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## Interview: Calexico

Interview by Stephen M. Deusner

Joey Burns must have a phalanx of trumpets following him around Tucson, providing a southwestern soundtrack to even the most mundane activities-- a mournful lament for buying gas, punchy horn stabs for taking out the garbage. At least, that's the impression I got while talking to him about Calexico's new album, *Carried to Dust*. He spoke from Wavelab Studio, where he and John Convertino, the central duo behind Calexico, have recorded all of their albums. Punctuating his musings on the art of collaboration and the joys of studio accidents were blasts of trumpets practicing the charts for new songs like "Victor Jara's Hands" and "Inspiración" as well as a cover of Nina Simone's "Keeper of the Flame", which Burns explained was for a WXPN World Café Live session in Philadelphia.

**Pitchfork:** Can you tell me about a story in the album, the L.A. writer's road trip?

Joey Burns: I guess it was the winter of 2007-- I was paralyzed like everyone else by the absence of late-night television commentary [during the Writers Guild strike --Ed.]. So I came up with this song called "Writer's Minor Holiday", and I was wondering if there was a way of connecting all the songs [on the album] with an overall theme. I think I got a couple of songs in and then I'm like, "Nah, forget it. I'm not going to make it such a restrictive concept." Making a record is like going to a storage locker every now and then, and either dumping off things or picking up something that you've been missing for a while. Then, several months or songs down the road, you have a collection of ideas and you make sense [of them] afterwards.

**Pitchfork:** There's almost a travelogue feel to the album, even if it's not pinned down under a specific story.

JB: I definitely feel like this record stems from a lot of experiences and memories of traveling, whether it's a destination we've actually been to or not. We finally got to go down to South America, which was one of those dreams we've had for a long, long time. We only went to two countries-- Chile and Argentina. We did schedule some time off, so we got the chance to explore and see some of the local sites.

One of the clubs in Santiago, Chile, was right next door to one of Pablo Neruda's houses, and we just happened to catch the last tour of the day. We were allowed to linger a little longer than some of the other tours. It was great. He was a poet, of course, but he was quite the collector of things from swap meets and flea markets in his travels, which I could relate to. He had a lot of nautical themes in his houses, and strangely enough, for this band living in the desert for a while, there are a lot of references to the ocean in our songs. I grew up near the ocean, so it always haunts me. It always finds me, especially on full moons out here, when everything gets laced in blue light. It reminds me of being back at home where I grew up in Southern California, on one of the rocky peninsulas down along the coast.

**Pitchfork:** Were you traveling to South America on a tour?

JB: Yes. We had a couple of shows down there. One of the benefits of being in a band is having the opportunity to go to places you wouldn't normally get to go to. Now that we've been doing this for a while, it would be nice to go to more unusual places to play, whether Alaska or Taiwan or Brazil or Mexico City. We've still yet to play Mexico.

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**Pitchfork:** Really?

JB: We've played close-- Tucson, the town of Calexico [California]. When we were there, we heard that there was a big following in Mexicali, just across the border.

**Pitchfork:** How do people perceive your music in different parts of the country and different parts of the world? It seems so geographically specific, yet also so free-floating and traveling.

JB: I think it's pretty open-minded. There are a lot of band members from different places, different countries. On this record, we even employed several musicians from Spain, as well as our usual musicians from Germany-- Martin Wenk and Volker Zander. There are guests from around the United States-- Pieta Brown, Mickey Raphael, [Iron & Wine's] Sam Beam, [Tortoise's] Doug McCombs. I guess in some ways the touring ensemble of Calexico-- and the philosophy we have-- is better represented on this record than some of those in the past.

**Pitchfork:** You also seem to be involved in so many people's music.

JB: I think that's becoming more the norm, don't you? I think more and more bands are getting involved, like Damon Albarn co-owning a label like Honest Jon's. We don't really count on any one thing as the be-all-end-all, not so much for the monetary aspect but more for the creative fuel it gives you, the satisfaction of working on different things with different people. I do a lot of jobs...I guess you could call it work, but I don't charge people. I just like getting involved.

**Pitchfork:** It seems like a survival instinct for a lot of musicians. You have to make it worthwhile for people to buy physical music.

JB: It's all going to change, which I'm ready for. I'm not a big fan of the CD format. I got the new Conor Oberst record, which I love, but I can't read any of the text. And I don't know if that's intentional. It'd be beautiful on an LP version. I can clearly understand his words and stuff, but do you know what I mean? You sacrifice some of that feel. And that feel is what's most important about doing any of this.

**Pitchfork:** To what degree is Calexico a duo as opposed to a full band?

JB: We go back and forth. Some of the guys who have been playing with us for 10 years, it drives them crazy when they hear "the part-time members" or "the added musicians." These guys-- Martin Wenk, Volker Zander, Jacob Valenzuela, and all-- are a huge part of what we do. They make it that much easier to get these ideas on record, take them out on the road, and transform them live. That's my favorite part-- taking that studio version and asking, "What can we do to make it work in a live setting?" For me it's night and day. We're playing a studio and it's very quiet and studious. It's like a library, with all these instruments lined up against the wall and they're staring at you saying, "Play me! Over here! Don't forget the banjolin!" "Next record, I promise."

**Pitchfork:** What does your touring schedule look like? Are you looking forward to playing these songs live?

JB: We're looking forward to hitting the road. We've been doing this long enough that it's pretty important to give the record companies-- and ourselves-- as much help as possible. We've got tour dates all over the place-- Europe and the States. And I'm sure, once those continents are taken care of, we'll get to go back to South America, which I'm excited to do, and maybe play some of these other countries we've never been to. We've never been to Russia. There's a song on the record called "Red Blooms", which takes inspiration from a news item about some of the missing people [in Russia] every winter who are unaccounted for until the spring. And then they find these bodies thawing beneath the layers of ice. Nice positive image. We've got this goth side that I'm not sure if you guys know about it.

We're going to take one of the guest musicians-- his name is Jairo Zavala-- on the road, and he's very excited to be a part of all this. Sam Beam is extremely busy and has enough going on. Plus, he's got a family of four kids. But we always cross each other's paths, and it's a pleasure to continue on with the musical relationship and friendship. In Chicago, we're going to invite Pieta Brown to come up from Iowa to sit in with us. Or, if anything, it'll spark us to invite guests locally.

**Pitchfork:** People you know or open invitation?

JB: I don't know. If we're in London, we'll just put our feelers out and see who's around, maybe someone on tour. We'll just see what's going on. Martin Wenk, our trumpet player, is always really good about finding people. He's a good

communicator, always texting and keeping in touch. We tend to go on the fly.

**Pitchfork:** Are there any people with whom it would be your dream to work?

JB: There are a lot of people. You got an hour? Recently we did some folk festivals, one in Winnipeg and one in Calgary, and we got to collaborate with people like the Weakerthans and this great band called the Acorn. We really enjoyed getting to play with them. It was uncanny just how easy it all was and how enjoyable it could be in a situation like that. In Calgary we played with Andrew Bird, Bill Callahan, and A Hawk and a Hacksaw, and there was also the Handsome Family. It was all in one day, and we were sharing the stage at different times. Those are some of my favorite artists right there, and it was a lot of fun. Bill [Callahan] is pretty silent, pretty short on the commentary, but I told him the invitation was extended if he ever wants to come to Tucson and record or something. I always thought he would be someone we could do a good job backing up, if he was into that. You never know.

**Pitchfork:** When you're writing, are you writing specifically for the guest, or do you find somebody to sing that part you've already written?

JB: Usually, I just write the song, get it sculpted and formed and sometimes even mixed. In the case of "House of Valparaiso", we had the song already mixed and Sam [Beam] was already on tour. When he came back, we sent him the file mixed and ready to go, and he just added his stuff on top. Normally, it's a gradual process. We don't have it all mapped out beforehand. We just go by the seat of our pants.

**Pitchfork:** Can you tell me about having "Crystal Frontier" playing on the shuttle?

JB: Gabrielle Giffords, who's the local congresswoman here, sent me an e-mail asking if she could use one of our songs to include in this mixtape that the family members make for the astronauts. I said, "Sure, I'd be honored." I chose the song, and I was very happy that they would ask us to give a song for the wake-up call.

**Pitchfork:** It's strange to think of it blaring out in space.

JB: It is strange. I love those things. It would be really bizarre if you actually knew what the situation would be, if you're out there and understand where that signal goes. Does it bounce off that device and keep on trailing out there in space? I really don't know, but I was very pleased that she was into it. I didn't expect it at all. It was an interesting news item for us, because when you're involved in putting out a record, you're focused on the release date and you miss out on some of these wonderful surprises. It came at a good time.

Actually, it came right before we got the call from director Taylor Hackford, who's doing a new movie. He flew us out to L.A., and I think we're going to do some work on this movie he's doing with his wife, Helen Mirren, and Joe Pesci, called *Love Ranch*. It's based on the Mustang Ranch, the legalized brothel in Reno, Nevada. We got to go to the brothel. We were playing a show in Reno and we heard there was a museum, so we thought we'd just check it out. That made it all doable, and my girlfriend gave me the okay. So we go to the museum, which closes by 3 p.m., and of course we get there at 4 p.m., but we got a tour of the brothel. And that was pretty...entertaining. This woman, what was the name she had given herself? Jenna. She gave us a really nice tour and good background information for working on this film, strange as it is.

**Pitchfork:** Is it a period piece?

JB: It's in 1976. It revolves around this couple who ran this very healthy and very legit business...of prostitution. My aunt was so excited that we were potentially doing a project with Helen Mirren, because like a lot of people I know, she's a big fan of her work, and she does a great job in the film. She's badass. It's been fun. The music business has its one dimension: It's about putting out records. It can be sleazy at times, it can be exhausting, but the film business is just plain crazy. You really have to be demented and just crazy, overly passionate, and drink lots of caffeine or something. It's a lot of hours and hoops to jump through, but I love it. I love movies, and I love music in films. I think that's one of the reasons we brought back some of the instrumentals on this album, because we've had songs placed in movies like *Collateral*, *I'm Not There*, and one of the last episodes of "The Sopranos". It's interesting to hear a song that you've written pop up as background while Tony Soprano does psychedelics with some young girl in the desert.

**Pitchfork:** Do you get a lot of film offers?

JB: We do. We get a lot of requests to license songs, and every now and then, student films and independent films will check in and see what our schedule is like. It's tough because we tour a lot. It becomes a factor in deciding what we can and can't do.

Because if you're gone, then you need some "A-Team" special van where you can record. Some people do that, they have a setup where they can record on the road, but we're not that advanced. In the States, I'm still driving our old van. I don't think I can do much other than that.

**Pitchfork:** Do you take a lot of inspiration from movies? I read a lot of references to spaghetti westerns with Calexico.

JB: More so than movies like that, I'm inspired by directors like Jim Jarmusch-- his films and theories and aesthetic. That to me is more interesting. Ennio Morricone is a whole other category. His music is really quite exceptional and has been for a really long time. Personally, the music was more attractive than the actual films. I don't know a whole lot of westerns. I know some, but I'm more a fan of the maestro's work. They call him the maestro over there in Italy [*laughs*]. He just reminds me to appreciate all those beautiful mistakes, whether it's live or in the studio. That's the approach we take when we go into the studio: Let's just see what we can create without much planning and thought. Let's just throw some shit against the tape machine and see what sticks, rather than try to replicate some demo that we made. As soon as you have demos, it's over. Everybody gets that demo stuck in their minds-- and I'm guilty of it, too-- you get it stuck in your mind and you can't let it go. Our demos are our albums. That's how we've been doing it for a while now.

**Pitchfork:** Were there any instances on this album where you went in and accidentally discovered something?

JB: "Man Made Lake" came from rehearsing and playing with a certain rhythm and pattern. I love the drums, and I thought maybe I could use that drum path, take off the guitar and bass, and put whole new chords and structures and melodies on there. So we did that. Working in Pro Tools enabled us to work backwards, which I like. The song "El Gatillo (Trigger Revisited)" is another one that we recorded several years ago. I loved the drum track, and I wrote new music to it. Our mixing engineer and co-producer here at Wavelab, Craig Schumacher, was just beside himself. He said we're the only band that will record a song, take everything off but the drums, and rebuild the song around the drums.

But it works great, and there's no one way of doing things. If you had the time and, I guess, the patience to try those things, then you can come up with some interesting takes. And it's one of those things, too, where we had learned the song and tried to record it after we'd rehearsed, and it just lacked all that spontaneity and spark. It felt better just to keep jumbled and loose and subconscious. It's like you're free writing and you come up with this strange phrase and you don't know why but it feels good. Just save it. Don't even touch it.

[We did] the same thing on "Writer's Minor Holiday", which actually stems from the one time we rehearsed this song, which sounded completely different. I kept the words, and when I tracked the song, I did a rough vocal guide. When we went to mix it, I told John that I was going to re-sing it, and he said he loved the vocals as they were. So he's there to keep me from questioning things too much. He's really good about that. He's really good on first takes, and we bounce these ideas off each other.

And we've been working with Nick Luca since 94 or 95; he's also been a big part of the whole Wavelab experience. He understands that element of chaos that we need, and at the same time, there are times when we want to hone in on a part. It's that give and take that these guys here at Wavelab understand about us, and that's why I think a lot of people will comment on the new record sounding more like the older stuff, because it's mixed by the same individuals who worked on our past albums, rather than *Garden Ruin*, where we deliberately went with a different mix engineer.

**Pitchfork:** The two albums really do sound different.

JB: *Garden Ruin* was recorded in the same studio I'm in right now, but it was mixed by somebody different. We wanted it to be a different sound. We were open to seeing what kind of drum sound Andy Taub and J.D. Foster could get. I really like a lot of that album. I've heard a lot of people discount it, but there are some people who say that it was the record that made them understand more about where we're coming from. It all balances out.

**Pitchfork:** I've heard people say it's a band album, and I've heard people say, no, it's a songwriter album.

JB: Isn't that just the way that things happen? I'm sure that there will be people who will react adversely to this record. It's only natural, and it's not like we're a band that's very widely known. I think we float on the periphery and we do these different projects, and our music means different things to different people at different times. I

love that. I love the fact that we're not just a one-sided band or style of music. It's got this complexity to it, and we're able to blend where and when needed. It comes from having played a lot of music over the years in different projects and in different situations.

I've always been a fan of variety, even as a kid, hearing instruments on those classic 60s records, whether it was a celeste-- that keyboard that sounds like a glockenspiel and a vibraphone-- or the sitar. I went out and bought a sitar in college. So I've always had this thing for non-Western instruments and ideas. On "Victor Jara's Hands", Jairo Zavala just brought so many great arpeggiated guitar lines and slide work on the acoustic guitar. We don't think of coming up with those things, but because he comes from a Spanish background, he does. That enabled a lot of these songs to take shape and come into existence. Otherwise, they'd be left on a reel of tape somewhere. And that's what we wait for, too. We have all these songs that we would like to finish, but we don't always find that ultimate feeling that you're looking for, where you're impressed with what you're hearing back on the speakers.

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