

The Hold Steady's Latest: Watch Us Drool >>

BLURT

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¡MUY CALIENTE!

Arizona's Prodigal Sons

on the Album of their Career

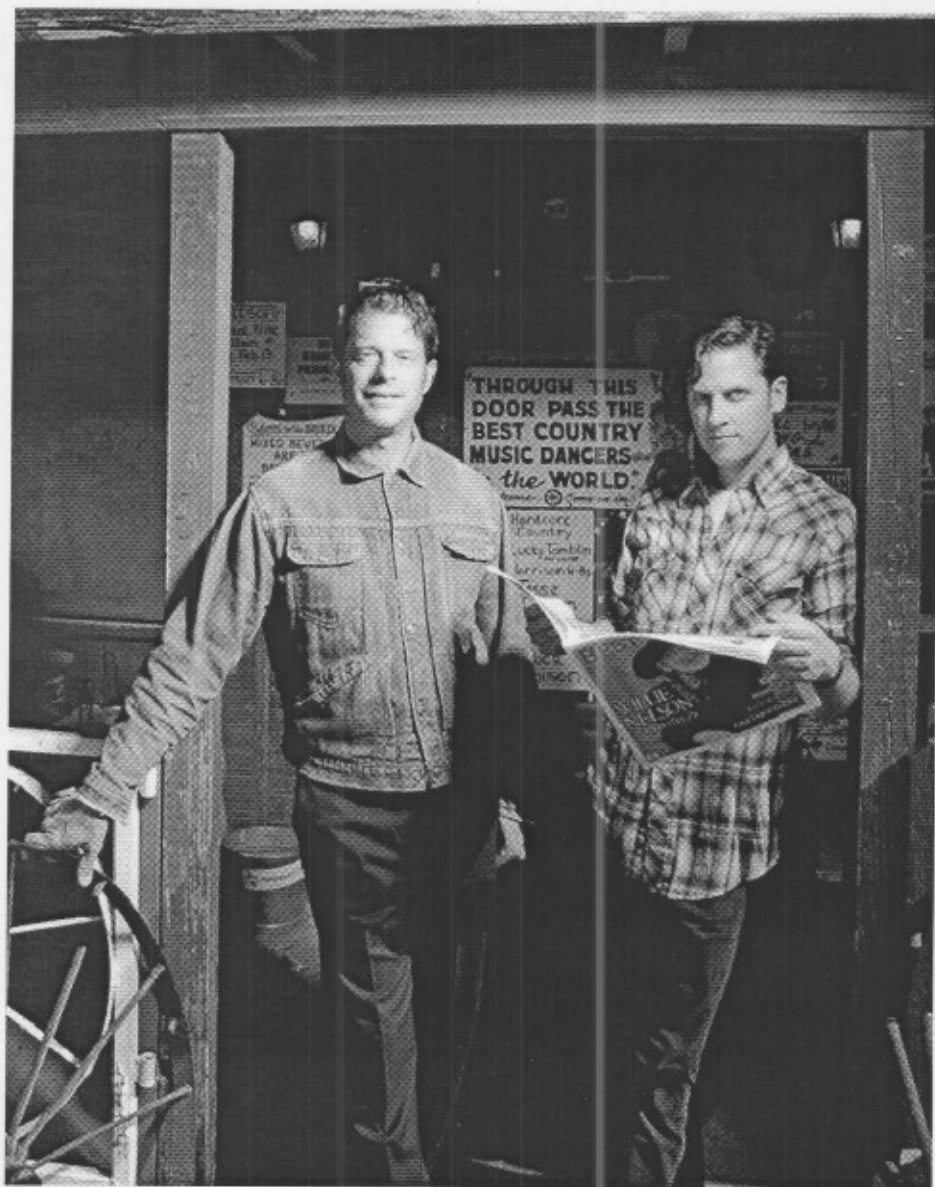
Calexico



Neil Young
Aimee Mann
Gary Panter
Dr. Dog
Howe Gelb

**GEORGE
CARLIN**

Kelley Deal,
Kevin Smith
and Others
Remember a
Legend

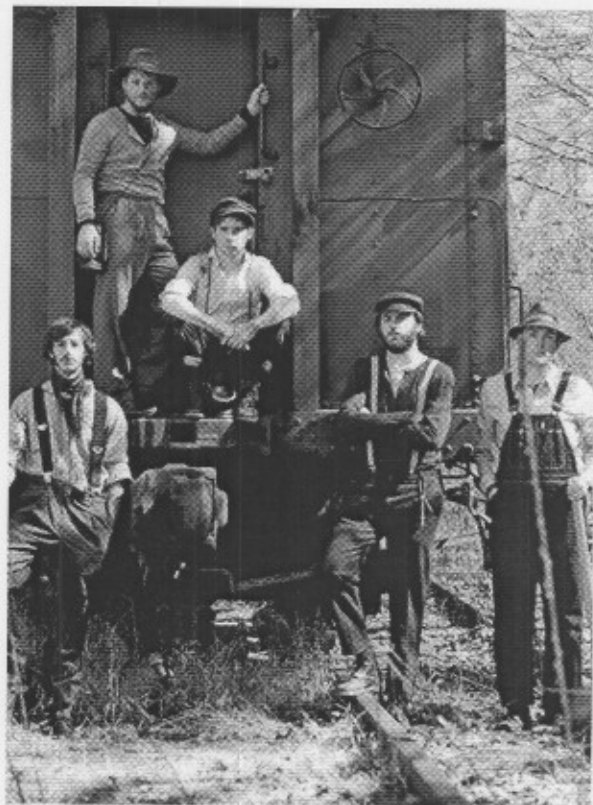


[COVER STORY]

32) CALEXICO

"We like those mysterious notes that are in the background, or just beyond the main instrument or voice. The mystery is important," said Joey Burns, of what frequently motivates Calexico musically, in describing the band's forthcoming album *Carried To Dust*. On hand to probe that mystery: JOHN SCHACHT.

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**29) GEORGE CARLIN**

In which writer and funnyman ED CONDRAN probes the absurdist, acerbic late comedian's genius. "The whole world is a freak show," said Carlin. "When you're born you get a ticket to the freak show. It's a circus, a cavalcade of entertainment. You should have fun with it." Carlin had fun with it to the very end. R.I.P.

38) GARY PANTER

BLURT's resident aficionado of both low art and high, A.D. AMOROSI, had a sit-down with the legendary underground artist. Panter proved hugely revealing, describing himself as "a sponge for modern art and primitive art... pop art too" while darkly predicting "I have a mountain of ideas to test out."

42) DR. DOG

Amorosi also put Dr. Dog on the couch, discussing hippies, hackey-sacks, strawberry-flavored rolling papers and their new CD *Fate*. Of where that "fate" may lead the Dog-men advised, "The tracks are endless but the cars can't waver, can't leave the rails. The lines have been laid in advance."

From Dust 'Til Dawn

WITH THEIR LATEST ALBUM,
CALEXICO'S JOEY BURNS
AND JOHN CONVERTINO
FORGE INTO A BRAVE NEW
FUTURE WHILE KEEPING A
FIRM HANDLE ON THE PAST.

By John Schacht

PHOTOS BY GERALD VON FORIS





If Barack Obama defeats Senator Same Old Song & Dance this November, let's skip the heartland Mellencamp and tomorrow-obsessed Fleetwood Mac and celebrate with music more in tune with the better angels of America's nature, so neglected these last eight torturous years.

Few bands would be better suited for that gig than Tucson's Calexico. Culturally diverse, intellectually curious, environmentally aware, and self-reliant yet socially responsible, these qualities inform some of the most vibrant and eclectic music American rock has to offer. The closer? Their new release, *Carried to Dust*, may be the best damn thing you hear this year.

Of course, Joey Burns and John Convertino, the ex-Giant Sand rhythm section that began moonlighting as Calexico a dozen years ago, don't subscribe to the sloganeering school of agit-rock. Instead, their band has evolved into a kind of musician *kibbutzim* whose defining trait is the mysterious nature of collaboration itself—a cooperative tonic for every greedy cash grab, bogus terror alert, renditioning, waterboarding, wiretapping, and “heckuvajobbing” spawned in Bush's Orwellian reign.

But in this dysfunctional era, even the least sentient have felt the foundation slip. Who hasn't traveled down paths—emotional, psychological, or artistic—they might otherwise never have, if only in search of a response that didn't involve one-way air-fare or a long rifle in a tall tower? Calexico's journey mirrors the national zeitgeist, maybe plus some; given the band's globe-spanning itineraries, the disconnect most Americans felt was only exaggerated for Calexico when they toured the States.



Their 2006 release, *Garden Ruin*, channeled that frustration and angst into skittish rock tempos and foreboding narratives, and featured furious crescendos that still couldn't quite relieve the tension. As Convertino says, "There [were] monsters lurking all over *Garden Ruin*, even in the pretty bits."

But with change in the air, Americans seem willing to peek out from their psychic bomb shelters for a look around. Hope is back, and like most of us, the members of Calexico feel cautiously optimistic that we might soon resume lives that will be, if not exactly worry-free, then not defined by manufactured fear either.

"Having gotten something of a response to the Bush administration out of our system, and knowing that this is ending soon," says Burns, "there's a sense of hope again."

"It's been a load lightened off our shoulders just knowing he's going to be gone soon," adds Convertino. "I sense something has changed with the new record; it's a lot more experimental, and we're having a little more fun with it."

WITH THE OGRE'S SHADOW gone from its central role in their songwriting equation, the 15 tracks on *Carried to Dust* read like a crystallization of all things Calexico: familiar elements refracted into exhilarating new sonic territories. The record's title alludes to *Ask the Dust*, the mid-century novel by second generation-immigrant writer and

underground hero John Fante, a Convertino favorite. He says it resonated because of the main character's resilience. "I loved the character Bandini and his struggle; you get to the point where you feel the whole world's going to crumble, and then something amazing happens."

Victor Gastelum's arresting *chica-in-a-lowrider* cover is the first sign of familiar footing; with the exception of their 1997 debut *Spoke* and then *Garden Ruin*, Calexico's official full-lengths, EPs and singles are synonymous with his iconic artwork. Also back in the fold are musical strong suits like the wide-screen desert noir, mariachi/surf guitar mash-ups, Miles Davis mutes, nylon-stringed guitars, and high-and-lonesome twang that defined *The Black Light* (1998) and *Hot Rail* (2000). Elsewhere, the string orchestration of "The News About William" and funky drive of the Latin Playboys-inspired song "Inspiración" recall *Feast of Wire's* wider palette. The experimental ambient touches and haunting interludes return from *Garden Ruin* exile as well, but fresh twists on that record's pop sensibilities and rock dissonance can be heard on "Writer's Minor Holiday," "Two Silver Trees" and "Red Blooms."

"You can almost imagine each song coming from a different album in the past, and yet it's been reworked and modernized so the entire record has a new sound," says Nick Luca, a long-time Calexico collaborator who plays keys, guitar and Chinese ghuzeng on the new record.

The rock-fueled immediacy of *Garden Ruin's* production (overseen by J.D. Foster) has been moved aside here, replaced by an element that distinguished previous records: a sense of open space to match their desert environs. The band credits co-producer and mixer Craig Schumacher, who's worked with Calexico on everything but *Garden Ruin*, with opening their sound back up. Recorded and mixed at the band's second Tucson home, Wavelab Studios, *Carried to Dust* "has that kind of 'big room' sound, the space in which you hear a natural decay of the drums or trumpets," says Burns.

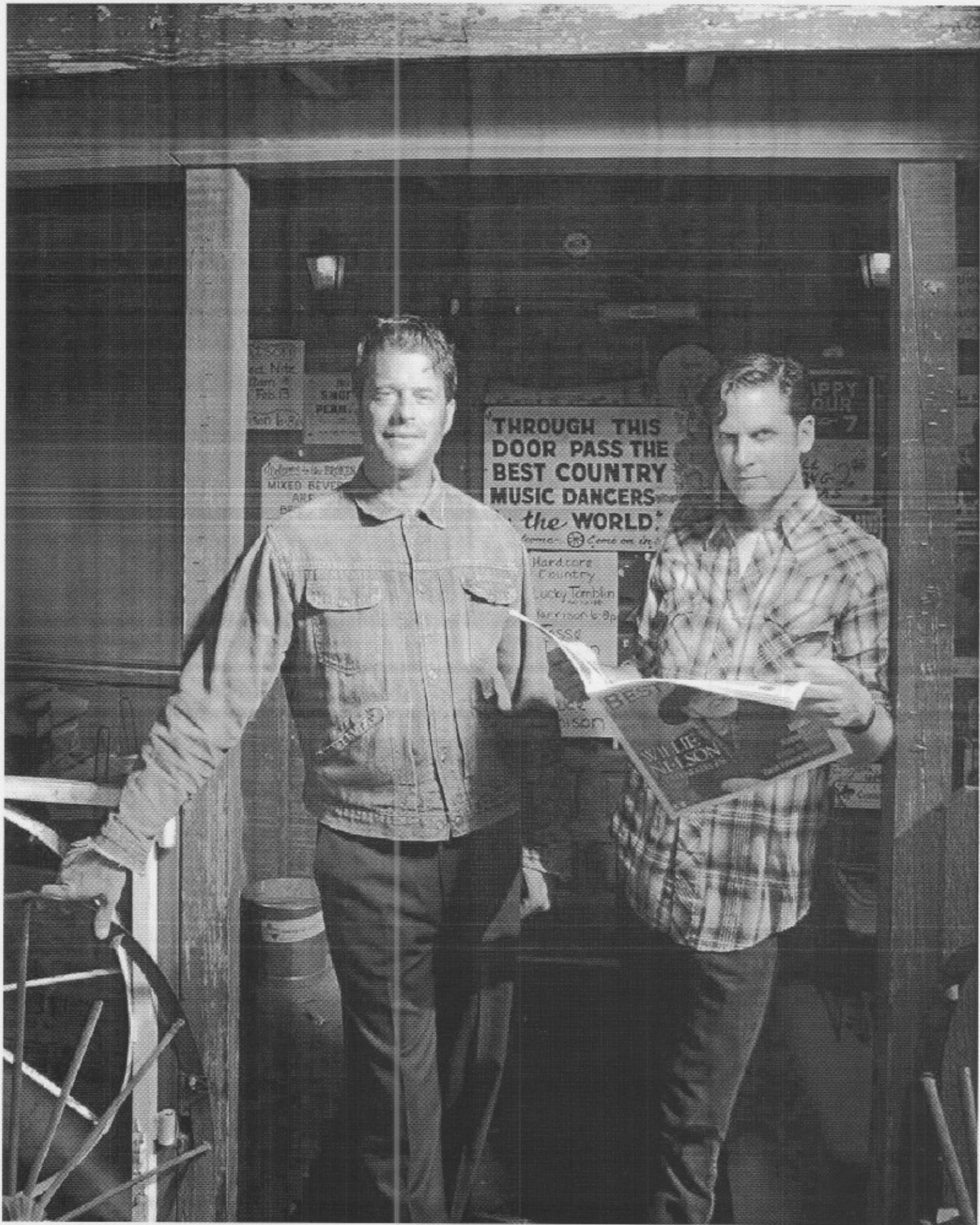
"There is something in all the layers and textures and subtleties that go into all the musicians' choice of notes," he goes on. "But that kind of sensibility does really well when there is that space for them to hear it. I think Craig gets that, so when we mix he knows we're going toward that. We like those mysterious notes that are in the background, or just beyond the main instrument or voice. The mystery is important; it goes hand in hand with the sentiment of a lot of the music and the themes of the songs."

Another sign of things opening back up: *Carried to Dust's* instrumental segues, like "Sarabande in Pencil Form" and "Falling from Sleeves." Burns describes them as "little breaths" between songs that heighten "that more cinematic flow." In the past, Convertino says, he and Burns would deploy an instrumental to "reflect on the songs with words," but with *Garden Ruin*, they tried to "bring all of that together within each song." Hence, no instrumentals on that album.

It was no secret that Calexico went into *Garden Ruin* determined to switch things up: they tracked from scratch as often possible with all six Calexicans present, employed an outside producer for the first time, mixed the disc not at Wavelab but in New York, and highlighted their classic and indie rock influences. But some fans worried that the new direction came with a steep bill – the loss of what defined the band in the first place. They hadn't exactly become the Strokes, but seemed pointed in that direction.

As if in answer, Burns and Convertino went into Wavelab alone after *Garden Ruin's* release and recorded *Tool Box*, a tour-only disc for their summer 2006 tour of Europe. Still, it was hard to tell whether the 14 instrumentals were something to tide old fans over, or a final purge of the word-less songbook.

Burns expected some fans, especially in Europe, to jump ship when they heard *Garden Ruin*. (A risky move, since Calexico's bread has been buttered better in the Old Countries; even with the cost of flying the band, crew and equipment overseas, Burns says that the European tours, where they play bigger venues and major festivals, still "pay for the American ones.") But they wanted "to make a point about, and for, America," he adds, and hoped that the more straight-ahead rock would attract new American fans. If positive critical reaction is any yardstick, they probably did. But even the highest praise for *Garden Ruin* typically came with an elegy: "I won't lie," wrote one critic who loved the record, "I already miss Calexico's old



mariachi-indie rock sound and the rampant eclecticism."

Now it turns out all the hand-wringing was for naught. Says Convertino: "I think people were like, 'What happened to the ambience and the instrumentals? You guys don't like doing that anymore?' No, we *do* like doing that, we still love that aspect of the band, and I think that's pretty evident in the new record."

The times may simply have demanded the urgent sonic and narrative shifts of *Garden Ruin*. No one in Calexico is close to disowning it, but the new record sounds like they're more comfortable integrating the pop and rock into their own roots, rather than at the expense of them. Convertino admits many of the songs on *Garden Ruin* felt like they "came from the outside in" and that may have made the biggest difference in the end.

Still, Paul Niehaus, who's played pedal steel and guitar full-time for the band since 2001, suggests that if a couple more traditional Calexico cuts that didn't make the record had been included, *Garden Ruin* might've wound up "very similar to the new record — it's a very fine line there and you don't really notice until after the fact when you have something to compare it to." But he says that creatively, "it really has to start with John and Joey. They have a vision of what Calexico can sound like, and we got away from that a little, but on this one it's definitely back."

Before any new writing and recording for *Carried to Dust* took place, Calexico scheduled some much-needed decompression time in 2007. The band had spent six months of the year on the road each year since 2001 when they fleshed out the lineup with Niehaus, bassist Volker Zander, and multi-instrumentalists Jacob Valenzuela and Martin Wenk.

But time off is a relative term in the Calexico universe. Their down-time included tours of Japan in January, Australia and New Zealand in February; 19 Euro dates in July; Argentina and Chile in October; and sprinkled one-offs throughout the U.S. during the other months. And though studio work on *Carried to Dust* didn't really begin in earnest until a year ago August, Burns and Convertino stayed busy after *Garden Ruin* by adding to their lengthy resumes, appearing on records by: Iron & Wine (*The Shepherd's Dog*); Spanish rockers Amparo Sanchez and Jairo Zavala; Lizz Wright (Verve's answer to Blue Note's Norah Jones); French songstress Marianne Dissard; Naim Amor of ABBC fame; Susie Hug, formerly of the Katydids; Italy's Vinicio Capossela; and Neko Case, whose next album is due soon. (The list is long enough that Burns phones back after Convertino reminds him of more.) The soundtrack-friendly Calexico also contributed score material and the song "Going to Acapulco" to Todd Haynes' Bob Dylan film, *I'm Not There*, in which Burns and Convertino cameo as part of the brass band in Richard Gere's segment.

These collaborations fuel Calexico; secure in their considerable musicianship and songwriting abilities, Burns and Convertino thrive in the exchanges and are regularly touted as "great listeners" by other musicians. Sam Beam, who recorded *In the Reins* with Calexico as his backing band, returns to add harmony vocals to "Valparaiso" on *Carried to Dust*; he also inspired some of

the striking images in "Two Silver Trees" by turning Burns onto the poetry of Norman Dubie. Sanchez, who did a duet with Burns on *Garden Ruin*, does the same here with Valenzuela on "Inspiración." Zavala adds guitar throughout, and takes a great vocal turn on disc-opener "Victor Jara's Hands," a tribute to the Chilean folk music hero murdered by Pinochet's death squads. Burns and Convertino met Willie Nelson band member Mickey Raphael during the making of *I'm Not There*; he adds harmonica to "Bend to the Road." Tortoise/Brokeback veteran Douglas McCombs, who appeared on 2000's tour-only disc *Travellall*, returns for *Carried to Dust*'s haunting ambient piece "Contention City," and Burns' duet with Iowa singer Pieta Brown on the country shuffle "Slowness" is another album highlight.

But the give-and-take starts with Burns and Convertino, who've now played together for 18 years. The pair still open occasional shows with an improvised duo piece (including on-the-spot lyrics) typically so cohesive it fools many — including yours truly — into believing they must be obscure covers or unreleased songs. They usually performed as a two-piece in Calexico's early years (and still do on occasion), and honed their improv skills so well in Howe Gelb's flying-by-the-seat-of-your-pants ensemble Giant Sand that Niehaus says they "operate at such a very high level it makes you really concentrate to come up with something that adds to the music."

Luca is one of Wavelab's regular engineers and has worked on countless records made in the studio they fondly refer to as "the hermit's Abbey Road." He says the Burns/Convertino method of improvising ideas to tape or Pro-Tools in the studio is far from standard. Most musicians show up with a list of mapped-out songs that undergo minor changes in the studio; Calexico will record "50 snippets of crazy ideas," Luca says, and then bring in regular band members and guests to add their input. "That's really been Joey's brilliance, his sense of community and incorporating everybody around—that's really made Calexico what it is."

Burns gives the credit to the other musicians' "shared appreciation for this kind of aesthetic and this path," made of "many sounds and many styles and influences." But his greatest praise goes to Convertino, whose drumming

Continued on page 59

"Everyone we work with is in it for the long haul, and they're into a quality of life, having this rich story with their life." — Joey Burns