



John Convertino and Joey Burns

CALEXICO defies the desert music descriptions with their fifth album, *Garden Ruin*, where they counterpoint an arid landscape of political and social allusions with major chord melodies and even echoes of The Beatles. Will it raise them to the stature of one of the bands that really matters?

RAISING ARIZONA

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Forget everything you know about Calexico, or at least set it aside for the next few pages. Suspend for the interim such indicative yet confining descriptions as “desert noir,” “border pop,” “mariachi rock” or “spaghetti Western” and resist the temptation to invoke references like Link Wray, Ennio Morricone or Gil Evans, even if it all applies.

Not to worry, the Calexico you know and love—or should know and love, if you’re a listener of discerning tastes—have not abandoned the multi-stylistic charms that have made the band one of the most engaging and alluring as well as truly independent musical acts of the last decade. They’ve been morphing—if not shape-shifting—all along over four albums (as well as EPs and below the radar releases) and a kaleidoscopic range of collaborations. But *Garden Ruin*, Calexico’s latest, finds the group undergoing a subtle yet profound tectonic shift.

To understand what makes Calexico tick (in a global array of rhythmic patterns), it’s best advised to eschew descriptors that touch on the many types of music they draw into their sound. After all, a close listen to their recordings reveals that as soon they are on to one style or groove, or just as often happen to be melding musical modes together, they quickly swing into something different. The Mexican and German influences of both their Southwestern home base of Tucson and their multiethnic and intercontinental membership do provide benchmarks, but so does everything from Portuguese fado to the Romani swing of Django Reinhardt to punk rock. And be-bop and early fusion jazz, surf and twang guitar, country, rock and country-rock, Parisian *chanson* and the band Giant Sand, in which the Calexico brain trust of Joey Burns and John Convertino initially formed a creative union.

Burns articulated the Calexico mission statement best at the time of their last album, *Feast of Wine*, in a short film titled *Border Horse* made by their friend Bill Carter and found among the extra features of Calexico’s 2004

DVD release, *World Drifts In: Live at the Barbican London*. “Any band that gets pegged with any kind of characteristic that they’re known for, you have to challenge that and you have to go beyond the description.”

GARDEN RUIN IS, DARESAY IT, AMONG MANY THINGS, Calexico’s pop album. “Yeah. I have no trouble with that at all,” says Convertino of the proposition. This comes not long after an impassioned talk of the sort Convertino obviously loves about the way Miles Davis and John Coltrane played pop songs like “Bye Bye Blackbird” and “My Favorite Things” and took them way out, curling, stretching and refracting the melodic themes, and then brought them all the way back home to where they started—just to give you an idea about how his mind thinks about pop music.

Then again, Convertino also sharpened his drum and song chops in a touring cover band with his older brother and sister that was good enough to earn a still-standing shrine at a club where they played in Anchorage, Alaska over two decades ago. “It was good training,” he notes. “When I graduated high school, I thought, I’m going to go to Berklee School of Music in Boston. But we started going on the road, and I think that’s a lot better training than what I would have gotten. As corny as it may sound, there’s a lot to a Steppenwolf song or a Doobie Brothers song that people related to.”

Which means that Calexico’s ecumenical approach to music isn’t subject to exclusionary musical snobbiism. “My daughter went through a heavy Avril Lavigne phase, and I have to admit there’s some great pop songs there,” Convertino reveals. “I would find myself humming a tune, and I would go, ‘Hey, that’s an Avril Lavigne song.’ And that’s a good pop song—when you can hum it in your head and you can relate to the words they’re singing.”

By the same token, “Nirvana may have been the year that punk rock broke, it’s true. They were a punk-rock band. But the bottom line was that they had a melody that you craved hearing over and over again,” observes Convertino.

Calexico fans already know their gift for resonant if not downright addictive melodies. But *Garden Ruin* finds them creating some utterly irresistible car worms like “Bisbee Blue,” which steps out from the speakers with a chunk’n’chop acoustic guitar intro that recalls the Beatles’ “Two of Us,” and is later laced with creamy harmonies, a strings and horn interlude, a la George Martin, and ascending George Harrison-ish guitar figures. (“I think we played some *Let It Be* stuff when we were in the studio mixing,” Convertino confesses.) Echoes of the Fab Four also waft through “Lucky Dime,” and “Letter to Bowie Knife” plays with a rockin’ pop snap that recalls the mid-’60s best of the Kinks and the Small Faces.

On “Yours and Mine” and “Panic Open String,” Calexico carves out its own modernist folk-rock niche, and for contemporary comparisons, “Smash” is as mesmerizing an atmospheric rumination as the recent best from Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy. Longtime fans of the band’s ethnic variations are not to worry — “Roka” is a seductive *cumbia* that’s as Southwestern as *arroz y frijoles*, and “Nom De Plume” takes a *derive* along the Left Bank of the Seine in the company of Serge Gainsbourg. But in its sum total, *Garden Ruin* is Calexico’s take on modern rock, albeit with their traditionalist and globalist bents and gift for the imaginative twist.

It’s also the band’s political album, expressed, however, via the Calexico lexicon. (One could also argue that the band’s internationalism makes them political by their very nature.) Lyrical images that suggest a bleak landscape abound:

Cruel heartless reign/Craving short term gains/Right down to the warning signs; This world's an ungodly place/Strangled by vines unchaste; When numbers matter more than the heart/Your eyes are hollow and stiffness starts to take control/Capsize the soul, deep down, you know it's evil; The numbers rise on the death toll/And the chimes of freedom flash and fade/Only heard from far, far away.

Yet in the yin-yang fashion suggested by the title *Garden Ruin*, these allusive omens are underpinned with such sweets as bright major chords, honcyed three-part harmonies and cheery “la la la” refrains.

“John and I prefer the more abstract and less the tried-and-true literal kind of songwriting,” explains Burns. “I’m much more a fan of symbolism or abstractness and the way it can open up rather than close in on an idea.” Hence *Garden Ruin* is, in that yin-yang way, not what it seems to be yet at the same time everything it seems to be and so much more.

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CALEXICO HAVE DISTINGUISHED THEMSELVES BY FINDING INSPIRATION in music from the fringes and the underground, various points around the globe, and the places where cultures interstice. And in the backgrounds of the band’s leaders, one finds threads of internationalism: Burns was born in Montreal, and Convertino, whose place of birth was Long Island, is the son of a first-generation Italian-American father.

On the other hand, they both grew up in distinctly American locales. For Burns, it was the Southern California suburbs of Los Angeles, while Convertino came of age in Tulsa, Oklahoma. “I think a lot of musicians my age, in their early or mid-40s and their 50s, will not mention that they listened to a Kansas record or early Genesis record or a Styx record,” notes Convertino. “If you lived in Okla., you had to like a Styx record.”

So even if *Garden Ruin* sounds nothing at all like today’s pop charts or

the album rock of yore, its origins do have a tangential tie to one of the most popular radio rock acts of all time. “It kind of started with a song on *Fest of Wire*—‘Not Even Stevie Nicks.’” Convertino explains. “I think that was like the beginning of it. That little song was basically a tail-ending jam from song ‘Black Heart.’ There was a bit of tape left, so Joey did that little progression.” Its rhythm reminded them of Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours* album, hence the cheeky tag that stuck as a song title. “And from that little progression was the beginning of the different direction for Calexico.”

And the seed of another way for Calexico to defy the usual descriptions. “It’s definitely what we set out to do,” says Convertino. “We’ve very rarely if ever ‘set out to do something,’ quote/unquote, different. Joey and I always just get together and meet in the studio and start rattling off ideas and bouncing them off each other, guitar and drums, and get some basic tracks down and start layering on top. But this record, for sure, we were like, we wanna do something different.”

“We’ve been trying to stay in that cusp and not get too hot in our pants, and go, ‘Oh yeah, business as usual. Let’s lay down some cowbell and throw some trumpets on there.’”

One idea that came up was possibly asking David Byrne to produce. “Imagine a Calexico record sounding like *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*,” posits Burns. “That could definitely make a lot of sense. And that would be something I would love to try.”

“A major way of changing our direction was to have a producer there,” explains Convertino. “We’ve always worn the producer caps ourselves along with Craig Schumacher” (their friend, engineer and owner of Tucson’s Wavelab Studios).

Calexico’s operating system is also programmed to follow the music where it takes them, and after years of exploring gut-string Latin American musical instruments, Burns was drawn back to the steel-string guitar. As a

result, *Garden Ruin* began developing as a major-chord song album. And they found an ideal production foil in JD Foster, already a friend from their work with him on recordings with Richard Buckner.

At the same time, Calexico, which literally started out as a duo with Burns on guitar and Convertino on drums, had coalesced into a cohesive unit of equally creative and versatile players: Germans Volker Zander on upright bass and Martin Wenk on trumpet, vibes, keyboards and guitars; Arizonan Jacob Valenzuela on trumpet, vibes and keyboards; and Paul Niehaus from Nashville (and the band Lambchop) on pedal steel and guitars.

So rather than Burns and Convertino sketching the basics and then having the band and guests add parts later, the full group gathered in Arizona to preface recording with, for the first time, pre-production. They started out in Burns’s living room and then set-up shop for a week with Foster in a fourth floor loft above Roka’s Café in the Arizona mountain town of Bisbee.

It was there that the songs began to take shape, and Foster proved to be the perfect outside ingredient to help bring *Garden Ruin* to fruition, as Convertino tells it. “What I’d heard about JD and what I loved about working with him with Richard Buckner was that I could sense he knew immediately where songs were building and releasing. He has a very good sense of that, and has a way of honing in and recognizing when it really needs to build or when the build needs to be more subtle or when you need to build it quicker. And he does that without saying, hey, build this up quicker. You just get the feeling like he’s pushing for you and with you. And he’s got a definite sense of adventure,” adds Convertino.

The final results, even for all the usual Calexico variations, find the group at its most straightforward on record yet. “As a drummer I came full circle and was definitely enjoying the simplicity of the rock beat—just to

be able to play that again and love doing it,” enthuses Convertino. “We were all kind of enjoying—like on ‘Letter to Bowie Knife’—just being able to sit back and play a rock tune...loud, fast, and it’s over before you know it.”

THE BLUEPRINT FOR CALEXICO CAN BE FOUND IN GIANT SAND, THE

adventurous and amorphous band led by Howe Gelb—and too often reductively denoted as “desert rock”—that was one of the most intriguing and challenging wrinkles on the 1980s indie-rock scene. Founded in Tucson, the group migrated to Los Angeles in the mid ‘80s.

Meanwhile, Convertino’s cover band had also landed there following the scent of a possible record deal. He was living in a 1920s vintage Spanish-style Hollywood apartment complex that actually welcomed musicians as tenants.

“This young couple with a new baby moved in about a year after I did,” recalls Convertino. “It was Paula Jean Brown [a latter-period member of the Go-Go’s and Giant Sand bassist and singer] and Howe. I’d see him in the hall and found out he was a musician. And Howe had already put out a bunch of records by then. He’d had the two Blackie Ranche records and three Giant Sand records, and he gave me those. I listened to his latest one, *Storm*. It was real stripped down: bass, drums, acoustic guitar and pedal steel, just those four instruments. It was great. And the drums sounded huge.

“So one day I asked him, ‘Hey, you ever need a drummer?’”

“Well, you any good?” was Gelb’s response.

“Yeah, you know. I played gospel in churches and every type of music you can imagine playing in cover bands.”

“Ah, that sounds perfect.”

Convertino played on 1988’s *The Love Songs*, after which the band all but broke up. “It just became me and Howe as a two piece. We kind of did that

the thought trail off, but names like the White Stripes and the Black Keys immediately spring to mind. “Not that we were the first to do it. A lot of those old blues guys would just play with a drummer.” The two recorded the album *Long Stem Runt* and toured the U.S. and Europe.

At the same time, Burns was “traveling in my Honda Accord hatchback with my bass and amp in the back, going from one rehearsal and show to another to get the breadth of the music and enjoying playing in so many different kinds of settings and styles.” He was also studying classical music at the University of California at Irvine. “I was just mixing it up, showing up late to see the Minutemen”—a primary if seemingly left field landmark act for Calexico, who have covered songs by D. Boon—“after going to see Charlie Haden.”

Burns was referred to Giant Sand by a mutual friend and joined up, taking the band towards a jazz trio direction with his upright bass. “We learned a lot from playing with Howe,” notes Convertino. “If you look at the other great songwriters like Dylan and Neil Young, you sense that same kind of adventure there, or that sense of...nothing’s down pat. That was when I started realizing that a song is a song and it can survive with just a drum set and an electric guitar and people still wanna listen to you.”

As members of Giant Sand, Burns and Convertino moved with Gelb to Tucson, where they also began playing in the instrumental group Friends of Dean Martinez, in which Burns switched to guitar. The two developed a bond due to what Convertino calls “a similar familiar background—the mom sitting at the piano singing the show tunes. And Joey knew a lot about classical music too. We could talk a lot about music and have a good dialogue about it.”

“Even though he’s a few years older, I always felt very comfortable sharing musical ideas with John,” explains Burns. “It wasn’t until five years after we met that we really sat down and started exchanging ideas. And it was in such a low-pressure setting, really, at each other’s houses.”

It turned out that Burns had a plethora of songs and ideas he’d been keeping in his back

pocket during his first years in Giant Sand. “I’d spent some time before in California playing in bands and I wanted to take my time and digest ideas, especially after working with people like Victoria Williams or Howe Gelb or Vic Chesnut. I wanted to learn from others first before going back out again and releasing my material. And John has always been a great soundboard and co-writer to bounce ideas off of, both lyrically and musically.”

In the mid-1990s, the two recorded an album together, *Spoke*, which was also the name of their project until they spied a highway sign for the California border town of Calexico on their way to a gig in San Diego. “The name just seemed to fit what we were doing musically,” says Convertino. On their 19-song, almost home-made sounding debut, Burns and Convertino began incorporating such instruments as the vibes and accordion as well as the Mexican-American styles that are all but carried on the wind in a Southwestern city like Tucson. It was released in Germany in 1996 and the following year in the States by the Chicago-based indie label powerhouse, Quaterstick/Touch and Go Records. And just as Gelb and Convertino did a decade earlier, Calexico hit the road as a duo.

almost dizzying in both its tally and sheer breadth. Calexico have become a festival favorite in Europe, where they command concert hall audiences. Their performances have included guests like Mariachi Luz da Luna and singer François Breut, and they have collaborated and recorded with Buckner, Neko Case, Lisa Germano (as OP8), Nancy Sinatra, Evan Dando, Amaranóia and Goran Project, to name some but hardly all. Burns and Convertino have also joined forces with the French Amor Belhom Duo as ABBC, wereynchpins in the studio band for last year’s multi-artist salute to border radio by *Los Super 7, I Heard It on the X*, and rounded out 2005 with an EP and tour with Sam Beam, aka Iron and Wine.

The rise of Calexico and their prolific extracurricular activities eventually led to a rift with Gelb for the longtime rhythm section mainstays of Giant Sand. Convertino says that he and Gelb remain on good terms, but for Burns, the schism continues. “I’ve made my overtures to Howe, but they’ve all been rebuffed,” he reports. “He’s placed a wall between us, and ultimately I have to respect that.” But would Burns like to work with Gelb again as Giant Sand? “Oh yeah. [I’d play with him in a second.]”

WITHOUT SETTING OUT TO DO SO, CALEXICO HAVE

been forging a new paradigm within contemporary music—an open-ended musical approach that is as much about musical and instrumental proficiency as it is instinctive and even improvisational, and one in which genre and stylistic divisions beg for erasure. Kindred souls staking out a similar broad musical territory and exploratory approach include acts like Wilco and Tortoise.

“I’ve always kind of considered what we do an offshoot of indie rock,” observes Burns. “Just as much as the way Neutral Milk Hotel takes up the odd instrumentation, so do we. And a lot of other bands too. It’s nothing too new,” Burns insists.

Although the notion of “border music” does reflect the influence of living, creating music and artistically intermixing in their home base of Tucson, Calexico are more accurately seen as an act for whom music is borderless. Both Convertino and Burns have a hunger for new and different artists, sounds, styles and modes—something that Burns feels was almost imprinted in his soul even before birth.

“My Mom used to say there was a lot of music going on in 1966—the year I was in the womb. She was just digesting all the music that was around her in Montreal, Canada, and Beatle music of course. And when she went into labor, she got up and clicked on the radio and started dancing to get the process moving.” Later, it was “growing up with my two older brothers playing music in the garage. I just wanted to be a part of that.”

Convertino was also subsumed within music from before he took his first breath. His father was a piano tuner by day who also played night gigs on piano and accordion. His mother sang spiritual music professionally and developed her brood into a family band, finally pulling in a resistant nine-year-old John when she offered to get him a drum kit.

just about rock and music, but having an appreciation for theater and the arts and installations and museums,” explains Burns of their adventurousism. “Or coming to Tucson and getting an old car and finding an old house and fixing it up and seeing what you can do to make it unique yet still maintain a certain amount of connection to where the tradition comes from.”

Calexico’s musical independence is matched by their determination to make their way outside the major label system as, up to this point, a self-managed entity. “Why not apply as much creativity as you put into the music into the business side of things?” Burns insists. “I’d rather take the route that is less pressure and more inspired with ingenuity and creativity, and work with people that are doing it for the right reasons.” “I’ve always thought that you’re better off getting a loan from a bank than trying to do a record deal with a major label,” observes Burns. “It makes more sense to put it on your credit card and than just slowly pay it off. You are ultimately going to owe what you made.”

And wherever the music takes Calexico in the future, the bond between Burns and Convertino remains at the core. “As the band is becoming more unified and opened with all the creativity and sharing the profits on tours and now with studio recordings and all this stuff, it is really essential that John and I still have this connection, and I don’t want to lose that,” says Burns. “For me, it’s the most important aspect of how this music comes about.

“One of the main reasons why playing with John has been so rewarding because he is so

open and encouraging to getting off the usual road and being adventurous with the music from night to night. And I love that,” stresses Burns.

The potency of their union has brought Calexico in America to the verge of the next level—a stature similar to the what they’ve already reached in Europe. Without any intentional designs on their part, Burns, Convertino and the rest of Calexico, with the help of Foster, have created an album with a number of radio ready tracks. They began their year with an appearance with Iron and Wine on CBS TV’s *Late, Late Show*—the group’s first time on the late night shows that help bring rising acts to a wider audience. It will only take but a few small breaks in the right direction for Calexico to become one of the bands that truly matters in the current musical zeitgeist.

And that will afford Calexico the opportunity to explore further creative approaches to the sort of music they make and the way they present it along with more collaborations and artistic side excursions—a prospect that only sparks their dynamic imaginations towards greater musical adventures. “We’ve been pretty lucky so far,” Burns cautiously concludes. “I can only hope that we’ll be so lucky for the next 10 years.” H