

Breaking the silence

With her new single dubbed an anthem for our age, songwriter Sadie Jemmett speaks volumes with her defiant brand of protest songs Interview by Kirsten Jones

If you're a fan of folk music, Sadie Jemmett will be a familiar name. The 48-year-old singer-songwriter has been making music since her teens and has travelled around Europe and the US, both with bands and as a solo artist. She has supported both Aled Jones and Judy Collins on tour and counts Yoko Ono among her celebrity fans.

Sadie is a true songwriter whose music reveals her path through life and tells stories about the people she loves, like her mother. "I had quite an unusual mother," Sadie reveals. "She was a bit of a damaged soul. Bless her, she couldn't really provide a home, so my brother and I lived with a lot of different families. About nine, I think."

At 16, Sadie decided she'd had enough of adults telling her what to do so she decided to up sticks and spend life on the road. "I had lots of parental figures telling me what I should and shouldn't be doing. I thought, 'You know what? I'll take it from here.' I was wild. I thought I'd feel better if I saw a different place. Well, I didn't. You can't run away from yourself, can you?"

Sadie's 2011 debut album, *The Blacksmith's Girl*, is described as a 12-track confession of raw and magical music made up of memories from her childhood, her wild teenage years and her journey towards a happier life. Penning the songs helped her come to terms with her relationship with her mother and – move on.

"I've always written music and played in bands," she says. "My first was a roots-reggae group called the African Ambassadors, in Edinburgh. Then I moved to Berlin and played in a very Pogues-y sort of band. We had a wild frontman who would jump all over the tables."

Following her first album, Sadie began to take her inspiration from the news and current events. Her latest single, *Don't Silence Me*,

is from her new album, *Phoenix*, which is out this month. It touches on love, loss and remembrance and includes a couple of political numbers with a punchy sense of defiance. Sadie wrote *Don't Silence Me* for her friend, *Casualty* actress Mhairi Morrison, after she revealed she'd been drugged and assaulted by a film director.

"I see it as a protest song against harassment and sexual assault of any kind, man or woman," says Sadie. "It's a song about people using their power to oppress and assault. It's a big subject and it's difficult for people to talk about it."

Don't Silence Me has been plugged as an anthem of the #MeToo movement and victims of sexual assault.

The single made waves on its release in March and the video features actresses and survivors who lip-sync to Sadie's lyrics. "My friend told me what had happened to her. It really upset me. I watched a documentary about Harvey Weinstein and found myself reaching for a pen and writing down words," she recalls. "Most of the women in the video are survivors, like Lili Bernard, who was one of the women responsible for putting Bill Cosby in jail."

Sadie is hoping the track gets a few spins on the radio and she has received support from Hollywood star Rosanna Arquette and Canadian singer-songwriter Ron Sexsmith.

"I have another political song on the album called *The Wilder Shores Of Love*. It's about the Syrian refugees," she explains. "It's not easy listening. It's slow yet disturbing. You wouldn't want to put that on and have a bath."

Sadie also has links to the theatrical world. Her parents were actors and her brother is involved in theatre. "My parents met at the Hackney Empire. They were in a play together,"

she reveals. "I went to drama school but it was actually my music that ended up being successful. A theatre director picked up a song of mine and used it in a big show in Paris. The universe told me I should be doing music."

Sadie has twice worked with DJ Frank Frenzy, co-writing music for plays in Paris and Switzerland, and has written songs for theatre director and actress Irina Brook. She has quite a following in France, too, which she puts down to her storytelling. "If you touch on a certain subject it encourages people to get in touch. That's the joy of social media," she adds. "A song of mine called *Adventures In Sobriety*, about a friend who stopped drinking, got loads of people in conversation."

She's got a thing or two to say about Donald Trump, too. *OK. Wow!*, her single with band Floating Arm, came after the US President pulled out of the Paris agreement. "There were lots of hashtags for that one," she says.

Sadie cites Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young as her inspiration. She also likes reggae and a bit of Lady Gaga. "Rather than fall in love with an artist, I fall for the song," she says. "The best lyrics come to me when I'm occupied by something else, say cooking or a train ride where I've got a little rhythm. When I wrote *Adventures In Sobriety* I was out and had to write it on my arm. I'm a bit more organised now. I sing using voice memos on my phone, which is a bit embarrassing in the middle of London Bridge station."

While Sadie plans a grand tour of Canada next year, her teenage daughter has a very different dream. It's not music and Sadie's happy about that. "She's studying psychology and I'm really pleased. She's got a beautiful voice but she doesn't want to sing. It's not a glamorous life, music – more of a slog. On tour you sit on buses and eat bad sandwiches."

Sadie dreams of playing in Santa Fe, but for now she's busy with her *Phoenix* tour, music for film and, maybe, an album of cover songs. "I'd like to put out a little album of covers. I do it in my own way. It means a lot for me to get the words right. Words are inspiring, healing and comforting to anyone who listens." ☘

"It's a protest song about people using their power to oppress"

PHOTOGRAPH: DAMIAN DUNCAN / STYLIST: TAMSIN NATHAN / MAKEUP: MIKAELA HONEYWILL

