Josienne Clarke and Ben Walker should have been on cloud nine after the release of their exquisite 2016 album Overnight. It was the pair’s first for Rough Trade after self-releasing their previous albums and the reviews were nothing short of glowing. And yet things didn’t pan out quite how they’d hoped. Overnight sold only modestly and, wondering if they might not get a second chance with Rough Trade, Clarke and Walker were pitched into a period of soul-searching. Were all the sacrifices and disappointments and emotional turmoil really worth it in order to pursue their dream?

Clarke had to remind herself that nothing is guaranteed in life. She doesn’t come from a bloodline of professional musicians and there are no lofty expectations instilled in you when you’ve been to a bog-standard comprehensive school in special measures. So Clarke used the disillusioning experience around Overnight’s release, which included one painfully empty show in America’s Windy City, to get real about things and to start enjoying making music again. “The song Chicago is about me reminding myself that I’ve never had these kinds of expectations,” Clarke says about one of the soulful standouts on their new album, Seedlings All. “It’s always been hard and I can either do this and accept failure or not do it. So I resolved to do it anyway.”

It’s this resolve to carry on regardless that knits together Seedlings All. Galvanised by their rigorous approach to music making, as well as their new all-or-nothing defiance, and coloured by Clarke’s attempts to answer some painful personal questions, it’s the best album the two have made together. A tour de force of haunting, melancholic, yet hopeful, phosphorescent songs featuring some of the most personal moments you’ll hear on a record this year.

Clarke and Walker’s 2017 EP, The Birds, used the migratory life-cycle of its titular species to explore human affairs and was written, says Clarke, “outside of myself”. Seedlings All is very different. “I almost didn’t want to make it,” she says. “It feels quite vulnerable because it’s so auto-biographical. I’ve never been so explicit about actual moments in my life. With this, people will know exactly the moment I’m referring to and parts of my life I’ve never shared, thoughts and feelings I’ve never shared, so it’s terrifying. But it was also cathartic.”

Clarke and Walker are four albums and a couple of EPs into a partnership that blends Walker’s intricate guitar playing and arrangements with Clarke’s compelling songwriting. Everything they’ve released has met with rave reviews and one of their heroes, Richard Thompson, selected them to support him on tour in 2017. Yet Clarke and Walker are at a stage in their lives when every moment devoted to music without cementing their future takes certain life choices – decisions many of us take for granted – out of their hands. Clarke, who has no back-up plan to speak of, no parallel career to pick up, can’t shake the idea that people view her life as a “silly, poncey pipe-dream”. These two wonderful talents, who take their craft more seriously than most, are, it’s safe to say, prone to pessimism and fretfulness. They make a fine pair.

Now in their mid-30s, Clarke and Walker first joined forces after Clarke’s sound engineer friend heard Walker playing acoustic guitar and suggested that, actually, he should leave indie rock and pair up with Clarke, who, having dropped out of three degrees, was “doing crap guitar for myself as a solo singer-songwriter.” So Walker, who now works from his own studio in Brighton, brought with him his mesmerising guitar playing and skill for delicate arrangements. For him, the appeal of working with Clarke was immediate: “I’ve heard a lot of songwriters and I don’t think there’s anyone better at it.”

Their albums to date – The Seas Are Deep (2011), Fire And Fortune (2013), Nothing Can Bring Back The Hour (2014) and Overnight (2016) – are self-produced, twilight folk-pop treasures that cite Thomas Hardy, Rossini, nature and the supernatural, and draw on the influences of Sandy Denny, Richard and Linda Thompson, Gillian Welch, folksong and classic ’60s and ’70s songwriting. On Seedlings All, though, they’re painting from a refreshed palette. Motown, Sam Cooke, Karen Dalton and jazz torch singers all make their presence felt alongside Clarke and Walker’s folky inclinations. After recording at Eastcote Studios in West London they used Walker’s studio as another instrument, over-dubbing and working in his love of electronic music. “There are little phrases that I cut up and moved around and dragged out and resampled,” says Walker. As well as featuring Clarke’s saxophone playing, the wintry and hypnotic Bells Ring bears the influence of Laurie Anderson’s O Superman and the subdued electronica of acts such as Lali Puna.

Their songwriting process is the same as it ever was, though. Clarke brings her songs, melodies and words to Walker, who tinkers with the music and arrangements. Delivered in her wearily mellow, river-clear voice – the sound of a “haunted angel”, said the Financial Times – Clarke’s lyrics transform her raw subject matter with heartrendingly powerful yet precise symbolism and metaphor.

“Words are incredibly important to me,” says Clarke, who spends a lot of time with her head buried in classic fiction and poetry, and books about psychology. “I’ve got all these weird rules about how you should and shouldn’t do songwriting. So things like a love concept, there are tonnes of songs like that. But you have to do something with it. Say it in a way that it hasn’t been said before and try to condense an idea down into its smallest form.”

“Songwriting is no longer this dark art full of smoke and mirrors and hoping,” she adds. “It used to be, but I actually know what I need to do with things now.” It means on songs like Sad Day she feels confident enough to attempt a song inspired by Bill Withers, even if it ends up sounding completely different. “Ten years ago I would never have tried that”

Clarke and Walker have hit their stride on Seedlings All. The out-of-step chimes and lyrics on Bells Ring are a bewitching exposition of how we all converse with each other, not only romantically, but politically too. “It’s that idea that you’re locked into a pattern of miscommunication and never resolve anything,” explains Clarke. On the pretty Maybe I Won’t, Clarke sings, “I thought a mother’s hands would grow on my arms somehow,” as she questions if motherhood will ever happen to her. “I just thought it would,” she explains, “that I would wake up and be an adult, and want children; that I’d suddenly decide, click.” Elsewhere, All Is Myth, with its seesawing drones, deals plaintively with Clarke’s existential crisis; Things Of No Use is a bold and moody folk-pop anthem inspired by Richard And Linda Thompson’s The Cavalry Cross; and the ethereal Ghost Light pinpoints the foreboding gloom of a soon-to-fail relationship.

These are songs about dealing with and making peace with the imperfections in life, the faults and the fears, the regrets and the disappointment, and, somehow, finding renewed hope and reasons to continue. “Joy doesn’t need working out,” Clarke explains. “This was me reconciling some things. That’s what I had to do.” They’ve done it wonderfully, too. Records like Seedlings All don’t come around very often. Perhaps *more* bands should approach their albums as if it’s their last.

“Yet again, I’ve made this one make or break,” Clarke says. “It helps me. It’s easy for me to find the motivation if I think it’s the last go. If this is the last thing I’ll ever make, it needs to be the culmination of everything I’ve learnt. I think that’s the way to do it. Otherwise, what are you doing it for?”