



Forget everything you know about Calexico, or at least set it aside for the next few pages. Suspend for the interim such indicative yet confining descriptions as “desert noir,” “border pop,” “mariachi rock” or “spaghetti Western” and resist the temptation to invoke references like Link Wray, Ennio Morricone or Gil Evans, even if it all applies.

Nor to worry, the Calexico you know and love—or should know and love, if you’re a listener of discerning tastes—have not abandoned the multi-stylistic charms that have made the band one of the most engaging and alluring as well as truly independent musical acts of the last decade. They’ve been morphing—if not shape-shifting—all along over four albums (as well as EPs and below the radar releases) and a kaleidoscopic range of collaborations. But *Garden Ruin*, Calexico’s latest, finds the group undergoing a subtle yet profound tectonic shift.

To understand what makes Calexico tick (in a global array of rhythmic patterns), it’s best advised to eschew descriptors that touch on the many types of music they draw into their sound. After all, a close listen to their recordings reveals that as soon they are on to one style or groove, or just as often happen to be melding musical modes together, they quickly swing into something different. The Mexican and German influences of both their Southwestern home base of Tucson and their multiethnic and intercontinental membership do provide benchmarks, but so does everything from Portuguese fado to the Romani swing of Django Reinhardt to punk rock. And be-bop and early fusion jazz, surf and twang guitar, country, rock and country-rock, Parisian *chanson* and the band Giant Sand, in which the Calexico brain trust of Joey Burns and John Convertino initially formed a creative union.

Burns articulated the Calexico mission statement best at the time of their last album, *Feast of Wine*, in a short film titled *Border Horse* made by their friend Bill Carter and found among the extra features of Calexico’s 2004

DVD release, *World Drifts In: Live at the Barbican London*. “Any band that gets pegged with any kind of characteristic that they’re known for, you have to challenge that and you have to go beyond the description.”

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GARDEN RUIN IS, DARESAY IT, AMONG MANY THINGS, Calexico’s pop album. “Yeah. I have no trouble with that at all,” says Convertino of the proposition. This comes not long after an impassioned talk of the sort Convertino obviously loves about the way Miles Davis and John Coltrane played pop songs like “Bye Bye Blackbird” and “My Favorite Things” and took them way out, curling, stretching and refracting the melodic themes, and then brought them all the way back home to where they started—just to give you an idea about how his mind thinks about pop music.

Then again, Convertino also sharpened his drum and song chops in a touring cover band with his older brother and sister that was good enough to earn a still-standing shrine at a club where they played in Anchorage, Alaska over two decades ago. “It was good training,” he notes. “When I graduated high school, I thought, I’m going to go to Berklee School of Music in Boston. But we started going on the road, and I think that’s a lot better training than what I would have gotten. As corny as it may sound, there’s a lot to a Steppenwolf song or a Doobie Brothers song that people related to.”

Which means that Calexico’s ecumenical approach to music isn’t subject to exclusionary musical snobism. “My daughter went through a heavy Avril Lavigne phase, and I have to admit there’s some great pop songs there,” Convertino reveals. “I would find myself humming a tune, and I would go, ‘Hey, that’s an Avril Lavigne song.’ And that’s a good pop song—when you can hum it in your head and you can relate to the words they’re singing.”

By the same token, “Nirvana may have been the year that punk rock broke, it’s true. They were a punk-rock band. But the bottom line was that they had a melody that you craved hearing over and over again,” observes Convertino.

Calexico fans already know their gift for resonant if not downright addictive melodies. But *Garden Ruin* finds them creating some utterly irresistible ear worms like “Bisbee Blue,” which steps out from the speakers with a chunk’n’chop acoustic guitar intro that recalls the Beatles’ “Two of Us,” and is later laced with creamy harmonies, a strings and horn interlude, à la George Martin, and ascending George Harrison-ish guitar figures. (“I think we played some *Let It Be* stuff when we were in the studio mixing,” Convertino confesses.) Echoes of the Fab Four also waft through “Lucky Dime,” and “Letter to Bowie Knife” plays with a rockin’ pop snap that recalls the mid-’60s best of the Kinks and the Small Faces.

On “Yours and Mine” and “Panic Open String,” Calexico carves out its own modernist folk-rock niche, and for contemporary comparisons, “Smash” is as mesmerizing an atmospheric rumination as the recent best from Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy. Longtime fans of the band’s ethnic variations are not to worry — “Roka” is a seductive *cumbia* that’s as Southwestern as *arroz y frijoles*, and “Nom De Plume” takes a *derive* along the Left Bank of the Seine in the company of Serge Gainsbourg. But in its sum total, *Garden Ruin* is Calexico’s take on modern rock, albeit with their traditionalist and globalist bents and gift for the imaginative twist.

It’s also the band’s political album, expressed, however, via the Calexico lexicon. (One could also argue that the band’s internationalism makes them political by their very nature.) Lyrical images that suggest a bleak landscape abound: