



Calexico

Carried to Dust

(Touch and Go/Quarterstick)

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by **Dan Raper**

After ten years and, now, six albums, you might think there's little new to be said about the humble and rewarding group Calexico. After thrilling the internet in collaboration with Iron & Wine, many discovered this wasn't just a great backing band—2003's *Feast of Wire* still stands as a sumptuous and underappreciated collection of atmospheric mariachi-folk. If 2006's *Garden Ruin* didn't capture the imagination quite as keenly, prepare for a return to the fertile and cinematic tone of old Calexico and for one of their most accomplished artistic statements.

More than any of their previous albums, *Carried to Dust* is a celebration of collaboration. Sam Beam, the thorny impresario of Iron & Wine, guests on one song, Tortoise's Doug McCombs on another, and folk songstress Pieta Brown harmonises sweetly on the country love song "Slowness". Less recognizable names are even bigger contributors: Amparo Sanchez and Jairo Zavala, whose humble but expert Spanish guitar (they're actually Spanish artists) give Calexico's easy-going Latin compositions a straightforward authority. And towering above all these guests, the now-permanent Calexico band members: Paul Niehaus on steel guitar, Jacob Valenzuela playing keys and trumpet (and singing lead now and then), Martin Wenk on accordion, guitar, etc, and Volker Zander on standup bass. Nevertheless, it's clear Joey Burns and John Convertino's guiding hands are a constant and they are what give the record the feeling of a Calexico record. Among all the variety, the common threads this band has established over ten years playing together are all here in the overt Latin material, subtle incorporations of jazz and country into sweet, fractured emotions of indie-folk.

The record opens with a trio of unbeatable songs. I'm not sure what Victor Jara, the Chilean social activist and singer/songwriter who was murdered during the coup in 1973, would understand of the song that bears his name, except that it's sweet and melancholy and immaculately constructed. The horn fanfare that makes up the chorus grows so perfectly out of the limpid verse that you're swept up completely. It's the best opening of an album this year. "Two Silver Trees", the first track to become available off the record, is all humid, shuffling blues; it's full of paranoia. And then there's "The News About William," my favourite song on *Carried to Dust* just now. The phrase "a sad little song spinning out of control" may be an appropriate description—from-within, but I won't ruin the song's fractured desolation by trying to describe it.

And with some diversions, things stay pretty riveting across the whole album. Calexico's studio- and band-bolstered sound occasionally has the lush experimental quality of Radiohead, as when "Writer's Minor Holiday"'s vocal backing track's hidden behind acoustic strum; at other times, Burns' vocals have the urgent whisper of Win Butler in "Neon Bible" mode. But generally Calexico's unconcerned with current comparators. Their music has that particular pop timelessness that causes reviewers to start talking about wild Western towns and red dust and Kill Bill and Mexico.

Technically, the album's tracking is finely parsed. Straight Latin tracks like "Inspiracion" and "El Gatillo (Trigger Revisited)" are linked into the more straightforward indie-folk material that follows through continuity of rhythmic tropes and tonalities. Not something you recognize first-listen, but a

small indicator of the expertise that goes into the construction of these humble songs.

So, while you may know what to expect—gorgeous, desolate studio atmosphere dressed up with gorgeous melody, generous swathes of Latin guitar, and bossa-nova rhythms—don't miss *Carried to Dust*. You'll want to hear "House of Valparaiso's" surf's-up melody/counter-melody, "Red Blooms" slow-boiled West Coast pop. The rock aesthetic of *Garden Ruin* largely put aside, this band's returned to what it does best, and at its best, they are hard to top.

RATING: ●●●●●●●●8●●

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