

*Cruel heartless reign/Chasing short term gains/Right down to the warning signs; This world's an ungodly place/Strangled by vines unchaste; When numbers matter more than the heart/Your eyes are hollow and stiffness starts to take control/Capsize the soul, deep down, you know it's evil; The numbers rise on the death toll/And the chimes of freedom flash and fade/Only heard from far, far away.*

Yet in the yin-yang fashion suggested by the title *Garden Ruin*, these allusive omens are underpinned with such sweets as bright major chords, honed three-part harmonies and cheery “la la la” refrains.

“John and I prefer the more abstract and less the tried-and-true literal kind of songwriting,” explains Burns. “I’m much more a fan of symbolism or abstractness and the way it can open up rather than close in on an idea.” Hence *Garden Ruin* is, in that yin-yang way, not what it seems to be yet at the same time everything it seems to be and so much more.

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#### CALEXICO HAVE DISTINGUISHED THEMSELVES BY FINDING INSPIRATION

in music from the fringes and the underground, various points around the globe, and the places where cultures interstice. And in the backgrounds of the band’s leaders, one finds threads of internationalism: Burns was born in Montreal, and Convertino, whose place of birth was Long Island, is the son of a first-generation Italian-American father.

On the other hand, they both grew up in distinctly American locales. For Burns, it was the Southern California suburbs of Los Angeles, while Convertino came of age in Tulsa, Oklahoma. “I think a lot of musicians my age, in their early or mid-40s and their 50s, will not mention that they listened to a Kansas record or early Genesis record or a Styx record,” notes Convertino. “If you lived in Okla., you *had* to like a Styx record.”

So even if *Garden Ruin* sounds nothing at all like today’s pop charts or

the album rock of yore, its origins do have a tangential tie to one of the most popular radio rock acts of all time. “It kind of started with a song on *Feast of Wire*—‘Not Even Stevie Nicks,’” Convertino explains. “I think that was like the beginning of it. That little song was basically a tail-ending jam from song ‘Black Heart.’ There was a bit of tape left, so Joey did that little progression.” Its rhythm reminded them of Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours* album, hence the cheeky tag that stuck as a song title. “And from that little progression was the beginning of the different direction for Calexico.”

And the seed of another way for Calexico to defy the usual descriptions. “It’s definitely what we set out to do,” says Convertino. “We’ve very rarely if ever ‘set out to do something,’ quote/unquote, different. Joey and I always just get together and meet in the studio and start rattling off ideas and bouncing them off each other, guitar and drums, and get some basic tracks down and start layering on top. But this record, for sure, we were like, we wanna do something different.”

“We’ve been trying to stay in that cusp and not get too hot in our pants, and go, ‘Oh yeah, business as usual. Let’s lay down some cowbell and throw some trumpets on there.’”

One idea that came up was possibly asking David Byrne to produce. “Imagine a Calexico record sounding like *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*,” posits Burns. “That could definitely make a lot of sense. And that would be something I would love to try.”

“A major way of changing our direction was to have a producer there,” explains Convertino. “We’ve always worn the producer caps ourselves along with Craig Schumacher” (their friend, engineer and owner of Tucson’s Wavelab Studios).

Calexico’s operating system is also programmed to follow the music where it takes them, and after years of exploring gut-string Latin American musical instruments, Burns was drawn back to the steel-string guitar. As a

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result, *Garden Ruin* began developing as a major-chord song album. And they found an ideal production foil in JD Foster, already a friend from their work with him on recordings with Richard Buckner.

At the same time, Calexico, which literally started out as a duo with Burns on guitar and Convertino on drums, had coalesced into a cohesive unit of equally creative and versatile players: Germans Volker Zander on upright bass and Martin Wenk on trumpet, vibes, keyboards and guitars; Arizonan Jacob Valenzuela on trumpet, vibes and keyboards; and Paul Niehaus from Nashville (and the band Lambchop) on pedal steel and guitars.

So rather than Burns and Convertino sketching the basics and then having the band and guests add parts later, the full group gathered in Arizona to preface recording with, for the first time, pre-production. They started out in Burns’s living room and then set-up shop for a week with Foster in a fourth floor loft above Roka’s Café in the Arizona mountain town of Bisbee.

It was there that the songs began to take shape, and Foster proved to be the perfect outside ingredient to help bring *Garden Ruin* to fruition, as Convertino tells it. “What I’d heard about JD and what I loved about working with him with Richard Buckner was that I could sense he knew immediately where songs were building and releasing. He has a very good sense of that, and has a way of honing in and recognizing when it really needs to build or when the build needs to be more subtle or when you need to build it quicker. And he does that without saying, hey, build this up quicker. You just get the feeling like he’s pushing for you and with you. And he’s got a definite sense of adventure,” adds Convertino.

The final results, even for all the usual Calexico variations, find the group at its most straightforward on record yet. “As a drummer I came full circle and was definitely enjoying the simplicity of the rock beat—just to

be able to play that again and love doing it,” enthuses Convertino. “We were all kind of enjoying—like on ‘Letter to Bowie Knife’—just being able to sit back and play a rock tune...loud, fast, and it’s over before you know it.”

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**THE BLUEPRINT FOR CALEXICO CAN BE FOUND IN GIANT SAND, THE** adventurous and amorphous band led by Howe Gelb—and too often reductively denoted as “desert rock”—that was one of the most intriguing and challenging wrinkles on the 1980s indie-rock scene. Founded in Tucson, the group migrated to Los Angeles in the mid ’80s.

Meanwhile, Convertino’s cover band had also landed there following the scent of a possible record deal. He was living in a 1920s vintage Spanish-style Hollywood apartment complex that actually welcomed musicians as tenants.

“This young couple with a new baby moved in about a year after I did,” recalls Convertino. “It was Paula Jean Brown [a latter-period member of the Go-Go’s and Giant Sand bassist and singer] and Howe. I’d see him in the hall and found out he was a musician. And Howe had already put out a bunch of records by then. He’d had the two Blackie Ranchette records and three Giant Sand records, and he gave me those. I listened to his latest one, *Storm*. It was real stripped down: bass, drums, acoustic guitar and pedal steel, just those four instruments. It was great. And the drums sounded huge.”

“So one day I asked him, ‘Hey, you ever need a drummer?’”

“Well, you any good?” was Gelb’s response.

“Yeah, you know. I played gospel in churches and every type of music you can imagine playing in cover bands.”

“Ah, that sounds perfect.”

Convertino played on 1988’s *The Love Songs*, after which the band all but broke up. “It just became me and Howe as a two piece. We kind of did that

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