



BY KEVIN FRIEDMAN

WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT AMERICANA MUSIC, they generally consider a country-tinged, alternative rock style—a narrow scope that limits itself to the backroads and dustbowls of North America. Actually, “America” goes all the way from the Bering Sea down to Argentina. Calexico knows this, and incorporates influences from all points in between. Now in its second decade as a band, over the course of six LPs, five EPs and multiple “tour-only” releases Calexico has established a unique sound by absorbing and interpreting aspects of Mariachi, Tejana, Andean folk, Afro-Cuban and American jazz. The Western elements of its music come filtered as though through a Sergio Leone-inspired lens with more than a nod to Ennio Morricone’s desolate, wandering menace. Lyrically, Calexico recalls authors like Cormac McCarthy, John Fante and Larry McMurty with its examinations of the western borders of the U.S. and Mexico (also providing the band its handle), investigating issues such as immigration, culture, race, and class within settings of open plains, dusty towns and ghostly cities populated by wanderers.

Joey Burns (vocals, guitar, bass, accordion...) and John Convertino (drums, percussion, vibes, marimba...) met 18 years ago as the rhythm section for the country-influenced experimental rock band Giant Sand. They soon began collaborating on their own music and releasing albums under the name Calexico, starting with the album *Spoke* in 1997. All the while, Burns and Convertino

continue to work as an in-demand rhythm section for artists with a taste for the cinematic Wild West or Mexicali flavor. Over the years they’ve backed artists as varied as Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, Nancy Sinatra, and Iron & Wine—with whom they collaborated on the 2007 EP *In the Rains*. Most recently, they were integral members of the studio band for the soundtrack to the Bob Dylan biopic *I’m Not There*. “Music is about bringing styles together,” says Burns. “It’s not about keeping anything really true. And I know that, in regards to traditional music, there is that kind of gray area sometimes.”

Calexico’s new album, *Carried to Dust* (Touch & Go), continues its journey across the musical borders of the world, further exploring Latin rhythms and song structures to combine with its own sound, with specific inspiration coming from experiences touring in Chile and Argentina. This is evidenced on the songs “Inspiración,” sung by Amparo Sanchez, and “Victor Jara’s Hands,” sung by Jairo Zavala, which refers to the Chilean theater director, musician and political activist who was arrested and killed following the 1973 Chilean coup. “Our tour manager, Valentino, was playing us Jara’s music,” Burns recounts. “Gorgeous songs. Valentino told us about Jara and what he meant to the people there.”

While earlier records exhibited more lo-fi experimentalism, *Carried to Dust* is decidedly well-produced, yet not to the arguably mainstream extent of 2006’s *Garden Ruin*. The elements of Mariachi and noirish Spaghetti Western that

distinguish the band’s sound remain strong—something Convertino traces back to moving to Tucson, Arizona, in the mid ’90s. “I remember walking down the street in Tucson with my daughter, and this guy walked up to us and gave us free tickets to a Mariachi conference,” he recalls. “I got to see this incredible scope of Mariachi music, spanning from an almost indigenous form, to the full-on orchestra from L.A.... I just remember going, ‘Wow, it would be great to have some of that sound in what we’re doing.’”

As they continued to record as a duo, playing most of the instruments themselves, Burns and Convertino enhanced their sonic palette by discovering instruments at a local Tucson music store. “It’s a huge old department store with all the instruments you need for just about anything,” Burns says. “We just started having our own little collection that we’d never really gotten into before.” And soon, these instruments—accordion, marimba, vibraphone—found their way onto Calexico’s recordings, ultimately shaping its sound, reflecting both the history of the instruments and the region.

“We try to get the air and the space into the recordings; the physical movement of the strings. We try to actually microphone the dust,” says Convertino. “I’ve always loved that idea of the dust actually being something that’s tangible in the air that holds onto memories or feelings, and I think that’s been a theme that comes across a lot in our music; the ghosts and nostalgia in an era and a time gone past.” **F**

Joey Burns and John Convertino pick 3 Calexico albums you should already own



Superstition Highway (1995)
Our first album, which has never been properly released. It was recorded and released on cassette in 1995. There was no intention; it was more about capturing live performances. BURNS



Road Map (2001)
I really love our tour-only CDs. This was the first one. They’re easier-going; we’re not focusing on the songs being just right. Like, “It sounds good, let’s put it on there.” CONVERTINO



Even My Sure Things Fall Through EP (2001)
“Crystal Frontier” is an important song for us that we play almost every show. Its themes cover what we’re all about: the historical, geographical and musical hybrid we mishmash with our music. BURNS