

Wildflowers

If you like breezy, supremely melodic, semi-acoustic pop with roots in both the UK folk-rock and US singer-songwriter movements of the late-'60s and early-'70s, then you'll love **Wildflowers**, a trio comprising Bennett sisters **Siddy** (lead vocals, guitar, lyrics) and **Kit** (who sings and plays accordion and keys) and co-songwriter **James Ashbury** (who sings and plays mandolin, acoustic guitar and kick drum).

Don't be fooled, however, by the air of easy-going harmony. Lead singer and lyricist **Siddy Bennett**, possessed of a voice that is equal parts husky and honeyed, didn't just sail into her role in fact, her journey has been rocky, to say the least.

Born 24 years ago, in an old Elizabethan farmhouse in Arlingham, Gloucestershire, which her parents - an errant jazz musician father and a radical socialist, actress mother - used to look after.

"It wasn't that we were wealthy - it was to keep squatters at bay," explains Siddy, who adds that the house, is today, owned by Children's Laureate Michael Morpurgo.

The Bennetts - Siddy and her three older sisters, including **Kit**, were an atypical family. They didn't have a television, her mother insisting that fast-paced TV shows and adverts were having an adverse effect on their brains.

"She wanted us to use our imaginations instead," says Siddy. *"We always used to get invited round to other people's houses because we would come up with the craziest imaginative games. We'd get lost in our own world of make-believe and take other children away from their Nintendos."*

Siddy considers her childhood to have been *"one of the best"* despite substantial penury and her parents' deteriorating relationship - her dad would disappear for months on end then return with no money for her struggling mum.

Her parents split up when she was 10, but Siddy was used to turbulence: she had moved a dozen times by the time she was old enough to go to secondary school.

Siddy's peripatetic lifestyle may seem like something out of the hippie era, and certainly the Bennetts were nomadic, but dippy airheads mooning at the stars and sky **Wildflowers** are not.

It was the six years that she spent on the south coast, from the age of 10 to 16, which hardened Siddy up.

"I had a magical childhood, but Plymouth changes a person," she says with a wry chuckle. There, she was cautioned by police, aged 14, for being drunk (*"I like to explore and have fun"*) and beat up an older guy for manhandling her (*"I spun him round then booted him in the balls"*).

As a consequence, she would walk around town with a precautionary fire-poker, deodorant and lighter in her bag.

Siddy seized the moment aged 16, in the middle of a history lesson, when she told her teacher she was quitting. She decided to join Kit in Bristol, where she studied music - she certainly had an ally in Kit. *"She's pure rock'n'roll,"* Siddy says proudly of her sister. The Bennett girls might like a drink and a smoke, and they know how to party hard, but they're also highly articulate and well-read, with a fascination for everything from US hip hop to Greek mythology.

James, meanwhile, with whom Siddy formed **Wildflowers** in 2012, hails from Birmingham. His entrée into the music industry was accidental - literally: he started playing guitar following a fall from his skateboard, leaving him in a cast for several weeks, unable to do anything but learn to play the six-string.

Skateboarding's loss was music's gain, and after encountering Siddy at music college in Bristol he could tell they had a musical future together.

"Out of everyone on the course, she seemed a really interesting person - a good person to work with," he recalls. *"She was just so confident."*

They spent a memorable first night out as friends, at an open-mic night at The Old Duke in Bristol where Siddy proceeded to perform a little pro-vegetarian ditty called **The Chicken Song**, featuring a rap about battery farming. James immediately invited her to form a band and become his songwriting partner. Their influences certainly dovetailed quite nicely, with James' love of the acoustic finger-picking style of John Martyn and Bert Jansch and harmony-pop of Crosby Stills & Nash, The Eagles and James Taylor. Before long, the pair were the hit of Bristol, able to fill out any venue in the city. But they knew they would have to leave to expand their horizons and so, with Kit now in the band, the three upped sticks and headed to Brighton, where they - plus tour manager and sleeve designer Matt Shurben - shared a one-bedroom flat.

Wildflowers were born, and their music began to take shape, via constant gigging around the country, playing support to folk bands and making appearances at festivals. There was constant travel, which provided Sidy with plenty of grist to the songwriting mill, allowing her to witness her many friends' bacchanalian lifestyles. Eventually, there were enough songs for an album: **On The Inside**, a bouquet of blissful melodies (with the occasional hidden barb) composed by Sidy with James and given the final all-important flourishes by Kit.

"Edge Of The Road is a song about why I left Bristol," admits Sidy, *"It's about feeling uneasy about just having fun and partying all the time - there must be more to life than that."* **Where The Flowers Don't Go**, one of many potential hits on **On The Inside**, concerns domestic abuse, *"It's not about anything that happened in my family, but it's the kind of thing I have witnessed,"* she confides, explaining that the voice at the start of the song concerns **Sampat Pal Dev**, leader of the **Gulabi Gang**, a group of Indian women activists formed as a response to violence against women. **Another Million Miles** is *"about unbridled optimism"*, and wanting desperately to travel to America - Sidy channels the spirit of Patsy Cline, whose songs she would perform, aged seven, in front of her family, whether they liked it or not - on this country-tinged ramble. There are songs on **On The Inside** about *"weed psychosis"* and **Let It Go** lays bare her feelings of abandonment having an absent father throughout most of her teens. **Trust** decides that *"true friendship is being there when someone has fucked up"*. The first single, **Chemistry** (out 15th Jan 2016), explores the pain as well as the pleasure of sex. The last track, **Skyscrapers**, is deceptive: it sounds like a love song but actually it has a darker subtext, written as it was after Sidy watched a documentary about the Vietnam War. *"I like intertwining two meanings,"* she says of an album that *"is light and dark and addresses everything that has happened to me over the last few years"*.

Half produced in Detroit and Brighton and given a bright, bold mix, this is music that reflects the band's love of folk, country, pop and rock and maybe a smidgeon of punk.

Wildflowers have already performed in front of tens of thousands of people including support to Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant, Tom Odell and in 2015, they crowd-sourced the costs of playing and travelling from Scotland to Glastonbury: they played seven gigs in seven nights, including one at Hadrian's Wall.

"We love hanging out with our fans," admits James. *"They travel all over to see us play, so we usually end up drinking with them in the bar! Sometimes they even help us load up our van."*

And in the few moments that they're not touring the length and breadth of Blighty, flying between London and Detroit or working on music, Sidy and Kit film and produce their own YouTube Vegan cookery show **Wild Vegan**.

Their ambition is strong and their potential for massive mainstream success is considerable. They are signed to a Detroit label, **Original 1265 Recordings** (via UK imprint Caroline), and they have some of that city's fiery spirit. Label founders **Kevin Nixon** and **Sarah Clayman**, from the UK, saw the band in London and then again at the annual SXSW festival in Austin, Texas, in 2014. There, they signed them and immediately took them up to Detroit, where **1265** is based.

"We went down really well at SXSW and in Detroit," recalls James. *"Because of our country influence, we make sense to American audiences. Kevin and Sarah loved our sound and harmonies and Sid's storytelling lyrics."*

But where to position them in what remain of the world's record stores? "Wildflowers" is about right: there is beauty on **On The Inside**, but beware of the thorns.

"We're cool pop," decides Sidy. *"Cool pop with a rock element. And an anarchist streak!"*

And with that she's gone, to make another move, plan another gig, write another song.