

micro-band thing way before....” Convertino lets the thought trail off, but names like the White Stripes and the Black Keys immediately spring to mind. “Not that we were the first to do it. A lot of those old blues guys would just play with a drummer.” The two recorded the album *Long Stem Rant* and toured the U.S. and Europe.

At the same time, Burns was “traveling in my Honda Accord hatchback with my bass and amp in the back, going from one rehearsal and show to another to get the breadth of the music and enjoying playing in so many different kinds of settings and styles.” He was also studying classical music at the University of California at Irvine. “I was just mixing it up, showing up late to see the Minutemen”—a primary if seemingly left field landmark act for Calexico, who have covered songs by D. Boon—“after going to see Charlie Haden.”

Burns was referred to Giant Sand by a mutual friend and joined up, taking the band towards a jazz trio direction with his upright bass. “We learned a lot from playing with Howe,” notes Convertino. “If you look at the other great songwriters like Dylan and Neil Young, you sense that same kind of adventure there, or that sense of...nothing’s down pat. That was when I started realizing that a song is a song and it can survive with just a drum set and an electric guitar and people still wanna listen to you.”

As members of Giant Sand, Burns and Convertino moved with Gelb to Tucson, where they also began playing in the instrumental group Friends of Dean Martinez, in which Burns switched to guitar. The two developed a bond due to what Convertino calls “a similar familial background—the mom sitting at the piano singing the show tunes. And Joey knew a lot about classical music too. We could talk a lot about music and have a good dialogue about it.”

“Even though he’s a few years older, I always felt very comfortable sharing musical ideas with John,” explains Burns. “It wasn’t until five years after we met that we really sat down and started exchanging ideas. And it was in such a low-pressure setting, really, at each other’s houses.”

It turned out that Burns had a plethora of songs and ideas he’d been keeping in his back

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pocket during his first years in Giant Sand. “I’d spent some time before in California playing in bands and I wanted to take my time and digest ideas, especially after working with people like Victoria Williams or Howe Gelb or Vic Chesnutt. I wanted to learn from others first before going back out again and releasing my material. And John has always been a great soundboard and co-writer to bounce ideas off of, both lyrically and musically.”

In the mid-1990s, the two recorded an album together, *Spoke*, which was also the name of their project until they spied a highway sign for the California border town of Calexico on their way to a gig in San Diego. “The name just seemed to fit what we were doing musically,” says Convertino. On their 19-song, almost home-made sounding debut, Burns and Convertino began incorporating such instruments as the vibes and accordion as well as the Mexican-American styles that are all but carried on the wind in a Southwestern city like Tucson. It was released in Germany in 1996 and the following year in the States by the Chicago-based indie label powerhouse, Quaterstick/Touch and Go Records. And just as Gelb and Convertino did a decade earlier, Calexico hit the road as a duo.

What they’ve achieved in the years since is almost dizzying in both its tally and sheer breadth. Calexico have become a festival favorite in Europe, where they command concert hall audiences. Their performances have included guests like Mariachi Luz da Luna and singer François Breut, and they have collaborated and recorded with Buckner, Neko Case, Lisa Germano (as OP8), Nancy Sinatra, Evan Dando, Amparanoia and Gotan Project, to name some but hardly all. Burns and Convertino have also joined forces with the French Amor Belhom Duo as ABBC, were lynchpins in the studio band for last year’s multi-artist salute to border radio by *Los Super 7, I Heard It on the X*, and rounded out 2005 with an EP and tour with Sam Beam, aka Iron and Wine.

The rise of Calexico and their prolific extracurricular activities eventually led to a rift with Gelb for the longtime rhythm section mainstays of Giant Sand. Convertino says that he and Gelb remain on good terms, but for Burns, the schism continues. “I’ve made my overtures to Howe, but they’ve all been rebuffed,” he reports. “He’s placed a wall between us, and ultimately I have to respect that.” But would Burns like to work with Gelb again as Giant Sand? “Oh yeah.

I’d play with him in a second.”

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WITHOUT SETTING OUT TO DO SO, CALEXICO HAVE been forging a new paradigm within contemporary music—an open-ended musical approach that is as much about musical and instrumental proficiency as it is instinctive and even improvisational, and one in which genre and stylistic divisions beg for erasure. Kindred souls staking out a similar broad musical territory and exploratory approach include acts like Wilco and Tortoise.

“I’ve always kind of considered what we do an offshoot of indie rock,” observes Burns. “Just as much as the way Neutral Milk Hotel takes up the odd instrumentation, so do we. And a lot of other bands too. It’s nothing too new,” Burns insists.

Although the notion of “border music” does reflect the influence of living, creating music and artistically intermixing in their home base of Tucson, Calexico are more accurately seen as an act for whom music is borderless. Both Convertino and Burns have a hunger for new and different artists, sounds, styles and modes—something that Burns feels was almost imprinted in his soul even before birth.