

CALEXICO [GARDEN RUIN]



Tucson transplants Joey Burns and John Convertino, who form the nucleus of the shifting lineup of musicians known as Calexico, have always blurred borders, both musical and geographical. While their proximity to the U.S.–Mexican border has been integral to their vibe since Burns' and Convertino's early days in Giant Sand, their new record, *Garden Ruin*, takes them away from the desert scenes and sounds on which they've made their reputation. Which makes sense, considering how much of the world they see on the road.

"We do a fair amount of touring," says vocalist and ringleader Burns. "Probably half the year or so, we trek across the States and Canada, over to Europe, and every now and then we might pop over to Australia, Japan and New Zealand. I'm always listening to a lot of the kinds of music that are more easily found over there than they are here in the States. With all the festivals overseas, you can find so many different kinds of music represented. The willingness to accept such an open program, and an audience that's thriving on that kind of variety, definitely influenced us."

The most obvious example of this interna-

tionalist approach on *Garden Ruin* is found on "Nom de Plume," a smoky mood-piece based around a Middle Eastern-sounding banjo riff, with spoken lyrics—entirely in French—evoking the South of France rather than the American Southwest. "J.D. Foster, who helped us produce this record, suggested this instead of taking it more in the Tom Waits vein, where it was already headed. Why not embrace the European influence and translate the lyrics into French?" Burns, a stranger to the language of love, does a bang-up job with his pronunciations for a novice. "I just realized, though, that I have to memorize it! It's gonna take me a while to be able to do that (*laughs*)."

The group continues to think globally elsewhere on *Garden Ruin*. On "Roka," some long-time Calexico fans may assume the track's chorus is sung by one of the band's many Mexican collaborators. This time however, the Spanish is sung by a Spaniard—namely, Amparo Sánchez, of the Barcelona band Amparanoia.

"It kind of involves this idea of a frontier where there are people crossing, especially along the lines of what's been going on here

in the Southwest for a number of years, but also what's been going on internationally. People coming in from lesser-developed countries and poor backgrounds trying to find jobs in more affluent countries, and willing to risk their lives—the idea that 'one goes where the water flows and water's running dry.' The lyrics I had written were really basic, and then Amparo and her manager translated them and added a few lines—the idea of dancing around these borders, it all being this dance of death we're engaged in, embracing death rather than fearing it."

It's not all darkness on *Garden Ruin*, however; much of the album is more up-tempo, and indeed more rock 'n' roll, than any previous Calexico effort. "Bisbee Blue," in fact, is as breezy and sugary as vintage Beach Boys. And while the group's famous cinematic, atmospheric approach to production is put to good use, there is also a subcurrent of the '70s singer-songwriter style. Throughout it all, Burns' vision is grounded in the subtle drumming of partner Convertino.

"For me, the most significant writing partner is John," Burns says, "From the beginning, we've been able to tap into some musical depth. We seem to have a good understanding of each other's musical abilities and phrasing, which is super important—when to let the music breathe, and how to build a song. Without having to verbally communicate ideas to John, he picks up on them."

And while Burns and Convertino are the soul of the group, they don't close themselves off to outside influence. Indeed, the notion of Calexico itself is an open question; at times the group consists of only a handful of players, sometimes with Lambchop steel player Paul Niehaus, and at other times incorporating a full mariachi band. But at all times, all ideas are welcome. Even some folks from the neighborhood help with the writing.

"I asked one of my neighbors here in Tucson, [producer] Dan Coleman, to write a string part for 'Bisbee Blue.' Then I asked him what he thought about putting strings on 'Lucky Dime,' and he said 'I don't really hear strings on that. But I'll tell you what I do hear—a chorus.' So he and I sat down together and rewrote the lyrics, and wrote a chorus."

That egalitarian, almost communal eclecticism is the real inspiration behind the Calexico vision. "I've noticed a wide variety of people of all ages and cultures at our shows," says Burns. "I enjoy that variety in the music that we make, and really embrace it." ■

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Performing Songwriter