example, again. *Long Way Down* is a 35-minute album, and for all the dreariness it exudes during that relatively short amount of time, a live show can't surpass an hour, if that.

Ninety minutes later on the Usher Hall stage and Tom Odell can still be bashing away at his piano. A total travesty unfolds right in front of 1,500 peoples' eyes. James Bay just didn't do that, and rightly so. He played what the crowd wanted to hear, even if he struggled to motivate them.

It was a real struggle to grasp what the big deal is. Bay isn't exactly authentic, which is a trait all musicians strive for right now. He did not take advantage of the opportunity to become a charismatic live figure, while the band were ultimately there to make the songs and himself look good.

Effectively, you may as well stay at home and listen to the album – the live experience isn't any different.