



Calexico's Western Reunion

Having left their hearts in El Segundo, Joey Burns and John Convertino circle back to retrieve them

By Kory Grow

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Gerald Von Foris



Have more spaghetti, boys.

Details:

Calexico

Carried to Dust

Quarterstick

When we last heard from the Sergio

Leone—worshipping Tex-Mex balladeers Calexico on 2006's middling *Garden Ruin*, it seemed the Man With No Name had finally died. The heralding trumpets, wheezing accordions, and textural click-clacks that defined the Tucson, Arizona, group had moseyed off into the sunset, replaced by cookie-cutter indie-rock guitars that only occasionally hinted at their Baja fascinations. But now, on *Carried to Dust*, their sixth official full-length, they've pulled a U-turn not to save their ailing muse, but rather for it to save them. Calexico's reliance on Southwestern musical clichés has inspired little middle ground between indifference and adulation since their core

members—bassist-guitarist Joey Burns and drummer John Convertino (both ex-Giant Sand)—transitioned from lo-fi folkies into spaghetti-western cowpokes early on. But when their brassy dalliances started disappearing around the time they first hooked up with pastoral drifters Iron & Wine (whose Sam Beam shows up again here on "House of Valparaiso"), their fans and detractors took equal notice. It wasn't the cross-cultural filigrees that were absent on *Garden Ruin*, though—it was the heart.

Still, the group never abandoned its *orquestra* live, and that may be why this return to form sounds so welcoming. From the symphonic strings on "The News About William" to the horns of "El Gatillo (Trigger Revisted)," Calexico sound comfortable with both sides of their personality again. "Writer's Minor Holiday," a song about a hitchhiking on-strike writer, would merely be a dated poem were it not for the myriad cymbal crashes and guitar strums holding it up; the cascading piano notes of lead single "Two Silver Trees" sound too pretty to be premeditated. Moreover, what they've learned from the past is how to employ these eccentricities for the good of the song. Opener "Victor Jara's Hands," which tells the story of the Chilean theater director, musician, and political dissenter who was executed in 1973, perfectly blends Burns's soft-spoken imagery ("Wire fences still coiled with flowers of the night") with vocalist Jairo Zavala's Spanish interlude, even as the mariachi symphony plays on. Calexico's regression may or may not be financially motivated, but it fits their songs. Now they're equipped for the showdown.

Calexico play Webster Hall September 24

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