

## UNMATERIAL GIRL

BY MICHAEL SIMMONS

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Sheila Nicholls has a battery-acid wit, a fierce fuck-off rebellious streak and a drop-dead gorgeous mug -- which is to say she's a hell of a dame. But the singer-songwriter-pianist's most appealing attribute is her deep intelligence. She proceeds thoughtfully, questioning her motivations, mapping out her goals. And then, when everything has been carefully laid out, she executes a perfect swan dive off a cliff, 100 feet into the waters of uncertainty.

This combination of deliberation and fearless abandon is evident on her newly released second album, *Wake*, on her own Essex Girl label distributed by Hollywood Records. The set had no less than four producers, including Nicholls and Glen Ballard of Alanis and No Doubt fame. Taking a year to record, the British-born Echo Park resident bounced between Los Angeles and London, fastidiously working and reworking the production until every minute detail was to her satisfaction. And yet, for all the sonic cartography, the result is risky pop with a high lyrical IQ that may scare away those who find self-examination too challenging.

Awareness is *Wake*'s theme, iterated in such songs as "Faith" (the first single and video), "How Strong" and "Maze." "There is a slight skein," says Nicholls. "It's based very loosely around the concept of faith and integrity and inspiration: What inspires us. How we find inspiration. What we put faith into. What works. What doesn't work. Why it doesn't work. Why we so often have to pick up our shit and start again. Why it's imperative to have faith and inspiration even when it's fucking impossible. a You have to find the phoenix. It's not just your fate, it's everybody's fate."

Nicholls sees the human condition as interlocked, and she's acted on this belief, working to support political movements from the Zapatistas to medical marijuana. When she first came to the States a decade ago, she volunteered as musical director at City Kids Foundation in L.A. and N.Y. and ran arts programs for children. She's organized a multidisciplinary performance series for women artists called Chicks in Arms. (Men are allowed to participate, but only if they wear a skirt. At the most recent Chicks gig, the sight of respected -- and stout -- poet Jerry Quickley was particularly memorable. Quickley seemed empowered by the courage to look different.)

Inspired by Ani DiFranco, Nicholls insisted on forming her own label though she was an unknown at the time of negotiations with Hollywood Records, which has the first option to distribute. Label chief Bob Cavallo is himself a rabid Nicholls fan, and Hollywood is aggressively promoting the album. In April they presented a showcase at the swank Park Hill Mansion in the Hollywood Hills. More than 70 entertainment-industry machers were held spellbound by Nicholls' short performance and showed their appreciation with prolonged applause. It takes authentic talent to move the jaded to enthusiasm.

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Nicholls has little in common with current musical trends. She's a singer -- not just a stylist -- with range, chops, dynamics and a healthy portion of blue-eyed soul. She walks the talk and not only advocates social harmony but works with a band that projects a joyous family vibe. The pursuit of consciousness permeates every aspect of her life, largely because she takes the state of the planet personally.

"I frequently feel sad that we can't seem to move past things we already know don't work," she says. "But it's a metaphor for personal life, too, when you watch yourself repeat patterns that are familiar to you but don't work any longer. It's incredibly difficult to let those things go and to let a new way into your personal space. As a species, we continue to perpetuate this paradigm that's been dead for quite some time. There are ways we could live that would be better for everyone. That may be utopian and idealistic, but an ideal is unreachable only if you decide it's unreachable."

It's a big reach for the daughter of a pub owner from a small English town to migrate to America with nothing but talent and end up with her own record label in the City of Angels, courted by the moneyed class and on the brink of what is characterized by the

with her own record label in the City of Angels, courted by the moneyed class and on the brink of what is characterized by the mainstream as stardom. In her own way, Sheila Nicholls is already a star. If she tops the charts and MTV -- and in the process helps people think about their own place on Earth -- that'll be an achievement. But she's attained a holistic world-view, applied theory to practice and created a life for herself based on that vision. In what is a very unhappy time for many, a time of loss imbued with the queasy feeling of just being lost, that accomplishment is rare and precious.

Sheila Nicholls performs at the Mint Sunday, June 30, and Monday, July 1.

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