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**INTERVIEW: [Sheila Nicholls](#)
From Essex To L.A., Sheila Nicholls Writes Piano Pop
Like No Other ([Essexgirl/Hollywood Records](#))**

By: [Alex Steininger](#)

She's been a nanny and a waitress, all the while writing songs on her piano in her spare time. She moved from her hometown of Essex, England, against her family's wishes, to pursue music, eventually landing in Los Angeles, home of the stars. Through it all she never gave up hope. And then one day



someone saw her live, fell in love with her no-holds-confessional lyrics, coupled with beautifully crafted piano pop melodies bringing them to life, and she soon found herself signed to Hollywood Records with her own imprint Essex Girl Records, a rare accomplishment for an unknown.

Then again, Sheila Nicholls is a rare gem, the kind of songwriter who doesn't come by very often. She can sing a ballad one moment, happy and relaxed, and vent her anger a few minutes later without second thought.

Her debut, *Brief Strop*, was a lot sparser compared to the follow-up, *Wake*. Recorded primarily live in the woods, self-produced, with complete creative control and no outside influences, its minimalist approach matched the rawness of the songs themselves.

"It was an acoustic, independent record that was recorded live," Nicholls says of *Brief Strop*. "I told myself once that was done I could go anywhere I wanted. I created my own record from beginning to end. There was complete artistic control. After making something like that you have nothing to prove."

She toured relentlessly in support of *Brief Strop*, booking the majority of shows herself, calling upon friends and bands in cities she had played previously to help her get another gig on her next trek through town.



"*Brief Strop* was never really something I thought would be commercial," admits Nicholls. "It was good work and we accomplished a lot. We recently did a 63-date tour and fans at every stop had *Brief Strop*, so the groundwork we did with it has definitely helped us."

With the recent release of *Wake*, Nicholls has upped the ante. She now has a booking agent. The band is larger. She's added a second guitarist and a drummer, and she's playing larger clubs.

"Live, we add drums to songs on *Brief Strop* that don't have drums on the record," she tells me. "We've also become very adept to playing the larger clubs and making our sound fuller. The live show doesn't sound like the record. I reclaimed the more produced songs and (give) them a different life and direction when I play them live.

"Live I can do that. I can make bigger songs sound smaller, but not the other way around."

Brief Strop was an open wound, containing songs you could hear and feel from the opening chords, urgent, heartfelt songs that were both intimate and honest. And though *Wake* still has the fire that burns inside Nicholls, it is less personal and more universal.

"*Wake* is more universal because I was working with other people. I'm not sure if it is the choice I'll make with the next record," Nicholls says, making no bones about it.

Wake was recorded in several different cities and studios with several different producers helping out.

The fiercely independent Nicholls, though appreciative of the education she got working with other producers, says she will probably do the bulk of it herself for the next record.

"I know what I like about the recording process and I know what I don't and I'll be clear about them with future collaborations," explains Nicholls. "The next record I'll produce more on my own, because I learned a lot from the producers I worked with while recording *Wake*, information I didn't have for *Brief Strop*."

Looking back on it all, Nicholls is quite content with the way *Wake* turned out.

"I'm pretty happy with it all," she tells me. "I was very meticulous about this album. I thought a lot about it. If there is one thing you don't want to do it is you don't want to look back and have regrets.



"I went in different directions and chose to do so and am pretty happy with my choice. I could have went a bunch of different directions, but chose the direction I went."

Nicholls went into the studio with a batch of songs she thought would become *Wake*, but by the time the recording was finished, it had taken on a life of its own.

"At the beginning of the recording for *Wake* I had other songs I thought would be on the record. But, part way through I had to let go and let it take its own journey," she informs me.

"There were a good four or five tracks that didn't make the album. Anything I was unsatisfied with I didn't put on. 'Faith II', another song about faith ['Faith' being the first single off of *Wake*], didn't make the record, because the record would have been too long. I wanted the record to be 'Bam! Here it is' and leave people hanging a bit, so it unfortunately got cut. It will, however, probably be the first track on the next album as-is.

"'Lime Green' was another song that I cut. It is a pissed-off song about my family telling me how to be. I'll re-record it and put it on the next record."

Nicholls and her band just wrapped up their first national tour in support of *Wake*. But if the grueling tour schedule for *Brief Strop* is any indication, look for her in a town near you soon.

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