

Howie Nicholsby: The Kiltmaker [C1]

Questo stilista scozzese combina una storia familiare affascinante con uno sguardo innovativo. Anche se nel suo curriculum figura l'aver vestito grandi celebrità, ciò che più lo entusiasma è riuscire a trasformare il kilt in un indumento adatto a qualsiasi occasione e a ogni tipo di pubblico.

Forty-six-year-old fashion designer Howie Nicholsby hasn't worn trousers in more than twenty years. Sure, Nicholsby is Scottish and he wears kilts — the traditional Scottish [knee-length skirts](#) —, but he does not believe they should be reserved only for Scotsmen. He also thinks kilts shouldn't just be worn for special occasions or made exclusively in tartan — a woollen [fabric](#) with colourful square [patterns](#) and intersecting lines traditionally associated with historic Scottish clans.

21ST CENTURY KILTS

In many ways, Nicholsby [embodies](#) tradition as a fourth-generation kiltmaker, yet he [dares](#) to reimagine the [craft](#). In 1996, he launched his brand, 21st Century Kilts, as part of the family business, Geoffrey [Tailor](#) & Kiltmaker. This shop, founded by his parents in 1971, is located on Edinburgh's famous Royal Mile. Nicholsby's goal is to redefine kilts as [garments](#) anyone can wear, for any occasion. To achieve this, he uses a wide range of materials, including wool, [denim](#) and leather. His innovative approach has been a global success. Nicholsby has designed kilts for celebrities like actor Vin Diesel and singer Lenny Kravitz, as well as for public figures such as Princess Charlene of Monaco.

FASHION JOURNEY

To learn more about his fashion journey, Speak Up spoke with Nicholsby about his family's rich history. It all began generations ago when his grandmother, at just fifteen years old, learned the art of kiltmaking. **Howie Nicholsby (Scottish accent):** My family were immigrants from Russia,

Poland, Ukraine, all that space. And on my father's side, my [great-grandfather](#) was a [cutter](#), tailor, [presser](#) and worked on kilts in an old Scottish company in Edinburgh. And my grandmother at a very young age, probably about fifteen, did an apprenticeship in kilt making. And then World War Two hit and she was sent up north to [pack parachutes](#), where she met my grandfather from London, who was an engineer. They came back to Edinburgh and opened a kilt shop, and then my dad was involved. I have a jacket behind me that has my grandfather's label in it, but I picked it up on eBay... really nice old tweed jacket here, and it's got the label inside: William Nicholsby & Son. So this jacket's probably about seventy years old, so I had to buy it and it fits me beautifully. When my dad started, he was a master tailor [by trade](#) and made suits for my grandfather and they were doing kilts. My dad felt he wasn't getting his [fair share](#) and they were [falling out](#), so my dad and my mum started their own business, Geoffrey [Tailor](#), in 1971. They got married in '72.

FRESH START

Nicholsby created his own brand within his parents' shop almost thirty years ago. For him, it marked a fresh start not only in his professional life but also in his personal life. **Howie Nicholsby:** On the year of their 25th business anniversary, I had pretty much a [meltdown](#). It was 1996. I ended up having to go to a rehab clinic. I'm all right now, I promise! I still have addiction issues and I don't drink anymore. This was at seventeen. I had an acid psychosis which affected my brain. [I] ended up in a clinic, came out and my mum and dad had rescued me and I wanted to show something back, an interest in the business. Before being ill I wanted to be a movie journalist. I decided to stay in the business and to learn kiltmaking. My first kilt I made when I was eighteen in 1996 out of snakeskin silver PVC. It's quite [sweaty](#), it was [hand-stitched](#) and that's what started 21st Century Kilts.

SCOTTISH CLANS

Kilts were [banned](#) by the British Crown in 1746 in an attempt to [crush](#) the spirit of the Scots. During the Jacobite [risings](#), which occurred at the time,

Scottish clans were the most effective groups fighting against the British government in support of the Catholic House of Stuart's [claim](#) to the British throne. The ban was [lifted](#) in 1782, after the Scottish [uprising](#) had been suppressed. By then, however, kilts were worn only for special events such as graduations, weddings, and even football matches. Nicholsby, however, argues that men should feel free to wear them on any occasion. **Howie Nicholsby:** My surprise, in over twenty-eight years doing this, is that people are buying kilts for no particular reason, which I love, and [which] surprises my dad generationally. So that is your [core](#) customer: a young Scotsman who's brought by his mum and dad to buy his kilt for everything: graduations, birthday parties, weddings, funerals and every event and party [in-between](#)! As a Scottish Jewish family, I've been to many a bar mitzvah and other religious occasions wearing a kilt. So national Highland dress can sometimes [supersede](#) a dress code. So once you own a kilt [outfit](#), you really can wear it with a [bow tie](#), straight tie or an open shirt. So, all different occasions. I think we're quite lucky that a lot of people still want to get married in a kilt, and that's the [foundation](#) of most kilt shops. Most people see it as an investment and it's going to last a long time.

QUALITY IS KEY

Nicholsby's brand places a special emphasis on quality, in contrast with certain trends in fashion that do not interest him. He also argues that wearing a kilt is not just a masculine option but a healthy one. He believes this perspective could help make the kilt a must-have in men's [wardrobes](#). **Howie Nicholsby:** My belief in general, aside from the fact that I grew up in the kilt industry, so I have a [bias](#)... I have always [been aware](#) that menswear is very, very limited and the [high-end catwalk](#) fashion world, like a man's skirt by Givenchy worn by Brad Pitt... Is the average man going to connect just because it's Givenchy and they call it a man's skirt? Is it a masculine skirt for the average straight Joe Bloggs... [plumber](#), [joiner](#), engineer, doctor, architect? A guy who is not in the fashion world, not a hairdresser, not an interior designer, not a graphic designer, they're not in the arts. So my [hook](#), my unique selling point, is that those men tend not to have an alternative in the wardrobe. They only have jeans, suits and shorts. So [my point being](#),

why not have an alternative that is extremely healthy for you? Because that's a... one key factor is that the kilt can fight testicular cancer and impotency. It's been medically proven that Scottish men are more fertile! Joking aside, wearing a kilt is something different, it's good fun, people smile at you when you're wearing it, but also on a physical level it's good to let air flow. People ask what it's like wearing a kilt: it's a bit like having a window open in your house, it's a nice [breeze](#)! Wearing a kilt keeps certain parts of the body much cooler. Biologically it's the way a man is designed, and all clothing for men was what we call [unbifurcated](#), so it had no [crotch](#). Not wearing a kilt is kind of counterintuitive. And the kilt and the investment of £1,000 for a manskirt kilt is a good investment for twenty, thirty years, 'cause it's beyond fashion. It's not going [to go out or in a fashion](#). It's just something you wear from time to time. So my average client-customer might only wear their kilt once a month, [once a fortnight](#). The hard[core](#) guys who have three, four, five kilts probably wear them nearly every day.

EXCLUSIVE ITEMS

In 2009, Nicholsby opened his own independent store. Later, he rejoined Geoffrey [Tailor](#) & Kiltmaker in Edinburgh's popular tourist street, the Royal Mile. Booking an [appointment](#) is recommended before visiting his store, which is more of a workshop than a factory. Nicholsby works on demand, taking six to eight weeks to complete a kilt. The average cost is £900, with [detachable](#) pockets available for an additional £300. **Howie Nicholsby:** We don't want to expand. We don't want other shops. We don't need to be the biggest in the industry. My mum and dad are very... they have a lot of integrity, and they wouldn't succumb to selling kilts made in Pakistan or China. That stuff is inappropriate and although it can be a [novelty](#) kilt and a joke, it's still quite [hurtful](#) to people in the industry and people who have [proper](#) kilts and have made the investment and have saved up [hard-earned](#) money... 'cause it's not an essential piece of clothing, but to people who own them, it means a lot to them and the people who make them, it's an art and a dying [craft](#). And I kind of feel like it's cultural appropriation when tourists come here and they buy these cheap kilts for like £20-£30 still. And then they

wear these cheap kilts and they look terrible. That's my one big sadness in the industry.

PROTECT THE KILT

Nicholsby approached the European Union to request a PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) designation for kilts, believing that this recognition would help protect and promote the product. However, the EU rejected his request, arguing that although geographical indications are used to protect certain items, this system only applies to food products, not to non-food items like kilts. **Howie Nicholsby:** When we were part of the EU and I was in my early 20s, I worked with a member of the European Parliament to try and create a PGI for a kilt. A protected geographical indicator like Parmesan, champagne, feta... But the EU would not do this protective indicator for clothing, thus the influx of kilts. But tourists don't realise how much work [is involved] and how special a kilt is, 'cause it's eight yards of fabric, 7.5 metres of fabric, it's pure wool and hand-stitched. So that was my hope with the European Union, that a kilt, to call it a proper Scottish kilt; just three things, pure wool, hand-sewing, made in Scotland... but it never happened.

ACCOUNTABILITY

On the one hand, Nicholsby sees himself as part of the rich and ancient history of the kilt. On the other, he rejects industry pressures, stating that his accountability lies solely with his customers. He emphasised that he does not see himself as a public figure. **Howie Nicholsby:** I'm a radical evolutionist. Fashion can come and go, but the kilt was everyday clothing for hundreds of years, going back to the Egyptians, the Vikings and all ancient cultures; the Greeks, the Romans, togas, sarongs... So I like to put the kilt on a pedestal and transcend time and space and fashion. But the kilt will always evolve and I'm just part of that evolution. But to evolve properly, you have to look back to go forward. So the radical evolution is that it is a lot of fabric, it is hand-stitched, it's based on the traditions, but the evolution is that it's not tartan. Whereas Vivienne Westwood, Jean Paul Gaultier, Alexander McQueen very much concentrated on tartan kilts and it being a very avant-garde,

expensive garment that isn't really for the people. Whereas for me, the kilt is all about the people. If people don't wear kilts, kilts won't exist. I respect what they do, their [\[haute\] couture](#) designer, [catwalk](#), hundreds of thousands of dollars behind them... But I'm not in that [realm](#) and don't want to be. [I am] Very much a private individual that enjoys and I'm passionate about a collection I created when I was eighteen years old. I'm a really happy, [chilled out](#) guy. I don't want pressure and stress, my customers are my only pressure, but it's a good pressure because they want their kilt made for something special like a wedding or a graduation or a big party. So that's the only pressure I have in my life. Is a good pressure, because we're making something beautiful for them to wear for a very beautiful special occasion. And after that occasion they've invested in something I'm passionate about, a kilt, that they'll wear again and again. www.21stcenturykilts.com

Glossary

- **catwalk** = passerella
- **plumber** = idraulico
- **breeze** = brezza
- **influx** = afflusso
- **hand-sewing** = cucitura a mano
- **presser** = stiratore
- **pack parachutes** = preparare paracadute
- **fair share** = parte equa
- **risings** = rivolte
- **detachable** = staccabili, smontabili
- **meltdown** = crollo emotivo
- **outfit** = completo
- **chilled out** = rilassato
- **craft** = mestiere
- **uprising** = insurrezione
- **foundation** = base
- **Tailor** = sarto
- **denim** = jeans
- **supersede** = sostituire
- **unbifurcated** = non biforcati
- **appointment** = appuntamento
- **novelty** = originale, stravagante
- **fabric** = stoffa
- **knee-length skirts** = gonne al ginocchio
- **garments** = capi d'abbigliamento
- **by trade** = di mestiere, di professione
- **lifted** = revocare
- **cutter** = tagliatore
- **bow tie** = papillon
- **bias** = pregiudizio
- **proper** = vero e proprio
- **banned** = vietare
- **crush** = schiacciare

- **in-between** = nel mezzo
- **been aware** = essere consapevole
- **high-end** = di lusso
- **once a fortnight** = una volta ogni quindici giorni
- **falling out** = litigare
- **hook** = gancio, elemento di richiamo
- **to go out or in a fashion** = passare di moda o tornare di moda
- **woollen fabric** = tessuto di lana
- **embodies** = incarnare
- **great-grandfather** = bisnonno
- **claim** = rivendicazione
- **sweaty** = che fa sudare
- **joiner** = falegname
- **my point being** = il punto è, ciò che voglio dire è
- **patterns** = schemi, disegni
- **hand-stitched** = cucito a mano
- **wardrobes** = armadi
- **accountability** = responsabilità
- **hurtful** = doloroso
- **thus** = quindi
- **core** = principale
- **dares** = osare
- **crotch** = cavallo (dei pantaloni)
- **[haute] couture** = alta moda
- **realm** = ambito
- **hard-earned** = guadagnati con fatica