

# Wolf Alice

"You can join us if you think you're wild," Ellie Rowsell sang on Freazy back in 2015. "You can join us if you're a feral child."

Many like minds answered the call. Wolf Alice's 2015 gold-certified debut album *My Love Is Cool* hit No 2 in the UK charts in June of that year, and No 12 on the Billboard alternative albums chart in the US: that's the sort of success most young guitar bands wait years to achieve. Wolf Alice were nominated for the Mercury prize, Ivor Novello Award, a Brit and Grammy, and took an NME Award for Best Live Band. They crisscrossed the UK, the US, Australia, Japan and Europe on the mother of all two-year tours. Their song Silk appeared on T2 Trainspotting, sequel to a film (and a soundtrack) that defined the 90s. They were picked by 24 Hour Party People and 9 Songs director Michael Winterbottom to be the musical heart of his fictionalised documentary *On the Road*.

It's been a wild time. But for Ellie, the maddest memory is a small moment. "In the van, on our way back from Glastonbury. We were all eating ice-creams and we were in the charts. And that in itself was so strange. And then I was like, 'Oh my god, Hayley from Paramore tweeted us!'"

It's such disorientating details, miniature epiphanies and tiny apocalypses from an extreme ride and the lull that came after, that make up Wolf Alice's second record, *Visions Of A Life*.

"The past two years were such amazing highs and then really extreme lows that you've never encountered before," says Ellie. "That's this album."

It's the classic story. You slog your arse off to make your debut, you tour like a demon, you hit the heights, you get no sleep. Then, when you finally come off the road, you come home to an empty house. "There's some extremely concentrated emotional fluctuation," says bassist Theo Ellis.

Instead of floundering or foundering, Wolf Alice channelled their restless energy into a forward motion. "On the first record maybe we were trying to hold back certain aspects, stylistic things," says guitarist Joff Oddie. "With this one, we thought 'we can do what we want'."

Regrouping in London, they spent intense weeks in the rehearsal room, working out their experiences in a wealth of new material. When it came time to pick someone to help hone it down, a coincidental name popped up. Justin Meldal-Johnsen worked on Paramore's *After Laughter*, Tegan and Sara's *Heartthrob* and M83's *Hurry Up We're Dreaming*, as well as playing with the likes of Tori Amos, Nine Inch Nails and Beck. Ellie, however, recognised his name from the Raveonettes *Pe'Ahi*, the only album she'd ever looked up to see who produced it. The rest of the band remembered seeing him play with Beck at *Electric Picnic*. "We all watched that show and went 'That's one of the best shows we've ever seen, and that bassist is fucking mad and cool,'" says Theo. "And then somehow we ended up making a record with him, which is a nice bit of the world working its magic."

Meldal-Johnsen lives in Los Angeles, which is how Wolf Alice accidentally stumbled into the "band make it big, record second album in LA" cliché. "It sounds so bad," says Theo. "But we were doing six days a week out there, our whole life was around doing the record. So it wasn't the 'go to LA' thing."

And indeed, *Visions Of A Life* is not an album of cliché. It's packed with surprises for those who think they know what Wolf Alice's shtick is. A gauntlet is hurled by the exhilarating rage-rush of comeback track Yuk Foo, briskly laying waste to all it sees in a little over two minutes. "*You bore me, you bore me to death,*" screams Ellie. "*Deplore me? No i don't give a shit.*"

Who the "you" in question is is up to us. "We wanted to make it open to interpretation, so that anyone who was frustrated at something could have it as their anthem," says Ellie. She herself was inspired by "being sick and fed up of certain expectations... for me a lot of it is about being a young woman. Even the shit, everyday wolf-whistle thing. As I get older, I feel like 'Why have I always put up with that?' When I sing that kind of song, it's everything that I want to do when that happens."

It's a good time, of course, for anthems to anger. "I think almost everyone feels frustrated right now, don't they?" says Ellie. "And petrified as well," adds Theo. "I read the news this morning and I was physically scared."

The band themselves have been doing their bit to do something positive with that frustration and fear. Ellie and Theo set up the Bands For Refugees movement, after the horrors of Europe's migrant crisis and the lack of compassion shown in many quarters shocked them into action. More recently, in the run up to the election, the band used their social media to urge young people to make their voice heard, with Ellie fronting a Labour video urging people to register to vote before the deadline. "It's just growing up and realising the potential of what you can do with the platform you've been given," says Joff. "I think you have to do everything you can to stay hopeful," says Ellie. "Nothing gets better if you're hopeless."

Though political turmoil seeped into the emotional extremes of *Visions Of A Life*, it's fundamentally a personal album, and one of great growth for Wolf Alice.

Helping them through these emotional and sonic leaps was Meldal-Johnsen. Recording at engineer Carlos De La Garza's Music Friends studio in Eagle Rock, California, he created a safe, collaborative environment for them to grow, but also pushed them further. "He can play and hear notes you don't even know exist," says drummer Joel Amey. "He's working at such a high level that you just wanna try and be on the same level."

You can hear the results in the swaggering monster-folk-rock of Sadboy, offering a buck-up to miseryguts everywhere and of all genders. And their progression and maturity as songwriters is particularly obvious in the beautifully paced, sweet and slow-burning Don't Delete the Kisses, a dizzyingly romantic track that tells of the delicious agony of unspoken love between friends over softly twinkling guitar and a steady rhythm. It's a sentimental love song for people who didn't do sentimental love songs until they fell sentimentally, ridiculously in love. "How awful is that, I'm like a teenage girl!" Ellie sings. "I might as well write all over my notebook that you 'rock my world'.

Intense emotion of a quite different kind pervades Heavenward, written about the death of a friend. It's one of the biggest songs Wolf Alice have ever done, a cloudburst of shoegazey guitar and vaulting vocals (Ellie's voice is a much stronger, expressive thing than ever). "*I'm gonna celebrate you forever,*" Ellie promises. "*You taught us things we all should learn.*"

Listeners will be surprised, meanwhile, by Beautifully Unconventional, a muscularly grooved beast of track that's a sister in spirit if not sound to Bikini Kill's Rebel Girl. It cements Ellie's reputation as the foremost smasher of whatever pop's equivalent of the Bechdel test is, following up her ode to young female friendship on Bros. "I wrote it about one of my friends," she says. "My feelings towards her reminded me of the film Heathers, where everyone is a Heather and you find your other non-Heather... a 'you can be my partner in crime', sorta thing."

You might have noticed the word "friend" comes up a lot in relation to Wolf Alice. More than anything, that's what these feral children are and what they celebrate. The intensity of success – something that breaks or at least tests many young bands – brought them only closer together.

"It's a weird thing," says Theo. "I hope I'm not jinxing it by saying this but we really do spend a lot of time together... we know each other so well, intricately well, more than you would have in marriage. It's so close that it almost takes on a new state rather than like a relationship or like a friendship. Maybe it's not very necessarily healthy..."

If it sounds this good, how can it be wrong? Here's to Wolf Alice, a reason for downhearted feral children to keep faith with the future.

**Visions Of A Life is released on 29 September via Dirty Hit.**

**[wolfalice.co.uk](http://wolfalice.co.uk)**

More information: [Adrian Read](#) and [Chloe Melick](#) at inside/out