

Little Big Town
NIGHTFALL

The night, with its curtain of darkness, contains many things. Hope, doubt, faith, need, resolution, joy, rage, dreams, exhaustion, romance. From that first dusky “Babe...” over a few vacillating guitar notes, *Nightfall*’s intimacy washes over listeners. Opening with a velvety song of desire, “Next To You” suggests a subtle look at how the world gets the best of us, how connection heals and ultimately, love is the answer.

Easily Little Big Town’s most nuanced project, upon inception, they didn’t realize they were on the verge of producing their ninth studio album. But with songs to capture, creative fires to stoke, Karen Fairchild, Kimberly Schlapman, Phillip Sweet, and Jimi Westbrook went into the studio to develop what was there with no masterplan. It wasn’t long before the fiercely musical foursome realized they’d found a new creative horizon – and they just kept going until *Nightfall* emerged from 34 songs, myriad experiments and the inherent harmony singing that has defined the Grammy-winning group since they emerged with the steamy, stark “Boondocks.”

“From the first time we sat in the living room, it was amazing that we all gravitated to the harmonies we sing,” explains the sunny-voiced Schlapman. “In 20 years, we really have stayed with the harmonies we settle into organically. We’re all really strong and opinionated, and we’ve always been really involved, but over the years, we’ve become more comfortable with who each of us is. Our different personalities and strengths have become the thing that brings us together as us.”

Nightfall includes the Grammy-nominated consciousness tug “The Daughters,” debuted to universal acclaim on “The Academy of Country Music Awards,” the cascading loveliness of “River of Stars,” the Mexican horn stomping revelry of “Wine, Beer, Whiskey,” the James Taylor-esque hope of “Bluebird” and the naked piano/gospel vocal chorus-tinged soul plea of Sweet’s raw vocal pledge on “Forever And A Night.” This is grown-up music, complex, wise, yet vulnerable.

“It’s so easy to keep layering guitars on top of each other,” Westbrook says of the sonics. “Every sound is intentional on this record. We’d empty tracks out to create more space. Those spaces let the energy come through. The space allows you to absorb what we’re saying.”

In the ache, there is surrender. In the conflict, solutions. Fairchild injects “Sugar Coat’s” whispery self-examination with a dose of awareness. Ruminating “Sometimes I wish I liked drinking, Sometimes I wish I liked pills/Wish I could sleep with a stranger, but someone like me never will,” her clear-eyed examination of societal expectations suggests the potential for a rejection of the good girl’s smile in the face of what’s handed her with a truth-reckoning “One of these nights I’ll meet you in the driveway, and tell you to go to Hell...”

“How many of us are going through Hell in secret?” Schlapman asks. “For generations, women were taught not to complain, not to explain, while behind the scenes, it’s a total disaster. Secrets are so cancerous, and most of us have them. That’s the empowerment: she suffers for knowing...until...” Fairchild agrees, “Through her awakening she finds resolve and is willing to tell the truth. No more sugar coating.”

It’s followed by Westbrook’s searching “Problem Child,” which turns the rejoinder of “What’s your problem, child?” into a recognition and invitation to seek solace. As Fairchild, who Schlapman calls, “the Tom Brady of the project,” says of the song’s tenderness, “We had just written this song and instantly wanted to record it. That’s Jimi’s very first vulnerable vocal, where he said, ‘I don’t know if I know this enough to really sing it...’ That made this vocal, and everything this song is trying to communicate.”

Sweet sees the cinematic juxtaposition of it. “With those beautiful strings and that vocal, it speaks to everyone that has felt like a black sheep, like a problem child. We’ve all been that person, whether (it was when) we were a child or not, and it takes something sad and cloaks it in hope.” Not that *Nightfall* is a somber place. Yes, it opens the gates to reflection, but in that comes freedom and joy.

“Over Drinking,” which sounds like a throw down, celebrates moving through angst to lighter ground... “I’m Over Drinking, Over You.”

Real country, classic material with a metaphor that turns the tropes inside out. Pretty profound. “If I’m out at a bar and I’ve tied one on...I’m drunk ‘cause I’m happy not drunk ‘cause you’re gone.”

“When ‘Over Drinking’ got texted to my phone,” Fairchild marvels, “it was such a fun song, country and smart. We immediately knew it belonged on *Nightfall*, although the record was basically mastered and finished. We knew this was a song our fans would love. We didn’t waste a moment despite being on the road.”

Dispatching a runner to a local Bed, Bath + Beyond to buy all the baffling they could find, an “instant session” was born in an empty room backstage. “It was so spontaneous and creative!” Fairchild continues. “We carry a recording rig with us, and set it up. The drums, bass, and guitars sounded amazing. That ‘in the moment’ feeling is all over the track.”

In perfect 6/8 time, Little Big Town leaned into hard country with a slinky, celebratory earthiness. The Telecaster stings and the sticks on the rims usher in a triumph from tear-in-my-beer anguish.

It juxtaposes the pluck of the teasing nag of the gently undulating “Throw Your Love Away,” which finds the ether-voiced Schlapman sparkling through a catalogue of indelible memories, or the acoustic smolder “Questions,” where the burgundy in Fairchild’s voice illuminates as she sifts through the post-breakup doubts she will never voice.

Obviously, there are layers of Fleetwood Mac’s intoxicating harmonies, the acoustic nature of Laurel Canyon, the sweeping sense of emotion that underlies Joni Mitchell and the great respect and love for the songwriters of Nashville, TN.

“I’m a dreamer,” Sweet offers. “This music hopefully honors that as musicians in country music. If people can open their hearts and just connect with music in a way that feeds them, makes them feel what they need or want to, then we got it.”

Westbrook explains, “The atmosphere everyone’s living in right now had our heads in more adult places. You always want to have fun, but we’re adults with families – and needed to say something that mattered.”

Still, as Schlapman boils it down, “This was a journey, and still is. Whether you’re going to the mountains, or the beach, even sitting in your living room with a glass of wine, this record is an experience. It will take you through so many places in life, hopefully sink in, and take you where you need to go, or give you what you’re looking to find.”

Fairchild adds, “The sequence is deliberate to take you through the romance of *Nightfall*...the questions we have when we’re alone, the joy and the frolic of love and friendship, and the strength to overcome.”

As fingers find a gut string guitar, then a piano, that tranquility closes *Nightfall* with the reality tug of “Trouble with Forever.” Four voices caressing the breathlessness of how things start, showering the truth about how love and life fade like a benediction for the best of who we are.