

# FIRST STRINGERS

GUITAR WORLD  
**Acoustic**

May 2006

## Calexico **GARDEN PARTY**

**O**VER THE PAST decade, Tucson, Arizona's Calexico have established themselves as one of the foremost Southwestern indie acts around, notable for an incredibly eclectic sound that features elements of everything from Portuguese fado and Mexican mariachi to American country, surf rock and Fifties jazz. But on their latest album, *Garden Ruin* (Quarterstick/Touch and Go), the band strips down almost to their unplugged underwear to create a folk-based record built around singer Joey Burns's acoustic guitar and vocals.

"We've always been perceived as a Southwestern band, and sometimes it's good to look at those perceptions and challenge them," says Burns. "Calexico actually started out with a very minimalist approach, but as we grew, we added more instruments and kept finding new ways to utilize them. This time, we wanted to step back and focus on songs and stories."

Calexico's return to their roots can be traced back to *In the Reins*, the 2005 album they recorded with Iron & Wine, and a stint opening for Wilco. Burns's strum-

ming on *Garden Ruin* tracks like "Bisbee Blue" and "Letter to Bowie Knife" is reminiscent of Jeff Tweedy's playing on Wilco's early work, while "Yours and Mine" and "Smash" have the quiet intimacy of Iron & Wine's best songs.

"Touring the U.S. with Iron & Wine and Wilco really gave us a different perspective on our music," says Burns. "In Europe, it's widely accepted to meld together a lot of cultures, but here, we'd play a cumbia and it would completely fall flat. So we began focusing more on straight-ahead songs with recognizable beats."

Like much of Tweedy's work with

Wilco, the songs on *Garden Ruin* feature melancholy lyrics hidden inside upbeat, ringing melodies. The album finds Burns venting on issues ranging from urban sprawl to the environment to the war in Iraq.

"I grew up listening to the music of the Vietnam War era, and I've always been a huge fan of people like Bob Dylan and Townes Van Zandt," he says. "With things being so politically extreme today, I feel very connected to what they were feeling back then. So I guess it's fitting for the times to make an album that goes back to that sound."

—Hal Bienstock

**GUITARS** 1961 Epiphone Texan, 1980's Martin Shenandoah dreadnought, 1990's Manuel Rodriguez nylon-string, 1960's Stella tenor, 1980's Crown banjo, 1930's Maxitone banjo ukulele  
**AMPS** Fender Blues DeVille 212, Fender Pro Junior  
**STRINGS** D'Addario



Calexico singer and guitarist  
Joey Burns