

PITCHFORK

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Interview: Calexico



Story by Jessica Suarez

The Southwest's mostly a visual place-- windswept deserts, skeletal flora, non-thermoregulatory fauna-- but Calexico's Joey Burns and John Convertino have practically trademarked the region's sound: a mix of American rhythm and Mexican instrumentation. But at their most recent New York show, as Calexico played the first few songs off their latest record, *Garden Ruin*, it became apparent that Calexico have dropped the trademark sound, favoring the hushed vocals and intimate lyrics of their former collaborator, Sam Beam aka Iron & Wine.

Other differences started to emerge that night. Whereas, on a previous record, a line like, "Horses running off on their own, now," might have meant, "Seriously, go catch the horses," on *Garden Ruin* those images of the Southwest become metaphors for jealousy and the deterioration of a relationship. I spoke to Calexico the day after their two New York showcases, where, by the band's count, they played before 70 or so music journalists in a venue that holds 161 people.

Pitchfork: How did you meet Sam Beam?

Burns: Through Howard Greynolds of Overcoat Recordings, a mutual friend. We've known Howard for many years. We met him while he was on tour with Will Oldham, Palace Brothers. He was instrumental in getting Calexico signed to Touch & Go/Quarterstick.

He had this idea for a series of collaborations, [and] when Sam rolled through Tucson, I went down and met everyone and took him to wave lab studio. We took him to get some food and we seemed to hit it off. Then it was just a matter of

trying to find the time to get together. Howard had mentioned to Sam that he thought he should have recorded with us earlier, a couple of records ago. I never knew that. We read about it on the Internet.

Convertino: Maybe on Pitchfork.

Pitchfork: *Garden Ruin* sounds like you took some cues, musically, from Sam. What did you learn from working with him?

Burns: His songwriting and use of vocals. He encouraged me to get in there and sing higher than I ever thought I could. When I thought it might not be working, he said, "No, it sounds good, just give it one more try, we'll blend it in with my vocals." It was just very influential for me, putting vocals on *Garden Ruin*.

Convertino: He said, "Have you ever gone in the studio without a drum set? Like actually built the rhythm from percussion?" I really liked that. Richard Buckner did that with J.D. Foster on *The Hill*. It drove me nuts. I would pull out a snare drum out, then a bass drum, then Richard would say, "No, no drum set. You gotta come up with something else." So that was a challenge.

Pitchfork: I think I would be scared, as a professional drummer who plays rhythm section in so many bands, to have someone say, "Don't bring your drums with you to you the studio."

Convertino: I was up for it. With Sam, he likes to layer really syncopated rhythms, and he gets this big layer. But that's how he describes it. He sings it.

Pitchfork: There's something people call "The Calexico Sound" now, and this record doesn't necessarily have that. Are you worried that people will be disappointed by the change?

Burns: The Calexico Sound? Because it doesn't have mariachi and horns? That's all the U.S. press has every really mentioned about the band. Over the course of however many records we've put out, there have been these gradual changes. In some ways, there are a lot of similarities, or the feeling that we're returning to some of the styles of music on the first record, *Spoke*. So if anything, people will feel like we've come full circle, and maybe there's a bit of a new direction on there, too. You can't worry about what people are going to think. You really can't. You have to do what you feel inside. That's your point of direction.

Pitchfork: How does press in Europe look at Calexico differently?

Burns: There they understand the subtleties more. If you're going to say what a "Calexico Sound" is-- if I'm to have any say in it, [I'd] say that it's allowing the nuances to come through, the space in the music. It's paying attention to the subtlety of brushes on the drums or the vibraphone. It's not trumpets.

Pitchfork: So I guess you're probably also tired of the phrase "spaghetti western."

Burns: Tired enough to try something different. You can't do the same thing over and over. Even though we love playing with the mariachis and that style of music, we'd rather take it somewhere else, rather than do it the same way we've done before.

Pitchfork: Besides touring with Iron & Wine, what else has been going on with you two?

Burns: Just getting older. Buying a home. Wondering what I'm doing. I've been going forward for so long; just trying to get the music out there as been the focus of my life.

Also, being the band manager, I've come to a point where I'm ready to let someone else handle the responsibility, so I can work on my home or get rest or do more music. I've really enjoyed working on the business side because it's interesting to see how it works, how Europe is different from the states, why certain bands that get out there, what's going on with radio in America, what about clubs, what is Clear Channel doing, how directly are they involved what are they masquerading themselves as now. I think also the whole topical...the last six years or so of the administration here in the United States-- sociopolitical issues in the Southwest, immigration. Seeing how it's felt worldwide, these topics arise everywhere.

Pitchfork: You've done things on immigration before, on border policy. But the politics on *Garden Ruin* are a little different.

Burns: They're realized more here.

Convertino: *Feast of Wire* had some reflection on the Bush administration, the frustration that a lot of people felt, that their vote didn't count. And then, four years later, where we were, being excited about some kind of change, and that not happening. I still felt, as a voter, gypped. I think there's a lot of frustration building, and it reflects in the music.

Pitchfork: When you're out on the road, what do you see that reminds you of Tucson?

Convertino: We were just in this little village called Albergo Bello, which means "beautiful tree" in Italian. It's in Italy, in the southern part on the Adriatic side, in the region where my family's from. I was walking around and there are nopalitos growing there, olive trees, and the terrain was almost exactly like Tucson. It was hot, and the houses were really unique. They had these cone-shaped roofs, and if you go inside there was a ladder to a loft. Right underneath the loft was the kitchen, and right before I had come on tour, I had put a loft above my kitchen in my house. I was like, "These are my people!" It was amazing.

Pitchfork: Maybe that's why you like Tucson so much-- it's part of your ancestral blood.

Convertino: Yeah, it could be that.

Burns: You know why I feel at home in Tucson? I grew up on the West Coast, right outside of Los Angeles. Every day driving home to my folks' place, you're driving into the sun, and it's setting on the water. There's something about that that's very peaceful.

Pitchfork: And Tucson has great sunsets pretty much every night.

Burns: It's almost identical except it's the reverse. There's no water, just desert. You go out there, and walking around, you just feel like you're at the bottom of the

ocean. Something big and expansive.

Convertino: Sometimes you'll be there and it's so still you get that feeling. But then all of a sudden a breeze will come, just like a wave. It goes right through you.

Pitchfork: The Giant Sand documentary *Drunken Bees* was just released on DVD. How does it make you feel when you see that old footage?

Convertino: It was really sweet to see it again. I'm just so thankful that she captured a few things that aren't there anymore. There's a scene where Tasha [Bundy] is pregnant with my daughter, and she's 11 now. So it's pretty amazing.

Pitchfork: When it was filmed, it was "that documentary about Giant Sand." Now it's probably, "That documentary with Calexico in it."

Convertino: That is a big difference, I guess. Like you said, then we were backing up Howe [Gelb]. You can see how camera shy I am-- and Joey, too. We didn't feel we wanted to be filmed, because it was Howe's thing. And we were pretty new to Tucson.

Burns: When I first saw it I remember thinking, "This feels like a home movie." So I was kind of surprised that she wanted to release it. But it's nice to have a little time capsule. But we still do a lot of backing up. We backed up Victoria Williams before then, backed up Richard Buckner and Neko Case. We love doing that. And I always try to tell people that it's important to do collaborations.

Pitchfork: *Garden Ruin* definitely puts you guys in front. It feels less like a large collaboration, more like, well, it's all on the two of you.

Convertino: We're finding our feet on this, for sure.

Burns: Doing the same thing becomes limiting. It becomes boring and old. So with the change in music, and the shift in songs on this record, I think everyone is enjoying the challenge. In the case of this record, our producer J.D. Foster came up with some really interesting horn arrangements. Foster is probably one of the most significant differences on this record. We brought in a producer who has a lot of great ideas.

Convertino: We trusted Foster's instincts, and we liked the way he worked. He allows things to happen and at the same time gives direction in a way that makes sense.

Burns: He's very sympathetic to everyone's feelings and ideas.

Convertino: It's almost like a luxury in some ways, having someone take the responsibility of communicating musical ideas. It's hard to do that sometimes.

Pitchfork: So it was nice to give up a little bit of that control.

Burns: When I start putting down a song, I'd say, "All right J.D., this is what's going through my head right now. I've got four different ideas of what could be here." I'd just tell him everything, and he'd go, "Alright, cool. Let's try the keyboard on the verse, the organ on the chorus, and leave the intro sparse." I just get so flooded with ideas.

Convertino: I'm just the opposite, I go to the studio and there's just nothing in my brain. And I go, "J.D., what do I do?"

Pitchfork: Now you're showing up with no ideas and no drum kit?

Convertino: So I just go and change the baby's diaper. That was my big event of 2005. I had a son.

Pitchfork: Congratulations.

Convertino: He's almost eight months old. Pretty soon I won't have to go into the studio at all, I can just send my son.