

## SPOTLIGHT

## LITTLE BIG TOWN

There's a reason why this tenacious country group refuses to go back to the house

Phillip Sweet, Karen Fairchild, Jimi Westbrook, Kimberly Schlapman

WHEN LITTLE BIG TOWN'S SELF-TITLED debut was released in 2002, its poppy, overproduced sound was met by critical scorn and commercial indifference. The band has been on a mission ever since. "The first record we made was just crucified, so we had something to prove," says Kimberly Schlapman, who shares vocal duties equally with bandmates Karen Fairchild, Phillip Sweet and Jimi Westbrook. "We had to show that we were the real thing, that we were an organic band and real musicians and songwriters."

That early stumble has fueled the group's fire ever since, even after its subsequent albums were roundly hailed by critics and audiences alike. "We've never lost that," says Fairchild. "It doesn't matter if we sell a million records or not, we always feel like we have to prove ourselves again

and again—which is good. I think it makes for better art. If you quit trying, you should probably go back to the house."

Little Big Town's latest album, *The Reason Why*, finds the group continuing the artistic roll it has been on since 2005's *The Road to Here* brought them to fame. The tone of the recording was dictated in part by the fact that all the members have become parents over the last several years. "Having new children in your life gives you a sense of youthfulness," Sweet says. "That purpose in our lives gave us a newfound boost of energy."

Yet domestic tranquility has had little effect on the group's ongoing attraction to songs about romantic distress. "We just like sad, lonely songs," says Fairchild with a laugh. "That's what storytelling is about, that's what

country music has always been so good at. They might not be our stories, but they're stories that need to be told." The band, which typically writes as a collective along with longtime producer and collaborator Wayne Kirkpatrick, also drew on friends and family for inspiration. "We want to see what's going on in people's lives and in the world, and talk about some of those things, too," says Westbrook. "Those conversations about things in life are important to us."

And when the album was complete, the members of Little Big Town gave it a title that reflects their constant motivation throughout the group's 12-year history. "That title says so much," Schlapman observes. "It speaks to our philosophy in this career that we've had together. The music is the reason why."

—Chris Neal

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