

### The Nat Geo Music Interview: Calexico

Nat Geo sits down with Joey Burns, one half of the creative duo behind Tucson's favorite "Desert Noir" rockers, Calexico.  
by Tom Pryor  
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Back in 1996 when guitarist Joey Burns and drummer John Convertino left alt-rock group Giant Sand to follow their own muse neither one realized just how far a little side project called Calexico would take them. Twelve years later Calexico is one of indie-rock's most critically acclaimed bands known for their adventurous, Latin-tinged sound spiritually rooted in the California bordertown from where the band takes its name.

"That's the thing with creative journeys," said Burns, when Nat Geo Music caught up with him on tour in London. "Not only do you never know where they're gonna take you... you never know how long they're gonna last." So far it's lasted them six studio albums, numerous live albums, EPs and side projects and collaborations with everyone from Nancy Sinatra to Neko Case and Iron and Wine. Over that time the Tucson-based band's sound and lineup has evolved from the sometimes stark aesthetic of the early duo, to their lush, fully-realized "Desert Noir" sound – augmented by a full band on 2006's *Garden Ruin*.

We spoke to Burns on the release of Calexico's sixth studio album, *Carried To Dust* (Quarter Stick), an atmospheric and introspective collection of new songs where the romance of travel and the open road provide a backdrop for deeper explorations into the origins of creativity and inspiration.

#### Nat Geo Music: So, I heard that National Geographic was the primary inspiration for this album?

**Joey Burns:** [laughs] Not exactly... but it's definitely part of the mix. The idea behind this record came during the writers' strike last year in Los Angeles. I got the idea of a screenwriter who had put in his time protesting already and was burnt out and just decided to get away. So he drives to the Yucca Valley swap meet and buys an old road map with a route already marked with red pen. He follows the route to an old cabin and more thrift stores where he starts picking up old National Geographic Magazines – and many of the songs on the record are inspired by old stories from National Geographic that he reads along the way. It's kind of a surrealist journey through the backroads of Southern California...

But it's also about how creative types recharge and how they – we – find inspiration. About what unlocks creativity... and, you know, after a few weeks those screenwriters were sorely missed. There's only so much reality TV that you can watch...

#### Do you think there's a link between travel and creativity?

Oh, definitely. The more that you can expose yourself to different ideas and perspectives, the more material you have to work with. We really did pull out maps from National Geographic when we were writing this. I loved those maps as a kid. They were kind of like a fantasy gateway – if you look at the maps long enough, you'll get there one day.

I think there's a certain romance in old maps... they're kind of a record of our own lost civilizations. Think about a map from the '70s where you still have the Soviet Union and East and West Germany. Now that's all gone and all the maps have all been redrawn – but those old maps capture something of that time just like a photo or a film or a song from the same era.

#### Is that where your penchant for incorporating international sounds into your music comes from? A kind of romantic impulse?

That's a good question... but I don't know if romantic is the right word... It's more like a kind of curiosity. Like I love stringed instruments from around the world and I collect them. They become a new ingredient in the music that I'm making. It's like, 'why does someone from Tucson dive into Portuguese fado music?' For me, I embraced that melancholy element and used it as an ingredient in my own music.

There's definitely an element of losing yourself. For me it's about getting out of your comfort zone of what you already know and finding that space where you can go off and take these elements and form your own signature sound. It's not about any kind of recipe. It's almost more like taking these ingredients mulling out what you'd want to hear on your favorite radio

them. What's the bridge? What's the path? ...

Right now people's tastes are changing. It's less and less about genres and categories and more about making connections, and I think traveling itself can inspire people to change.

**Can you talk a little bit about your own travels with Calexico.**

We do a fair amount of traveling and the band has become a kind of vehicle for us to explore the world. A lot of *Carried to Dust* was inspired by touring in South America. I've always wanted to spend some time down there and when we got the greenlight to tour there last year it was kind of a dream come true.

**Any favorite places?**

Argentina was great, and Chile, too. When we played Santiago de Chile we got to see [poet] Pablo Neruda's house, because it was right next door to where we were playing. That was great, because a lot of times when you're on tour you miss the big highlights and major attractions of the towns you're staying in. But when they're right next door or cross the street, it makes things much easier. [laughs]

**Are you a big fan of Neruda's poetry?**

Yeah... I've read some of his stuff. It's really exuberant...

**What about Victor Jara? The first song on the album is "Victor Jara's Hands" were you familiar with his music?**

Well that's a great example of what I was talking about earlier... about how travel can open your eyes to whole new things... I wasn't really familiar with Victor Jara before I went to Chile. I knew the name, but I didn't know his story - that he was this phenomenally popular folksinger who was murdered by Pinochet [during the 1973 Chilean coup]. When I heard the story of how he was imprisoned in this soccer stadium and how when the soldiers identified him as a musician, they broke his hands so he couldn't play the guitar... that really affected me, you know? "

"But I don't want to paint this dark picture of Chile... overall I really loved it there. I felt really at home in a weird way. Valparaiso was like a strangely familiar version of San Francisco.

**Because of the cablecars?**

Yeah, and the steep hills and the bay and whole vibe in general. But the neighborhood elevators in the hillsides were something new. [laughs]

**Where would you like to explore next?**

I'd like to see more of South America... or China or Russia. I would really love to go to Russia. We wrote the song "Red Bloom" about an article I read about people who go missing in Siberia every year. They're found frozen in the Spring, preserved like mammoths. I worked with my brother John, who studied in Russia on that, just trying to get my head around that.

Another place I would like to play is Mexico. We've never actually played there.

**That's really surprising, considering how much inspiration Calexico takes from the border...**

I know... it mostly had to do with logistics and finding the right promoter and the usual kind of 'how are we going to get paid and who's going to pay us' issues. But I would love to play anywhere in Mexico - especially Mexico city.

We had this idea of a tour that crisscrossed the border, with groups and artists from both sides of the border. But that's getting harder and harder to conceive with all of the militarization of the border that's going on now.

**Calexico is literally named after a border town in California, and you're based in Tucson, AZ. How does your sense of place affect your approach to music?**

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I was fascinated with this town that straddles the border. It just sparked my imagination, thinking about the way people live with this hybrid culture every day. It was a great metaphor for what we do in our music, and where we come from in the Southwest. We've always been about intuitively trying to mix up the influences of all these different places. Not just the Latin, Mexican and American, Anglo influences you get in border towns, but taking that hybrid mentality, that way of looking at the world, and applying it to everything. We're definitely rooted in the Southwest, but it's our jumping off point to take on the world.