

Crossroads

- filed under Music



Tucson, Arizona stands at the crossroads of many different cultures — Mexican, Anglo, Native-American — and Calexico's music couldn't be made anywhere else. The band's superb new album, *Carried to Dust*, is an expansive swirl of desert noir, mariachi, and indie rock. It's ambitious, literary, and expansive music and *Carried to Dust*, like all of Calexico's best work, manages to blend all of the band's influences into something greater than the sum of its parts. This past week I got a chance to interview the band's singer and guitarist Joey Burns. The band will be in Washington, DC at the 930 Club on November 12 for a must see concert.

Q: I see that Calexico has performed at a fundraiser for Congresswoman Gabby Giffords. I actually made some of the ads in her campaign when she was elected in '06.

A: Cool.

Q: So I noted that with interest. Have you always been politically engaged, do you have a long history with her or is this something more recent?

A: She's been coming to shows of our's for awhile. She used to workout at the YMCA here downtown and our good friend Steven Eye who runs Solar Culture and puts on a lot of shows over the years has always kind of turned her on to bands and what not, as well as turning musicians onto other musicians like Calexico meeting and working with Salvador Duran. He kind of brought us together initially and I had met her a long time ago at a concert at Steve's place.

I hadn't seen her again until recently when a promoter here from Phoenix - Charlie Levy, Stateside Productions, moved to Tucson. I guess he was tired of living Phoenix. He just fell in love with Tucson and then he heard about Gabby and what she was doing and wanted to help out and came up with this idea of doing a concert. And he asked me if I would mind helping her out. I said - 'Nah. I would love

to. You want to do this? Sounds like a great idea. Let's try to find a good time.' We sat down with Gabrielle and I was really impressed. Then after having heard about her a bunch and we kind of came up with this idea and we did this concert which I think was pretty successful.

H: That's very very cool. It's also cool that she was a fan. I did not know that.

A: Yeah, exactly. I also thought that was very interesting. She's very active in the community, you can tell. When she met Salvador recently – Salvador Duran - who I know you don't know. Maybe you can check him out online or something. She was very taken by his mural on the outside of the Rialto Theater – the stage, entrance where the bands load in.



I could tell, she just gets it. Her perception – her heart – opening up to the different people in the community. I think is really remarkable. I like the fact that she is pro solar energy.

Q: And married to an astronaut.

A: And married to an astronaut is not bad either. I kind of relate to that in some ways because I'm the astronaut and my girlfriend, she's the local. I'm constantly out there and sometimes I look at Gabby when we're hanging out and I'm thinking to myself, how do they do it? They live in two different cities. Sometimes he's not even on the planet. I can kind of sympathize. It just makes me wonder how my own girlfriend puts up with me sometimes.

Q: I don't know if you've read Dean Wareham's book and I'm sure that your life isn't like that, but he definitely makes the case for having a normal home life while touring around the country and being a rock and roll star.

A: Right. Right. I haven't read that book. I will have to check it out.

H: It's a bit of a cautionary tale. You are a relatively recent migrant to Tucson. Is that right? You're not from there.

A: Nope, I was born in Montreal, Canada. My parents are from upstate New York and I've been living in Tucson for about 15 years now.

Q: That's awhile. Now did you come here by way of California?

A: Yes, I did. I did. I came through music. After university, after failing to have a career in music, I guess you could say I went to school for music.

Q: I think you have a career in music.

A: I do now. But at that point, right afterwards where you look at your parents and they're like: 'why are you still at home?'

Q: Right.

A: And then I was working at a record store and was like, 'I'm working in the music business. I'm just starting from the ground up.' I moved to Tucson because of music. I was playing in a group with John Convertino and Howe Gelb, called Giant Sand, which is still a very active group. They were all relocating to Tucson, AZ after living in Los Angeles and the California desert around Joshua Tree. And I loved the move. It's been great. I'm here right now as we speak. I'm going over the train tracks.

Q: So to somebody who is from the east coast, I have spent almost all of my life on the east coast – describe Tucson.

A: Lots and lots of dust. You're swimming, and breathing, and sleeping in dust. You just can't get around it but you love it because once you get past the big dust clouds, then there's this beautiful scenery and even this sprawling town, Tucson, which is now population around one million people or so. It's still just seems like a tiny speck in this massive, sprawling Sonoran dessert which comprises northern NM into southern AZ. It's just beautiful. It's just a dry, dry, dry love for dry, dry dust.





Q: And very multicultural clearly?

A: It is, yeah. And it's still – downtown Tucson has this very small-town vibe, which I like. It's a small town.

Q: Were you attracted by the music? Or did you go and then become exposed to the music that you're now playing?

A: I just came here while on tour and in passing and just fell in love with just the vibe here. It's got so much to offer. There's still a lot of historical elements here in town and around town. For me – I know you say you come from the east – out here in the west, the presence of nature is so much greater here. Whether you're in Washington state or Oregon or Idaho or Arizona. There's just so much open space that I really love.

Q: How is that expressed in the music if it is?

two silver trees

A: That's a good question. I could lie and say it is certainly expressed but it's hard to say. I think it's conducive for our kind of music. I don't want to say that we're really drawing specifically from certain regional aspects but they have on occasion made their influence as a lot of other influences from around the country have made their impact on songs. Like Praskovia, which is an accordion waltz from a couple years back. Or on the new records, there's a song called Red Blooms which has nothing to do with Tucson. It has more to do on this news item that my brother John and I had read about "Snow Drops in Moscow" about people who go missing in the winter and reappear once the ice melts and you see these people who have died in the snow basically. That bleak landscape – I think – in some ways can make some bridge to where we are now where it's just a very extreme environment and yet there something that is very much alive and thriving in all of this extreme heat and dust. There's a history here which I find really exciting and it's probably a boring thing to talk about but I love the historical aspect of this region and the fact that this area specifically has been a crossroads for

many many years with the Native and ancient Indian tribes, Anasazi, Holkham, Pima - and the complex irrigation systems that they've had and then how those have gone by the waysides because of colonists coming in from the east, or the Spanish conquistadores, and the Spaniards and the colonial Spaniards coming in and staking their claim here. It's had this really interesting historical crossroads, which is if you're a fan of Cormac McCarthy - it really resonates with some of his themes.

H: I am, yes. Blood Meridian.

Q: Yeah and The Crossing, the Border Trilogy. When I moved here, I picked those books up and then I just loved the fact that some of his stories are more modern and so even though there is horses involved and traveling out in the desert, it still stems from or weaves through modern cities or towns. For me, when I moved here, I was just fascinated with all of this history and culture and character coming together. And it just - more so than anything, it just inspired us to dig into old vinyl records, old instruments, make sounds. Because we've been traveling over the years, we kind of bring that different mindsets from overseas back home here and you see there are more similarities than not.

Q: How would I describe the music for people who may not have heard it? Crossroads was actually a word I had thought of for the kind of music that you play. There are so many different influences in your albums that you do seem to be at a crossroads of a lot of different kinds of music in a lot of interesting and great ways. I'm glad you used that word.

A: Another journalist at one point - because I get asked this question a lot - asked is this a return to form, yada, yada, yada? Somebody said it is more of a crystallization of all things Calxico. That is a great way of describing this latest album.

Q: That's what it definitely sounds like to me. There are some bands that sound like they could be from anywhere. You guys are a band that really sound like you could only be from where you are which I think is a really neat thing. I should say though - have you read Patricia Limerick's Legacy of Conquest?

A: No, I don't think I've read that. Does that have to do with Spanish conquistadores?

Q: It's all the stuff you're talking about. It's all the different cultures interacting in the American West. She's a professor at the University of Colorado and you could have been describing what the book was about when you were talking about the interplay of all of the different cultures in Tucson.

A: Fantastic. I'll go pick it up.

Q: I am huge fan of both Neko Case and Françoiz Breut - I was always interested in the fact that you guys had collaborated with them and you do so much great collaboration with a lot of really interesting people. In those two instances, how did that come about? I mean, Neko Case and Françoiz Breut are pretty different singers.

A: Yeah, there are a lot of different singers we have worked with. The female voice works really well with a bunch of guys sitting around doing instrumentals. I don't know why. With both of those artists, I guess they had heard our music and so there was this kind of - it is only a matter of time when you're out there touring that you're going to run across people who are either friends of friends, or you're going to run across them at festivals or something. We had met Neko at a folk festival in Calgary, Canada. We spent a little time together but we didn't really get to play or anything together. Sometimes at those festivals, they get you in these workshops and you're sitting there playing with one another and wondering what the hell you're doing. And that's kind of a beautiful thing. I think we

had met and then at one point, she had said: 'Yeah, I'm going to be coming through Tucson. I'm going to record some songs. Why don't you guys come in and sit in on stuff?' So we did and we wound up becoming good friends and I saw her just yesterday. She's doing great. John and I have both recorded a couple tracks on her new record, kind of kept up the friendship and the collaboration. With François, we were on tour with another group, this is back in '97 and we were on the same label. For the first time in a long time back then, we were actually playing in France which was and still is a very hard thing to do because of the taxes there. It's just very difficult to get a paid show that warrants bringing people over the border into France.

Q: I didn't know that, that's interesting.



A: It's very difficult. It's one of the most difficult countries to play in because fees are generally pretty low and taxes are very, very high. François – we just kind of met. Her husband back then - Dominique A – fantastic singer, songwriter. We just got to meet them all at a show and kind of swapped addresses and then kept in touch. And then over the years, by playing in Europe and being in their neck of the woods, they said: 'hey, why don't you come in and sit in on a show.' And we did. And we just kind of kept up that connection and friendship. I've recorded on some of her records and she has recorded with us in concert for the live DVD. She was actually just here.

Q: I know – I saw that on her website. This whole festival of French music in Arizona, which is amazing.

A: Yeah. It's pretty unusual because it's coming from musicians really. It's basically this one musician who came to Tucson to record with Jim Waters. His band was called Little Rabbit. They were fans of Jon Spencer blues so they wanted to go to the guy who made that sound so they went to Jim Waters here in town. This musician Eric, he fell in love with this woman Enid. They live in Nantes and they have spent a lot of time back here in Tucson. He had this idea of wanting to for their maybe 5th or 10th – I think it was their 10th anniversary – they wanted to have a party and invite all of their friends from both countries. They decided to do this music festival and invite all of the musicians over. They got a grant from the city of Nantes and it was fantastic, a big success.

Q: Do you think that the band is unusual in the sense of how open you are to these kinds of collaborations – the different musical influences? I think you probably do more of that than most other bands? Is there something about the way you guys work or your set of interests that make you more open to that sort of thing?

A: Maybe. I don't know. I think that more and more – seeing bands like Devotchka, or Beirut, A Hawk and a Hacksaw - American bands that have a very different perspective musically and do a lot of collaboration. I think there's always been collective here in the States. That's something that's always been constant. Maybe because we have band members that are from Europe and the fact that we tour there so much over there and we're just fans of so many different types of music. Of course you want to meet those people and give them that positive feedback that 'hey, what you're doing is great.' And a lot of times you wind up crossing paths again. I don't think it's all that abnormal. Because of the traveling, it probably happens more so than if I was just to stay at home

A: How do you figure out who to take out on tour at any given time?



Q: We have a pretty solid 6-member band including myself, John Convertino, Jacob Valenzuela from Tucson, these two German musicians –Martin Wenk who plays trumpet and most instruments and Volker Zander from Munich who plays upright bass and electric bass, and Paul Niehaus who plays pedal steel guitar. That 6-piece band can take care of a lot of of the arrangements and songs that have been recorded on the album. And then every now and then we will bring like we've brought our

friend from Spain, Jairo Zavala, who recorded on a couple songs on this new record. He helped co-write the song Victor Jara's Hands, which is the first track.

Q: Which is an amazing song, by the way. I was totally blown away both lyrically and musically.

A: Oh - thank you.

Q: Especially once I read what it was about, it was very powerful.

victor jara's hands

A: It is a powerful story. But I think we like to mix it up on tour. I think we've been known for putting on a good show and having a good energy live. We've been lucky to keep it going over the years. It's going to be tricky in the next coming years - more and more, bands are going to have to figure out how to make it work financially

Q: It's funny. I was going to ask you. I was again online last night and I saw the videos - I don't know if you had done them or if NPR had done them, that are on the NPR site. They had you in the studio and I thought they were really neat and are a nice away of letting fans or prospective fans in on the process. Not obviously something that would have been possible before the internet. And then thinking how wonderful that was. And then thinking but of course, on the other hand, the internet also means that a lot of people can get your music without paying for it which I'm sure is not so wonderful. I'm wondering how all of the changes in distribution and technology have influenced what you guys have done given the fact that you were around before this and that you're obviously going to be around for a while.

A: Hopefully so. You have to embrace it. You have to find those aspects which work well for you, which feel good. You don't want to force yourself to do something you don't want to do. John just doesn't like doing video interviews so we try to avoid having him do them. And I can bear them, and I try to make the best out of them.

Q: He comes across pretty well in the videos I thought.

A: Those were pretty non-traditional - they're just kind of him walking around and talking about looking out for snakes, or watching his daughter riding horseback. That's very natural. He's comfortable there. Whereas when you're in a studio with lights and what not. Things aren't going to change in regard to technology and that's part of it. I think that just yesterday, our good friend Jim Blackwood - who does a lot of archival work for us and compiles and collects all live recordings as much as he can - radio, television, live shows, outtakes and studio recordings. He was saying that a lot of people who heard us play on KCRW - Morning Becomes Eclectic with Jim Harcourt - a lot people went to these torrent sites and started downloading the set which I thought was interesting. If you can get it for free on the KCRW site. Maybe somebody recorded it and put it up somewhere else where people could get it - like we were talking about it and that's great that people are at least interested and wanted to learn more about the band and want to hear what it sounds like in a live setting. So I'm happy that people are interested. And it could be worse. As far as the music business and industry - they kind of dug their own grave. They profited for way too long on the manufacture of CDs when the whole - the cost of making them is really not that expensive and t charging too much money for a CD. That greed led them to the position where they are in. Now people have found the

alternative and they don't feel guilty hurting the labels or the business. Unfortunately it is going to cut into a lot of artists – but whatever time period and technology that you're in, you have to find ways to be creative with the business side of things. It could be making your own handbags or making your own customized limited edition album sleeve. Or just pressing vinyl could be something interesting and different. I always try to think of ways of putting stuff out there beyond the regular proper release on the release. We do these tour CDs. It's a way of putting out music that is unusual to the average listener of our band and just do something different, maybe more jazzy and ambient. Maybe one CD is all snippets of home recordings and maybe one is all instrumental. We just try to mix up what we do and have fun in the process and hope that we can keep doing this for another 10 years.

Q: Given all of that, I was pretty taken by – I'm living in DC, I've been here almost 20 years now off and on – 20 years longer than I thought I would be. When I got here, Fugazi was in their heyday and I was very impressed with what they did recently which is they threw up like 40 different concerts from their history up on the website and you can order them. If you're a fan and like to listen to their live music, you now have a choice of 40 different CDs that you as a fan have an option to pay for rather than trying to hunt them and download them for free. Other bands I guess have done versions of that. I don't know if that's something that you guys have ever thought about.

A: There's some live stuff that's available for sale, but there's also a great site called archives.org which I think is based in DC and you can go and get some really great concert recordings from a whole bunch of different groups. But the one that for us that keeps coming up is this recording from 2003 in Stockholm, Sweden. I guess the national station did a really, really good job and kind of stood as the high water mark. And it's for free. You can go down there and you can download it for a reasonably good quality. You can check it out.

Q: I now know what I'll be doing this evening. Doing that and posting the link.

A: Who knows where all of this stuff is going to go. Maybe more subscription-based stuff. I don't know about for you but sometimes when I go online, it's a little bit too overwhelming and I forget sometimes what it is I went online originally to look for or find. I get distracted by whatever comes up. It might be good to have subscriptions so that when you - attached to your emails, you get something that is tailored to what it is that you're really interested in.

Q: I forget where I read this, but some sort of futurist was questioning somewhere – I should remember where and who – the whole notion of ownership of music. What does it mean to own a CD? Why don't we just all just subscribe to some service in which all music is available in some form or fashion. You pay a monthly fee and you basically can listen to the music whenever you want. Why buy something you might listen to 7 times if you can subscribe and have the option of listening to a lot of different things. I don't know if that will happen or not.

A: It seems like they've been trying to go that way. And then also – what's interesting to me - sometimes when you have a show, and I've been to shows like this or played at shows like this, where you know that nobody is recording or it's not even possible or it's acoustic and you just know it's going to be out there and that's it. That's all there was. There's no recording of it. I like that. The fact that it's there for that moment. And it's gone and you can't go back to it.

Q: Hey, thanks so much for taking the time.

A: No, thank you. I'm going to go to the studio now and do some music and have some lunch. It's been a real pleasure talking to you.