

Liner Notes: Calexico on 'Carried to Dust'

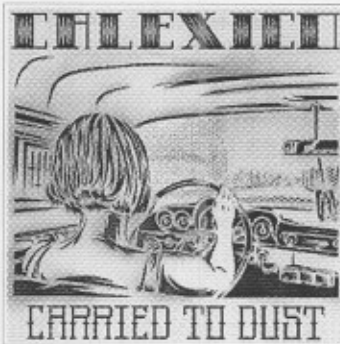


CALEXICO DRUMMER JOHN COVERTINO has a pretty good philosophy when it comes to structuring records:

"[It's] always about contrast — try to keep the listener interested," he said.

Contrast abounds on the group's sixth studio album, "**Carried to Dust**" (Quarterstick), which just may be Calexico's finest yet.

The album is a return to form of sorts for the band, which is helmed by singer/guitarist **Joey Burns** and Covertino. Calexico operates as Burns and Covertino's baby, with touring band members filling in studio parts where necessary. For the most part, the pair constructs the songs before the rest of the band comes in to record.



In 2006, however, Calexico recorded as a full collective — all at once — for "**Garden Ruin**," an album featuring poppier, more rock-oriented songs. The **Tucson,**

Ariz.-based group even eliminated the instrumental numbers prevalent on past releases.

"We were trying to cut through the quick, making songs as streamlined as possible," Covertino said.

For "Carried to Dust," Burns and Covertino handled most of the basic tracks together, with only pedal-steel guitarist **Paul Niehaus** joining them on two cuts. The rest of the musicians then came in, one-by-one, to record their parts.

"It was a lot more fun," he said. "It was a lot less pressure that way."

And, yes, the instrumentals are back.

Covertino took **Express** through nine of the album's 15 tracks, which range from sun-soaked pop rock to a Latin-style song sung completely in Spanish, and feature friends **Sam Beam** (of **Iron & Wine**) and **Pieta Brown**.

[Click here](#) to stream the whole album and follow along.

» "**Victor Jara's Hands**"

That song is interesting for me musically, drumming wise, because there's three drumming tracks on it. We really hadn't done that very much in the past, overdubbing drums. We do quite a bit of percussion overdubs and stringed instruments and stuff, but we never really messed with the drums — always kept them simple — but that song is based on a drum machine and I did a track with

brushes over the drum machine. And then I did a track over the brushes with sticks. So, it was a lot of fun for me and I think the song has a great dynamic as it builds. Lyrically it got inspired from the story of **Victor Jara** [a Chilean folk singer and activist who was murdered during the U.S.-sponsored Chilean coup in 1973]. We'd done a tour down in **Chile** and **Argentina** and I think that trip inspired us quite a bit.



» **Two Silver Trees**

Again, it was one of those things where the song really changed a lot from initially the basic track, so, I wound up having to overdub cymbals. ... We needed something to signify that chorus coming in because the timing was kind of weird on it. So, there's the cymbal rolls and that guitar line that's kind of **Arcade Fire**-ish. I kept joking with Joey about the beat, how it reminded me about an '80s **Styx** song.

» **"Writer's Minor Holiday"**

That one really reminded me of a **Pixies** song when we were first tracking it. It had this really cooking energy to it. And when Joey started doing those back up vocals, which got replaced by a woman, that really started to swing the song. I felt like that really gave it what we were doing with "Garden Ruin," kind of a pop sensibility, but it's still really different from that.

» **"Man Made Lake"**

That song was fun to put together because we actually had our bass player play with us on that one, one of the few ones that wasn't just me and Joey on the basic track. Joey wasn't even playing guitar, he was playing organ. It's just this really funny groove. That's just another way we can put songs together. Sometimes you actually just do a jam and then you structure the song over the jam and that's what that song was all about and I really like it because there's these funny drum fills that come in during the verses and drum fills aren't supposed to do that they're supposed to come over the choruses, but that's what happens when you're jamming.

» **"Inspiración"**

It's one of my favorites on the record. It's **Jacob Valenzuela**, the trumpet player. He'd written the song with his brother and we'd been doing versions of it not quite as strange — that recorded version is kind of a more twisted version of the song. We wanted to make the percussion and the rhythm not so Latin. We wanted to mess with it a little bit to give it some contrast. I remember when we recorded it I didn't touch any cymbals. No hi-hat, no nothing. We just recorded stuff and layered percussion on top of that basic beat. It's interesting because I think that song really pops out. I think that's maybe because there's no cymbals played. Something happens in the recording process when you hit a cymbal in the microphones they take up a ton of space from the other drums, at least that's the way the engineer was explaining it. I was like, "Shit, really — then I'm never going to play cymbals again."

» **"House of Valparaíso"**

[Sam Beam] affected us pretty severely I think. We started becoming really good friends and getting to know him was really a great thing. But I think, too, even in "Garden Ruin" Joey was experimenting more with the vocal layering things that Sam does, that he learned from working with Sam on "**In the Reins**" [Calexico and Iron & Wine's 2005 collaborative EP]. And that song, "House of Valparaíso," was one of the ones too that changed a lot from the initial foundation. The middle part was completely rewritten and then we added Sam's vocal, which was one of the last things to add on there. It just changed the song so much when he took what they were singing before and interpreted it and sang it the way he sang

work that Joey was singing before and interpreted it and sang it the way he sang it. I don't know how many times he doubled it and tripled it. And so, it swings the song in a different way. It's one of my favorites on the record.



» **"Slowness"**

I told Joey I was listening to Feist's record and she has a song on there that has this really great shuffle, and I said, "Hey, you know, we've never really done a shuffle," and so I was like, "Hey Joey, let's do a shuffle." So, he started playing one ... those basic chords on the shuffle, and that's kind of how that song started.

» **"El Gatillo (Trigger Revisited)"**

Well, I was telling Joey some of these instrumentals that we play live are like the funnest parts of the show, like "Minas de Cobra" or "El Picador." And you realize that it features Paul Niehaus and his pedal-steel playing — he's taking the melodies and he plays them so well on the pedal steel. ... We wound up doing this sort of answer to a song that we do, "Frontera/Trigger." "Frontera" is an instrumental and there's another song called Trigger that has words, so Joey started singing those "Trigger" words over an instrumental, so this is the instrumental version of "Trigger," the opposite, because that's what the word means in Spanish, *gatillo*.

» **"Contention City"**

It was just one of those late-night moments: Joey on the Wurlitzer and me on the drums and Paul on the pedal steel and just letting yourself go a little bit and I guess that's it. It was fun. I especially like the moment there at the end where it really falls apart and fizzes all together. That was another thing for me: I was really wanted to have a longer ambient song to finish the record, so I got my three wishes for the record: a shuffle, an instrumental and a longer ambient closer, so I'm pretty damn happy.

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Photos by Gerald von Foris

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