

Calexico: Beyond The Border

by Jay Hathaway for SuicideGirls (<http://suicidegirls.com/>)

Calexico have been called a lot of things, from "desert noir" to "Mariachi rock," mostly labels intended to play up the band's roots in the American Southwest. But if you really want to reduce Calexico's complex blend of themes and grooves (from around the world, not just from the border) down to a simple message, it should be this: these guys have damned good taste.

Talking to drummer John Convertino, it doesn't take long to understand how he and singer/guitarist Joey Burns have been creating fresh music together for over a decade. Convertino is knowledgeable about an impressive range of styles, everything from raw early rock to disco. On their latest record, *Carried to Dust*, they've also brought in a cast of collaborators who add even greater richness to their sound. Notable guests include Amparo Sánchez and Jairo Zavala, both from Spain, and Iron and Wine's Sam Beam.

Suicide Girls talked to John Convertino about the story behind *Carried to Dust*, and -- as you might imagine, if you've ever listened to Calexico -- all kinds of other music, too.

Jay Hathaway: Hi John, how are you?

John Convertino: I'm fine. I'm in the studio, doing a little recording.

JH: Recording again already?

JC: Yeah, we are. Looks like we're going to start a soundtrack that we're very excited about.

JH: Can you talk about that yet?

JC: I think I can. There's already a website for the movie. It's called *Love Ranch*, and Helen Mirren and Joe Pesci are the big stars in it. It's about a brothel called the Mustang Ranch, in Reno, Nevada, and a triangle of three lovers.

JH: Are you writing lyrics for that, or doing a score?

JC: We're doing a score. James Newton Howard is the composer. He's coming up with ideas, and we're reinterpreting them, giving them that Calexico vibe, or sound, or feel ... whatever you want to call it.

JH: How is it to work with someone else's ideas to start out, when it's usually just the two of you coming up your songs?

JC: I don't really know yet, because we're just starting in on it. What Joey and I are doing right now is a song for a benefit record for this Dutch band called *De Kift*. We're also working on another benefit record for Chris Gaffney, who passed away a few months ago. That's kind of getting us in the mode. We're going to actually start doing the soundtrack this week. We've done quite a bit of reinterpreting other songs, we've done some things with the Gotan Project. It's kind of fun to swap songs. The Dutch band, *De Kift*, they're going to do one of our songs. It's cool to swap it out and see what happens.

JH: Are you looking forward to touring again? I know you've been a long time in the studio this time around, and it sounds like you're staying there for a while.

JC: Yeah. We did a couple of shows up in Germany, a couple big festivals. We did a four or five day rehearsal period, going over some of the songs off the new record, and they were coming together really nicely live. We're really looking forward to playing the new songs. It's like you never really get off the road, 'cause you always have these little one-offs that you're doing. We did some shows up in Canada. If you play enough shows in a row, you start getting the feeling like "Oh yeah, this is what it's like." It's really exciting to have the new songs though.

JH: How did all of the experiences you've had traveling globally as a band influence the way this album came out?

JC: Early on, when we started touring in Europe, we were playing smaller venues. We were playing some places that might only hold 100 or 150 people, in the south of France, or we'd play some small village in Italy. We did a couple of tours in Japan. These kind of tours, you don't really make that much money. It's not really a money-making thing, but what you gain from doing it is the experience of being in a completely different culture. Not just being in Paris or Milan or something, but you get out into the outskirts, into the country. When you really start seeing the spaces in between the big cities, I feel like that's what really starts to influence our music.

What happened recently, for this record, was a trip down to South America, Chile and Argentina; Getting to experience that really had a large influence on this record. Similarly, with Garden Ruin, we had a lot of touring in the states at the time that was being put together, so you could really hear the influence of what was going on at that time, with the war coming out, the Bush regime ... so for this new record, it's been a relief of sorts to be able to travel to some different places, like South America, New Zealand and Australia, and also to see the light at the end of the tunnel. The Bush regime is almost over, you can almost feel the relief. I think all those things have really helped make this record what it is.

JH: Would you say Calexico's music is more about a place or a time?

JC: I think that's what records do. That's what music can do. It can be a Polaroid snapshot of what's happening right now. I think that's where we try to go with what we're doing. We try not to put too much thought into it, as far as coming up with a concept beforehand. For us, it seems to work more spontaneously. Then, when it's all done, that's when you figure out what it's about. (laughs)

Lyrically, Joey was using a lot of his experience of being there in Argentina and Chile, for songs like "Victor Jara's Hands" or "Valparaiso." There's a lot of reference to the ocean, to the end of the Earth, this kind of feeling, within the record. I think it's been a theme for our band, even though we're based in the desert, and we've been called "desert rock" or "desert noir," I still really feel like there's a life aquatic to our music as well. Maybe it's because we want water so bad! (laughs) But it definitely rained like hell last night, so I'm happy about that.

JH: I just left Seattle, so I'm happy to get out of the rain a little bit.

JC: I bet! You're from Seattle?

JH: Yeah, but I'm in Kansas City today.

JH: So, how did the story of this album come together? You said that you come up with these things spontaneously, but there's also a narrative to it. How does that work?

JC: It came up after the record was done. It wasn't something Joey had thought up beforehand. The song "Writer's Holiday," he had come up with that before we went into the studio, but to actually make it a concept of going on holiday and traveling to all of these different places really came up after the fact. That happens sometimes -- especially in the mixing process, when the recording of it is all done, and we're going over each of these songs, time and time again, listening to every single part, fine-tooth combing each song -- you start to feel like there's a cohesiveness with the sequencing, and how this record is going to have a flow to it, or a theme to it.

I guess we're kind of old-school in that way, that we still like to think of a record as a 33 record, where you have an A side and a B side, and you have a turning point. Whether it's in the middle of a song, or it's in between two songs, it always feel like there's a turning point, where the record starts to become something else.

JH: You raise a good point. We're living in a mixtape culture, where people are grabbing singles out of the context of a whole album. It's a different experience, really.

JC: Yeah, put the iPod on shuffle, you know? It can be fun, but it's just weird that we're losing that sense of theme throughout a record. I guess we'll just keep doing it as long as we can. I appreciate you recognizing that.

JH: I mean, it's one thing if you're a throwing a party ...

JC: That's true. I think that's what's so great about a DJ. A real person who spends more time listening to music than playing it, maybe, or can understand music in a way that a musician can't. It's a curse of a musician to be so inside the music. It's hard for me to listen to anything without zeroing in on the drums and bass. I always do that so quickly. A non-musician can hear the whole right away, and it affects them in a way that it might not affect a musician, and I think that's why DJs are so great. We have a couple of great DJs here in Tucson that have radio shows on the local community radio station. They're a lot of fun to listen to. Do you have that kind of thing in Seattle?

JH: Yeah, but the thing I've noticed there is a lot of people who don't want to give up on grunge and early-90's rock, or they want to exploit it. You guys have been around 10 years now, do you think that kind of stuff will start happening with your music?

JC: It's interesting that you say that, because I think with our last record, people said, "Oh, we miss the Southwestern feel, or the Ennio Morricone stuff, or the mariachi stuff." It's just funny how it's sometimes hard for your listeners to try something new. They'll always compare it to what you've done before.

Like I said earlier, we never are really thinking we're going to purposely change this, that or the next thing. It's just following your instinct and letting what's been going on in your life influence you. That's what's so weird about a movement in Seattle that got dubbed "grunge." Was there a movement out of Tucson that was called "desert rock?"

What I thought was interesting, when Nirvana and all those bands were coming out, was how the kids

thought that was all new music. Being a little bit older, I said, "Wait, that's not necessarily new." You had Heart that came out of the Northwest, you had Jimi Hendrix who came out of the Northwest. You had the Sonics, even back in the 60s, who came out of the Northwest. There's a really rich history of music from that area. If I were going to go to Seattle, I'd want to put together something like the Sonics did. I think that was the shit.

JH: What do you think people are going to remember about the music of this decade?

JC: Music has gotten more complex... I think during the 2000's, you're having people blending all different kinds of styles together. You're having the crumbling music industry, the record companies not doing what they were doing back in the day. You have this whole new medium of Internet and digital downloading. It's hard to keep things pigeonholed in any kind of genre.

JH: People are always looking for something new that everybody else isn't already listening to. Nobody seems to know where it's going, but it'll be interesting to watch and see.

JC: Yeah, it is interesting. I just went and saw the movie Mamma Mia...

JH: With all the Abba songs!

JC: Yeah, Abba. The music sounds great in the context of the movie. I remember when disco came out, I was in high school and I wore a "disco sucks" t-shirt to school, because I was being anti-disco, because it was so popular. Of course I got sent home from school. But I actually, secretly, being a drummer, really loved it. I would see these bands in lounges and small clubs, playing disco, and the drummer's always rocking the shit out of it. Actually, my first drum teacher used to play with a DJ, he was a live drummer and he'd play live to the disco. I was thinking about doing that again, just for fun. It's a great workout, and I think it'd be pretty fun for a crowd to see that.

JH: Absolutely.

JC: Maybe it's all gonna go back to disco. Put your dancing shoes on!

JH: Hey, people like to dance.

JC: Yeah!

JH: How did you get into playing drums? How old were you when you started?

JC: I started when I was 9 years old. I'm the youngest of five, and all my brothers and sisters were playing instruments. My mom put together a little family band. She wanted me to sing, and I didn't want to sing, so she bought me some drums. Nobody else wanted to play the drums. I took lessons from that guy I was telling you about. We would play churches. They were more fundamental, conservative churches, and we were playing gospel music with drums and bass guitar and electric guitar. So that was a big deal back then. I would start to take my drums out of the car, and the preacher would be like, "Oh, we can't have those drums in the church!" And my mom would stick up for me, "Wait 'til you hear him play!" It's funny, because it really wound up helping me later on, to be able to play that soft, and play with brushes and be really understated. That's pretty much how I play to this day.

JH: It's funny how you can sometimes tell how drummers got started by listening to them play. You can pick out the marching band guys, stuff like that.

JC: I learned the traditional grip and basic rudiments, but I was never in a marching band or any kind of high school band. I went right away and started playing clubs, playing jazz. I kind of missed out on that. One of my early drum teachers too, was really anti rudimental drumming, he was more into learning polyrhythmic stuff. Kind of where Elvin Jones was coming from, and Art Blakey and Max Roach, that school of drummer. Maybe you can hear that in my playing some, I don't know.

JH: Getting back to the new album a bit, I wanted to ask about all the musicians you collaborated with on this record. What did they bring to it?

JC: I would single out Jairo Zavala, who plays guitar on quite a few of the songs, and he does some singing on the first song. Really influenced us a lot. He comes from Spain, and we've always had this south-of-the-border influence in our music...When he starts playing with us, just the way he approaches the guitar totally swings it in a different way...Just him playing one simple line on the song "Fractured Air" really makes us play in a different way.

It was really fun to work with him, as well as Amparo Sánchez. They played together for many years, Amparo and Jairo, so you had that connection between the two of them. Joey and I played both on Jairo's solo record, as well as Amparo's record. They both came to Tucson. We really got to know each other's musical telepathy. That was a great foundation for our own record.

JH: Then when you go on the road, you're going to have the band you toured with on the last album. Who else is coming with you?

JC: Jairo's going to come on the road with us in Europe, and I think he's actually going to come here in the States, too. I think that's going to make a huge difference for our live show. And then the shows where he's not with us, Paul [Niehaus] has been picking up a lot of his parts. That's great, too. It's been really great hearing Paul play more guitar. Pedal steel is his main instrument, but he's really a great guitar player too.

And then you have the singers, Pieta Brown and Sam Beam, and Amparo, who are either singing with Joey or singing off of him. I think that's been a great thing for the record as well, to have that kind of vocal contrast. In the past, we've been pretty good about instrumental contrast, and bringing in a lot of different kinds of instruments, different kinds of sounds...It's good to have that contrast with other voices.

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