

CALEXICO

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"drives the bus"—a sentiment many echo. The open spaces on *Carried to Dust* really play to the drummer's jazz-influenced strengths, and his parts are as nuanced and tuneful as any other instrument on the record. Niehaus' first reaction upon hearing the final mixes was typical: "The drums just blew me away."

But the Convertino Effect goes beyond his skills with the skins. Burns says the care that the drummer takes with his kits—he prefers vintage models, and has bought old sets on-line just to fix them up and sell them at cost to friends like Victoria Williams and Neko Case—is a metaphor you can extend to the way Convertino lives his life. Luca says that if Burns is the songs' homebuilder, and the band members, guest musicians and studio staff serve as subcontractors, Convertino is the *arbiter elegantiae*, quietly suggesting when something drifts too far from the Calexico aesthetic. "Everything about him is very vintage, very tasteful," Luca says, "we trust him for that."

Burns cautions that this vintage is no retro hipster put-on, but an organic response to the built-in obsolescence of modern life: "John has seen it and then seen through it," he says. "He's just got this Kerouac-like sense of adventure and poetic grace so that wherever we go...people pick up on his dynamic, and that has a lot to do with how we've formed the Calexico feel and sound."

Calexico's international flavors and themes can obscure the fact that their music is resolutely American—maybe more so for bringing so many different cultures into their sonic melting pot.

Their first trip to Chile and Argentina, where they played sold-out shows in thousand-seat venues, provided Burns with plenty of fodder for new lyrics, some courtesy of the CIA-funded '70s coup that gifted the world Pinochet, and today's echoes at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. An article in *The Economist* about the growing poverty in the new Russia inspired striking images—"shadows drinking antifreeze"—and allusions to Gogol's *Dead Souls* in "Red Blooms," while the Oriental flavors of "Two Silver Trees" bring yet another musical influence to the band's

table. One of Calexico's thematic staples, urban sprawl and its corrosive environmental effects, is beautifully rendered here by "Man Made Lake." Similarly, "Contention City," about an Arizona ghost town where short-sighted greed in the 1880's killed a boomtown in eight quick years, works as a cautionary tale for, well, every civilization.

All of these themes point to the universality of our plight; if Calexico's music hops borders, so do the issues they write about. That's why a candidate like Obama, whose understanding of them is in direct contrast to The Shrub's willful ignorance, offers at least a glimmer of hope. For a band whose Arizona hometown is central in the immigration debate and all that it portends, choosing a uniter over yet another divider is serious stuff, something their travels have brought home again and again.

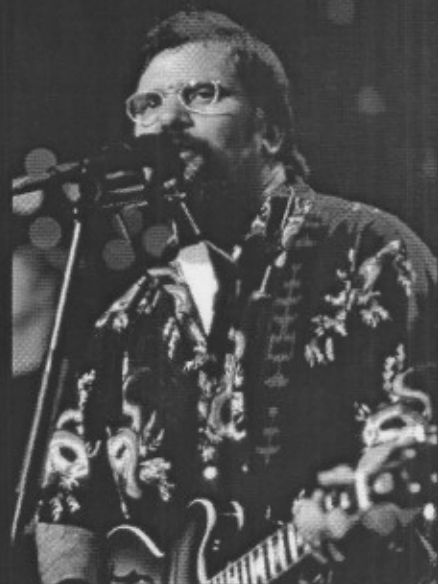
"You think about Europe," says Convertino, "and how they've been dealing with borders and different languages and different cultures for a long time. They've obviously had their problems, but they've gotten to a place where they don't have to build walls between their countries—as a matter of fact, walls have been coming down, not going up."

Burns sees Calexico's role, however minor, as part of the bigger picture; thematically, aesthetically, and best of all for us, musically. That's what gives *Carried to Dust* its impressive power, and makes even the most minimal Calexico sketch resonate down to our souls.

"Creative freedom is a wonderful thing," Burns says. "We've been involved with other projects on major labels and we've seen the disconnect: artists are working with other people who don't get that artistic background, that cultural continuity. They just don't get it. They're not reading the same books, they're not appreciating the same kind of quality of life. You're face-to-face with a corporate machine, and it is not about the future, it's about here and now, it's about making money. "There are a lot of people out there who need money, who are not going to do anything unless they get paid for each and every action. But everyone we work with is in it for the long haul, and they're into a quality of life, having this rich story with their life. They want to go deep: they don't want to just float on the surface." •

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