

LITTLE BIG TOWN THE BREAKER (Capitol)

After last year's *Wanderlust* detoured into less traditional rhythms, Little Big Town roars back with *The Breaker*, an album that reaffirms its strengths – four-part, layered harmonies, and lead vocals shared among all four members. And the arrangements snap with crisp dynamics that showcase this foursome's fearsome vocal blend. There are the requisite party anthems (“Night on Our Side,” “Drivin’ Around”), the sunny, silvery hubcaps (“Happy People,” “Lost in California,” “Don’t Die Young, Don’t Get Old”), and the cover that outshines what the original writer might have done (Taylor Swift’s “Better Man”). There are a couple minor mistakes. The aforementioned party anthems are a little over-compressed, so that every drum hit whacks the breath out of the vocals, giving them a pumping, drumming-on-the-chest suffocation. And someone forgot the noise gate on the amps at the 0:50 and 2:24 marks of “Rollin’.” But I’m quibbling. Little Big Town is more than a pop-country New Seekers, as they demonstrated on *Pain Killer*’s “Girl Crush” -- the band can tap some deep emotional wells. *The Breaker*’s “Girl Crush” is “When Someone Stops Loving You,” a wrenching, soulful ballad that nails the crippling hurt, amidst the rest of the world’s indifference, when things simply end. The lead cries, and the harmonies ache. Songs like this are why this band of Alabama birds continues to fly high. ****1/2

LAKE STREET DIVE SIDE PONY (Nonesuch)

If you’re one of the moral minority with a healthy disdain for stock drum machine rhythms, sound-alike synth patches, and vocals that are compressed, de-essed, and auto-tuned to the point of emotional sterility, then dive right into Lake Street Dive. *Side Pony* is the band’s fifth release, another refinement of the band’s original sound conceived by the quartet at the New England Conservatory and birthed in Boston. No, this is not a hoity-toity recital of sterile adroitness. Lake Street Dive’s chops rock a side pony (it’s a hairstyle) with doses of retro soul, R&B, jazz, rock, and Brill Building banter. Vocalist Rachael Price belts out a fierce independence, and bandmates Mike “McDuck” Olson (guitar, Rhodes, and trumpet), Bridget Kearney (upright and electric bass), and Philadelphia’s Michael Calabrese (drums and percussion) answer in kind. It’s all in the key of fun. The Motown echoes of “Call Off Your Dogs,” the wry laments of “Mistakes,” the ping-ponged guitars of “Hell, Yeah,” and the carefree confidence of the title track are each sound examples of how it used to be done before the machines took over the Top 40. Lake Street Dive is Beantown’s answer to Philly’s Hall & Oates (whose “Rich Girl” they even covered on an earlier EP). To paraphrase, “because they rock a side pony, baby, they’re just livin’ their life, because they rock a side pony.” ****

BRIAN WILSON NO PIER PRESSURE (Capitol)

The Beach Boy turns 74 this year, but he’s still singing like he’s 24. *No Pier Pressure* is a Wilson showcase, with a guest artist on nearly every track, putting the emphasis on harmonies atop harmonies: layered mini-choirs, call-and-response duets, and lead vocals interlaced with backup echoes and ornamentation. From the opening *cappella* “This Beautiful Day,” to the melancholy “The Last Song,” it’s sand castles, sailboats, and twilit shores. “Runaway Dancer” is a beach party with a disco beat. Zoey Deschanel’s tropical sway in “On the Island” is followed by Mark Isham’s mournful trumpet playing slower variations on the same melody in “Half Moon Bay.” Al Jardine and David Marks ride a soaring seagull chorus in “The Right Time.” “Saturday Night” celebrates the best evening of a week near the waves. In between the smiles, the good vibrations of Wilson’s writing are again tempered with his awareness of the passage of time. The most poignant moments evincing Wilson’s mastery are in “Whatever Happened,” as Al Jardine and David Marks ask “whatever happened to my favorite places / nothing’s where it used to be / whatever happened / what’s gonna happen to me?” Nostalgia morphs into the gauzier memories of passing years, yet Wilson keeps it all sounding angelic. *****