

It's all uphill from here: James Bay studies the angles, San Francisco, 27 March, 2018.

Bay in the Area: JB wows the Fillmore crowd.



# THE CHANGINGMAN

Singer-songwriter unveils new sound and look to a shrieking San Francisco crowd.

**JAMES BAY**  
FILLMORE,  
SAN FRANCISCO  
TUESDAY,  
27 MARCH, 2018  
★★★★

It is James Bay who brings up the absent elephant in the room first. "I did an interview the other day," he begins, sat upstairs at the Fillmore in San Francisco. "It always starts with, 'Sorry, I hate to do this but... I have to ask about the hat.'" Not that he seems overly bothered by such enquiries. "I imagine David Bowie got a lot of questions: 'Where have the eyebrows gone? Why is your hair bright yellow now?'"

Though a wide-brimmed black bolero does sit on top of a flight case outside of his dressing room, the long-locked, fedora-sporting troubadour behind 2015's twice-platinum debut LP *Chaos And The Calm* is nowhere to be seen today. Instead Bay sits down in suit trousers, steel-toed boots and a sparkly shirt that glistens against his porcelain skin, running his fingers

through his newly shorn hair. It's not just his wardrobe that's been given an overhaul, either. Forthcoming second album *Electric Light* largely jettisons the roots-lite singer-songwriter moves of its predecessor in favour of a slick, more modern sound that takes in spacious electronic pop, slinky R&B and the soulful glitches of Bon Iver's recent records.

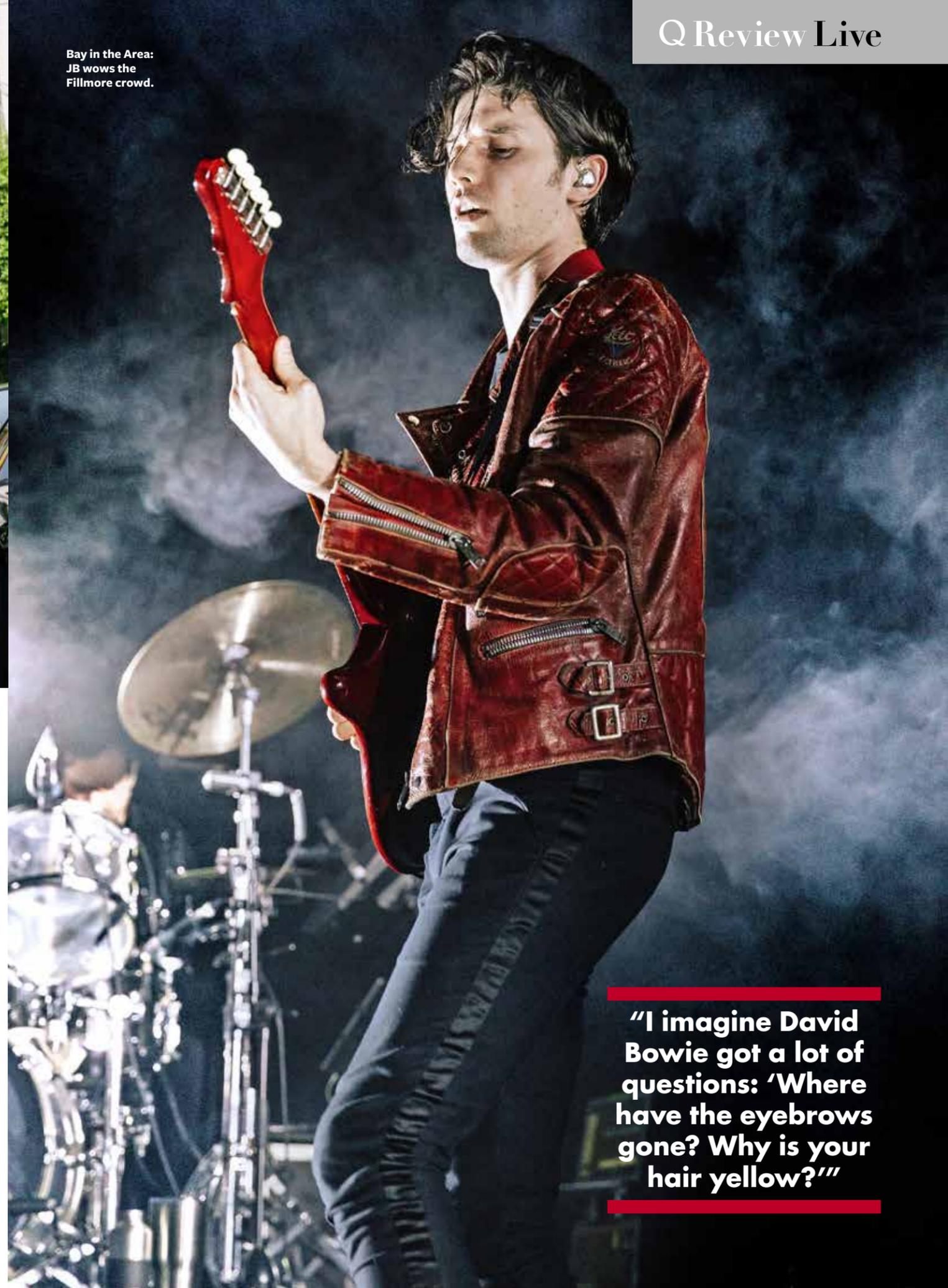
Bay points to the Auto-Tuned vocals and floating synths of lead single *Wild Love* as the signpost for his reinvention. "I sat back and listened to it and I knew in that moment that this is not music that was going to be performed by a bloke with long hair and a hat. So I changed," he reasons. "To stay the same is boring. Prince sacked his name off. Michael Jackson went from tuxedo and Afro to hat, glove, red leather jacket, to buckles and a biker jacket across his three most important albums. There are some

more bizarre, potentially biological changes that went on too, but..."

They are lofty comparisons to make but it transpires Bay currently has his eyes determinedly fixed on some pretty big prizes. The Fillmore is a special place for "The Bay" – as his team call him. When he was growing up in Hitchin he'd pore over live albums recorded here by Aretha Franklin and The Black Crowes and played this room on his 23rd birthday, opening for bluesy American singer ZZ Ward. Now 27, he's since experienced a sensational winning streak.

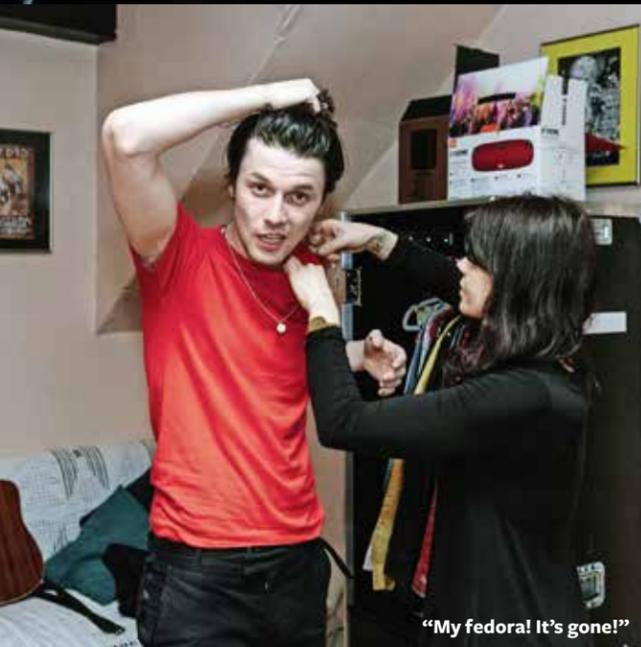
*Chaos And The Calm* was a Transatlantic success: Number 1 in the UK, Number 3 in the US. He won the 2015 Brits Critics' Choice Award, played Glastonbury's Pyramid Stage and supported Taylor Swift on the European leg of her 1989 tour. Seeing that level of pop megastardom up close spurned him to go after it >>

RACHAEL WRIGHT



"I imagine David Bowie got a lot of questions: 'Where have the eyebrows gone? Why is your hair yellow?'"

Thinking big: Bay "treats the stage like he's in an arena."



"My fedora! It's gone!"

himself. At the 2016 Brits he filled a spot as Justin Bieber's guitarist ("It was mad: 'Look, we've lost our guy. Is James up for this?' I'm not gonna say no"). The Taylor Swift tour, however, was the real revelation for him. "I went in with expanse on my mind. I came out shook even harder, even more hungry for that scale. You get a taste of it and it tastes fucking great."

**A**t a mere 2500 people, tonight's crowd is less than half the size of the ones he's due to play to later this year, working as a testing ground for a melding of old material and new songs "to freak people out with".

As the room fills, the scale of Bay's show begins to reveal itself. It's the production that strikes you as much as his first bit of peacocking. Though the

stage is modestly sized, Bay treats it like he's in an arena. A film projection plays across a massive screen of two actors in a troubled relationship, their dialogue mirroring the lyrics to Electric Light's opening track. It's the type of thing you're more accustomed to seeing at a big pop concert where some fantastical theme and story arc bookends proceedings.

He enters quite the pop star, too. In a red, Michael Jackson-in-Thriller style leather jacket and black T-shirt, accompanied by deafening screams. Bay's newly beefed-up backing band of four players and two backing singers inject more soul and R&B into shivering guitar favourites such as Craving, and the as-yet-unheard chain-gang rock of Us and Slide. The latter's stripped-back arrangement allows the band to down tools and all gather around a microphone behind Bay like

his own backing line of Bay-ettes. It ends on a recording of Allen Ginsberg's poem Song, which plays out as he exits for a mid-set change of clothes. His outfit changes pale in comparison to his guitar-switching though, with almost a different instrument brought out for every song.

For those less fussed by Bay's new whistles-and-bells razzmatazz, there's still plenty of more earnest, one-man-and-his-six-string moments. Bay goes in for some serious eye-scrunching noodling over the schmaltzier likes of When We Were On Fire, for instance.

Such older numbers feel a little misplaced now though, and certainly Bay himself looks more entertained hollering new Blondie-tinged single Pink Lemonade. He toe-heels his feet and flicks his head; free-er, friskier, and a lot more dynamic. "I need one thing from you," he says. "You need to be fucking loud." The crowd oblige throughout, inciting clap-alongs and on Just For Tonight they carry a whole chorus so Bay doesn't have to. "Listen," he coos with all the heartthrob charm of Harry Styles. "I had my hopes up. But I didn't expect this. And I love it."

To accompany the new songs' versatility, Bay's voice has diversified too. Rasping and jeering on rockabilly barnstormer Best Fake Smile, on Wild Love it's hushed to allow the electro nuances to flourish. With a soaring

**SETLIST**

- Intro
- Wasted On Each Other
- Pink Lemonade
- Craving
- If You Ever Want To Be In Love
- When We Were On Fire
- Wild Love
- Scars
- Us
- Slide
- Just For Tonight
- Let It Go
- Best Fake Smile
- Hold Back The River
- Need The Sun To Break



Poster boy: Bay in relaxed mood, pre-gig.

**"I came away from the Taylor Swift tour with a taste for that scale. It tastes fucking great."**

pre-encore version of breakthrough hit Hold Back The River he sounds like a one-man British Kings Of Leon. It provokes the fans into a final round of ear-splitting shrieking as he comes back for one last number before walking off to Kiss by Prince, a little nod to his new-found capriciousness.

Backstage, Bay recalls a time when the screams were so uncomfortable he

had to wince through a performance. "I can understand why The Beatles stopped playing," he says, his choice of reference again betraying the scale of his ambitions. Retiring to his dressing room, it's time to cool down his vocal cords with a humidifier, and prepare for the next show. There's no beer, there's no party, but there is a major pop star in waiting. *EVE BARLOW*



The new-look, new-sounding James Bay: "free-er, friskier and a lot more dynamic."