



Music Feature

Hayden rebounds

Sad-sack songsmith on the upswing

Bryan Borzykowski

HAYDEN and **JAYMAY** at the Danforth Music Hall (147 Danforth), Tuesday (February 19), 7 pm. \$25. 416-870-8000.

Paul Hayden Desser arrives in Vancouver a day before he plays a sold-out show at UBC. The reclusive Toronto singer/songwriter is excited about the gig – he loves playing theatres. He’s booked in a bunch of them on his current Canadian tour, and almost every show is sold out.

That’s not surprising in itself, but when you recall that Hayden hasn’t toured the Great White North in three years and his last record was released in 2004, it’s amazing that he can still command such rabid audiences.

“I don’t know what it is,” says the soft-spoken Hayden, whose fifth record, *In Field & Town* (Universal), hit stores in January. “I go away every few years and make a record, put it out and do some touring, and people in Canada especially have come to see me play.

“I can’t really explain it except to say my records are genius,” he says, laughing.

Today it’s hard to deny that Hayden’s got a gift, but that wasn’t the case in 1998, when he released his sophomore effort and major-label debut, *The Closer I Get*. The gritty record failed to inspire audiences, and it could have derailed his short career, especially after he was kicked off his label. Luckily, Hayden only has himself to worry about.

“The idea of the artist who’s ruined by a major label situation is definitely more about bands than solo artists,” he says. “It involves more people who are going to be put off by whatever happened, so a lot of bands fall apart when that scenario occurs.”

Hayden admits that rebounding from *The Closer I Get*’s poor reception wasn’t easy. Taking three years to release follow-up *Skyscraper National Park* and a lack of touring also had people wondering if the guitarist had thrown in the towel.

In retrospect, it was probably wise of Hayden to take his time to regroup, but his hiatus – and the sporadic release schedule he continues to follow – could have led many of his fans to turn elsewhere for their fill of depressing indie folk.

“He’s a bit of an enigma in that way,” says Steven Himmelfarb, Hayden’s booking agent. “He’s basically been ‘away’ from performing since iTunes and iPods came onto the scene, and never had a real MySpace page until this record came out.”

Hayden’s discs are usually full of sad-sack acoustic tunes, but the songwriter’s skills have greatly improved with every album – especially *In Field & Town*, which actually has a few more-upbeat numbers.

In Field & Town offers the rollicking, full-band number *Worthy Of Your Esteem*, the delicate piano of the tears-inducing *Did I Wake Up Beside You?* and the perfectly placed horns on *More Than Alive*, all reasons for listeners to keep coming back.

“He would not be in the same position had he been trying to remake *Everything I Long For* for the last decade,” says Himmelfarb, explaining why Hayden’s career is at its strongest. “Oh, and the hair. People like his hair.”