



Calexico:
Carried to Dust
[Quarterstick; 2008]
Rating: 8.3

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Being in Calexico is almost like attending a music school, where every record is another lesson on the way to a dissertation. Core members Joey Burns and John Convertino prepped in Giant Sand and Friends of Dean Martinez, and they've kept a busy schedule of extracurricular activities since, touring with Wilco and Iron & Wine and playing on dozens of other people's records. Their own albums have swerved all over the stylistic map while maintaining an essential sense of identity. The divergence in sound between their last two albums, 2003's *Feast of Wire* and 2006's *Garden Ruin*, basically predicts the shape of *Carried to Dust*-- *Feast of Wire* was the record where they tried everything and made it work; its follow-up was their basic rock album.

While they're frequently thought of as stylists or synthesists, Calexico use their cross-genre amalgams to make music of emotional power and beauty, and this record has exceptional instances of both. "Writer's Minor Holiday" provides the beauty. Convertino's laid-back, jazzy drumming drives the track, freeing falsetto vocals and sparing dabs of steel guitar to serve as ghostly hooks and allowing the central melody to reveal itself slowly. Several of these songs are like that-- the primary vocal is so understated it defers to the instruments; to that end, string-soaked, waltz-time ballad "The News About William" works almost like a duet between Burns and Paul Niehaus' steel guitar.

Multi-instrumentalist Jacob Valenzuela gets his first Calexico co-lead vocal here, sharing the mic with guest Amparo Sanchez on the Spanish-language "Inspiración", which has the album's boldest borderland horn part and a freaky underlying organ *ostinato*. Other guests include Jairo Zavala, who partners with Burns on the dark chorus of "Victor Jara's Hands", and Iron & Wine's Sam Beam, who lends his soft harmonies to the sensuous flamenco-dub slide of "House of Valparaiso". The album's final third is darker and harder, moving from the desert surf of "El Gatillo (Trigger Revisited)" to the sawing, mournful cello of "Falling from Sleeves" to the icy, spooky soundscape of closer "Contention City", a slow drift of electric piano, glockenspiel, and otherworldly steel guitar featuring Doug McCombs of Tortoise and Brokeback.

Carried to Dust, therefore, is more in the band's usual Southwestern jazz/country/rock/tejano mold than their last, but it's not as diffuse or far-ranging as *Feast of Wire*. Ultimately, this is the type of record this band is suited to making, and it richly rewards repeat listening-- details and melodies that seem buried or understated eventually come to fore, slowly revealed in a mixture of organic warmth, welcome variety, and subtle complexity.

MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com/casadecalexico>

- Joe Tangari, September 11, 2008

