

JOEY BURNS and  
JOHN COVATINO  
have focused CALEXICO'S  
maverick perspective  
into a well-developed and  
coherent whole

by  
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photographs by CHOD MCCLINTOCK

# COME TOGETHER



*I am part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin  
fades*

*For ever and for ever when I move.*

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Ulysses”

“It’s not like we’re abandoning any one influence; we still play a variety of songs,” says Calexico co-leader Joey Burns of the Arizona band’s new adventures in a major mode, *Garden Ruin*. “Variety is always the key for us.”

The fact is, though, it would be impossible to cover all of Calexico’s influences in any one project: Portuguese fado, eastern European gypsy, electronica tango, jazz, Top 40, movies; the touch and feel of dozens of different instruments; the sound and personalities of the many artists they’ve backed, collaborated with or remixed.

There’s also the undeniable influence of more than a decade working and touring with inspiration-prone Howe Gelb (as members of Giant Sand and in other projects). There’s the mariachi tradition of the borderlands. There are the endless skies of their Tucson home, and the tiny European clubs they’ve come to love like home. There’s also the general serendipity of opportunity, or risk; not to mention life, in general, and being open to its messages.

Calexico’s 2003 album *Feast Of Wire* may have come closest to capturing the band’s range. A German oompah finds its way into the spaghetti-western accordion ballad “Sunken Waltz”. The dreamy, jazzy “Stucco” incorporates rich string arrangements. The

exquisite, miniature “The Book And The Canal” features drummer John Convertino on piano, his first instrument. “Attack El Robot! Attack!” explores electronic effects in an instrumental soundscape. “Güero Canelo” is a mariachi rave-up from a lode Calexico has quarried since their 1998 disc *The Black Light*.

It turns out that the anomalously poppy *Feast* track “Not Even Stevie Nicks” was a harbinger of things to come. It announced to the world that Joey Burns can write a sing-along, verse-chorus-verse, less-than-three-minute pop song, and he might even like it.

The song also revealed the rock ‘n’ roll drummer dormant for more than a decade in Convertino’s sticks. Having spent the late ‘70s in a touring cover band (“Top 40 stuff like the Doobie Brothers and Head East,” he says), Convertino had relished the switch to more open, lyrical drumming with Giant Sand and Calexico, and he never looked back. But of “Not Even Stevie Nicks,” he says, “Joey snuck it in and I just thought of Mick Fleetwood, and I started playing kind of a Mick Fleetwood beat. My first thought afterward was, ‘That was fun! It was fun to be able to do that.’”

J.D. Foster, who produced *Garden Ruin* (due out April 11 on Quarterstick Records), relates conversations he had with both Burns and Convertino leading up to the sessions. He notes that the band’s European label was looking for a more “hi-fi sound,” but more than that, “They both came to me, particularly John, and said they were really feeling like they were dug into this hole of being the cactus-head, western-landscape, playing-with-the-mariachi thing. They’re really intelligent, really talented guys, and musicians get bored and want to stretch. Those guys have

the abilities to stretch in a lot of different ways.”

Longtime Calexico/Howe Gelb/Giant Sand engineer and de-facto producer Craig Schumacher, keeper of Tucson’s renowned Wavelab Studios, enthusiastically concurred that it was time for a new direction. “To the extent that there’s a Tucson sound,” he offers, “part of it is we’re not very careful. Music has to come first. It has to be about the moment and the inspiration and not caught up in the technology. [It] sort of has some sort of unpolished grit to it. I think for me *Feast Of Wire* is sort of the pinnacle of that process, and you just can’t keep going down that same road every time.”

Burns picks up the thread. “We were working on the Iron & Wine project [the 2005 *In The Reins* collaborative EP], and Howard Greynolds [longtime friend and owner of Overcoat Records] said, ‘Why don’t you get David Byrne?’ I thought, that could be really interesting, and maybe have it go in a different way. But John was I think a little more intimidated by the fact that he’d have to be talking to one of his favorite singers and bandleaders. It seemed like much more of a leap, and difficult to arrange schedules.”

Foster was a clearer choice. “*Devotion & Doubt* was a great time for us,” Burns says of the 1997 Richard Buckner album that he and Convertino played on, with Foster as producer and bassist. “The way [Foster] kind of allowed the songs to breathe, he was connecting us all together and yet being this fourth member of the ensemble, kind of listening to the whole picture. Not really telling you what to do, but showing where you wanted songs to kind of breathe, or open up.”

Ultimately, it was Foster’s emphasis on songcraft that most influenced *Garden Ruin*, because it bolstered Burns’ evolving focus



JOEY BURNS (top left) and JOHN CONVERTINO (above) in rehearsal and (opposite) employing old technology.





CALEXICO in rehearsal, Tucson, Arizona.

on writing. Indeed, the liner notes to *Garden Ruin* are the first in the band's ten-year history to include lyrics.

**B**isbee, Arizona, is nestled in a precipitous, high-desert landscape among the ochre-striated, fault-thrust Mule Mountains, their blue tops laced with the silhouettes of century plants, yucca and scrappy Arizona pine. Its eastern mouth is gashed with deep, mile-wide, terraced basins left by a century of open-pit mining.



PAUL NIEHAUS

The mining culture departed as the value of Bisbee's copper ore declined, but, owing to its bottomless vein of character, the town was never quite left to its storied ghosts. Bouquets of brightly colored houses are stilted and cantilevered across the acute slopes of the tiny canyon, among the thousands of concrete steps that comprise Bisbee's main thoroughfares. The town itself is a testament to the indomitable creativity of its decades of inhabitants.

The trade in unique "Bisbee Blue" turquoise has sustained four generations of the family that produces it. Otherwise, artists, craftsmen, bikers and aging hippies anchored the community until in recent years it began to attract new investors in home restorations, bed & breakfasts, and performing arts. Even some offbeat trendiness has descended. Winter visitors make reservations days or sometimes weeks in advance for Cafe Roka, which offers perhaps the finest dining between Tucson and Mexico City.

Up three flights of carpeted stairs, Cafe Roka offers a space for special occasions. It rises ten feet from honey-colored hardwood floors to a tin ceiling, pressed in art-deco motifs. A flank of windows on its south wall overlooks Main Street and confronts a mountain-side. The room was plenty long and wide enough to hold the Calexico cast, and all their instruments, for a week of woodshedding, an unprecedented pre-production event for a band that traditionally has written and recorded its material in the studio.

"We went there to do some writing, some regrouping, getting away from the normal habits," Burns explains. "The cell phone doesn't work so well down there. That sense of exploring is a great inspiration. There's definitely some strangeness down there that we like — those haunted places....Everyone was kind of blown away with the images there."

The trip was also something of a team-building exercise for *Garden Ruin*. Calexico's entourage included Foster and Dutch soundman Jelle Kuiper, as well as the band's core



VOLKER ZANDER



lineup since its tour behind 2000's *Hot Rail*: bassist Volker Zander and multi-instrumentalist Martin Wenk from Germany, guitarist and pedal steel player Paul Niehaus from Nashville, and trumpeter and emerging multi-instrumentalist Jacob Valenzuela, the band's only other Tucson resident.

Burns and Convertino had played most of the instruments on recordings made prior to *Feast Of Wire*, inviting others into the studio to add color. But as their tour opportunities grew in number and size, replicating the music was always problematic. Mariachi Luz De Luna played some dates in the United States and Europe behind 2000's *Hot Rail*. Otherwise, Calexico tried to share members with other bands on the bill. This had limitations.

"It was pretty low-budget and we were opening up for Lambchop and Vic Chesnutt, so maybe some of the musicians would want to sit in with us," Burns says by way of example. "They had some horn players we thought could play some of these parts. And we got the word back that the trumpet parts would be more demanding maybe than what they were used to. Just listening to *The Black Light* album, those trumpets were just crazy. And then you think about playing a whole night with Lambchop and then Calexico and Vic Chesnutt."

The head of Calexico's U.K. label, City Slang, offered some suggestions. "Christof Ellinghaus' brother-in-law Martin [Wenk] had played some trumpet and some guitar and heard the music. Volker, the architect, plays cello and bass. So we met them and played a couple shows with Vic Chesnutt and Lambchop, and we stayed in touch and had fun playing over the years."

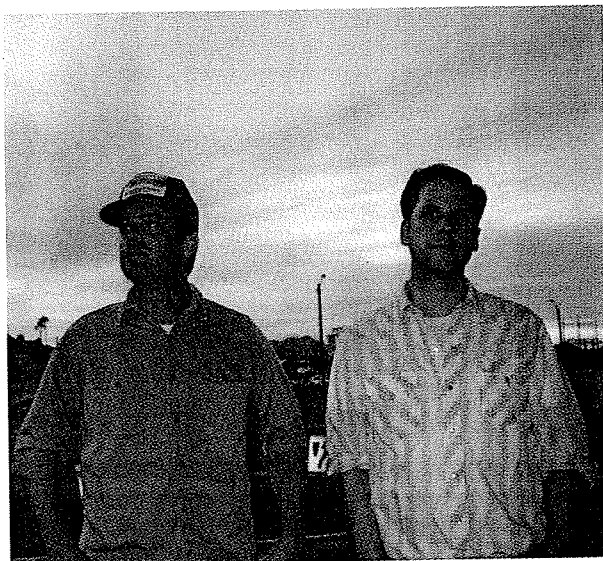
So it was that Calexico became less of a loose collective and more of an actual band. The Bisbee sojourn produced the first music this band had created together.

**H**aving changed the scenery, the process, and the focus of his preparation, Burns also changed instruments. A switch from nylon-string to steel-string guitar led to a shift toward the more pop-friendly major mode, and away from the minor mode that lent the southwestern mood to much previous Calexico music.

"Joey had three or four songs that were reasonably close to written," says Foster, but "I totally admonished him a couple of times. I'd say, like, 'Hey, Joey, instead of worrying about what musical instruments could go on this tune, go write fifteen more songs to choose

from. I think that would help our position a lot more.' Not that that exactly happened, but those guys obviously have no problem with musical ideas. They have a zillion musical ideas in their brains, so that's not an issue."

For inspiration, Burns drew from the atmosphere — the geographical atmosphere of Bisbee, and the psychological atmosphere of global social malaise. Whereas previous records had touched on themes related to the migrant trail from Mexico, Burns now found other, broader political notions shadowing his lyrical landscape: energy consumption, environmental abuse as represented in the gaping maws of Bisbee's abandoned mines, a sense of diminishing freedom, the



CONVERTINO and BURNS enjoying the scenery.

nature of evil. Oblique and impressionistic, these themes flicker in the new album's lyric details and instrumental moods, in the background much as they are in most of our lives.

"As opposed to saying, 'We're gonna write a whole political record,'" Burns clarifies, "I think in some ways, all these topics, all these themes, all these extremes and struggles reside in many facets of life. Politics could be reflected in a personal relationship as well. You can't just say that 'this is about Bush.' I mean, John sings this refrain about 'Saddam Hussein/Bin Laden, gonna get your noggin'; he jokingly sings that over and over again, but that's just as valid as some of the pro-right-wing Republican mentality songs that you hear on some radio stations, or the reverse. Who wants to hear that? It sounds more like slogans and campaign themes and motifs. To me it goes deeper than that."

*Garden Ruin* strides right into Calexico's new world with its opening track. "Cruel" opens with an acoustic exercise under Burns' assured bari-tenor voice, now revealing an

elasticity and range unimaginable from the duo's 1997 debut *Spoke*. Convertino comes in with a radio pop beat, a barely perceptible veneer of dust and a chip or two keeping it real. (Says Foster, "You're not going to get dumbass drums outta that guy, ever.") With a piano over the bridge and an emerging, upbeat horn part, the song threatens to turn sunny behind Burns' dark lyric hints of the "lay and law of the land" misused, but he pulls it all back with a line he borrowed from his brother John: "Birds refuse to fly/No longer trust the sky."

"Originally it was one of those songs that kind of popped out in Bisbee," Burns says. "We said 'Hey, let's write a song that's...more in the way of a song that we've covered by Love, 'Alone Again Or'. The lyrics that I was kind of just mumbling at the time were about love and careless heart, 'Cruel'. And I couldn't do it."

"So I e-mailed my brother and I said, 'I need some help here. I want to take this away from this theme of love and heart.' And just writing this e-mail helped open me up to thinking about where I would want to take it, to more like being a good steward to the land, environmental topics, or what does one do with this resource that we have."

The odds-on favorite song follows. "Yours And Mine" is a universally resonant assay of that looming "fish or cut bait" moment in a relationship.

Whose time is being wasted? Yours and mine. The hookiest track, though, is the next one, "Bisbee Blue". It's a song of hope for a touchstone amid troubled times in a worried landscape, and the spirit of the music makes you believe there might be one.

Convertino provided the backstory for "Letter To Bowie Knife", an angry tale of innocence lost. Says Burns, "It's just kind of a rock song we made up down there in Bisbee and didn't know what the hell it was supposed to be. But after we started playing that song, John kind of mentioned this letter he wrote when he was a kid growing up, because he had a Bowie knife, and he wrote a letter to the company. They wrote back a letter that was kind of all cloaked in fundamental Christian belief."

"It seemed to kind of strangely coincide with this idea of living by the sword and dying by the sword — these causes that are being fought for, crusades, all those kinds of ideas started coming to mind and how that could influence a child, about his own knife."

"It's also kind of a play on words with

David Bowie, because the song sounds like a leftover track from Wes Anderson's *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou* (a 2004 film that used Bowie tunes on its soundtrack).

"Roka", featuring the vocals of Ampananoia's Amparo Sanchez, revisits desperation, disillusionment and death on the migrant trail. "Having traveled and playing songs from *Feast Of Wire* and talking to journalists in Berlin or Lisbon, London or Amsterdam, this idea of immigration doesn't so much pertain to our own back yard, but it's global," Burns says. "So as much as I wanted to make it about this place, I wanted to also kind of open it up, and address the whole global issue of immigration."

**A**t age 10, John Convertino performed for an audience of 8,000 at a North American Christian Convention in California. "I barely knew how to set my drums up," he remembers. "At one point, because the rack tom was sitting on the left side and I didn't have the spurs set up right, the thing rolled over. It was pretty bad."

The audience, of course, loved it. Convertino was then touring with a family band that also included his mother, two sisters and brother. While they made the rounds of Christian conventions and church groups nationwide, his father held down the home front, teaching piano and accordion. For a time, he also led an accordion orchestra. "They would do classical pieces like Bach," Convertino says. "Fifty accordions playing a Bach fugue. It was awesome!"

When his mother left the road to become a voice teacher, the siblings traveled as a rock 'n' roll cover outfit, eventually settling in for a year as the house band at Chilkoot Charlie's in Anchorage, Alaska. Their next move was to Los Angeles to look for a record deal. Apart from the predictable problems of working with siblings, the lure of

marquee lights finally broke up the band. A brother and sister went into the acting business; the other sister started a family.

For a year, Convertino was at loose ends. "I tried busing dishes and then I wound up being a balloon delivery guy," he recalls. When Howe Gelb moved into his apartment building, Convertino was happy to offer his services. He laughs as he tells the story.

"We got together and we'd have these kind of rehearsals, and they were not like any rehearsals I've ever had before. We'd run through these songs and we'd never really figure out a beginning or an end. There would be times when I would be laughing so hard behind the drums. And then he was calling me up to meet him at the studio, and before I knew it we had a record together. It was called *The Love Songs*. There's some pretty major drum mistakes in there, but he kept saying, 'Oh I love those.' I just didn't get that. But I've really learned to appreciate that kind of spontaneity."

When Gelb and Giant Sand bassist Paula Brown divorced, and keyboardist Chris Cacavas departed to launch a solo career, Convertino and Gelb began playing as a duo. Gelb liked the jazzier sound but wanted to add an acoustic bass. Convertino asked around and a friend gave him Joey Burns' number, which he passed along to Gelb. Of the resulting audition, Convertino says, "I think he only played a couple of songs with us and he got the gig." Burns was fresh out of college.

Much moving about ensued until all three players wound up living on the same block in Tucson, hosting a parade of visiting musicians. Gelb's "let it be" spontaneity and the porous nature of Giant Sand encouraged exploration, collaboration and growth, principles that Convertino and Burns took to heart. Side projects bloomed everywhere and, in Schumacher's

words, "They became the rhythm section du jour."

They joined with Bill Elm in Friends Of Dean Martinez, and when that relationship soured, they launched Calexico as a duo, first acting as openers for Giant Sand, then releasing *Spoke*. Before long, Convertino and Burns' side projects began to dominate their time.

From that point, the Calexico story largely turns on Burns' growth as an artist. In a 1997 interview, Burns told Fred Mills, "You know, I used to be so nervous when Howe wanted me to do some of my songs...but everything is changing and growing."

Now, Foster says, "He's really discovered his range. I think live he's gotten to be quite a good singer, and he's become a much more confident frontman for the band. I think that everything he's learned from the people he's worked with, he takes with him and he absorbs and kind of turns it on its ear. That's one thing Joey's really good at: He's a student first and foremost."

Convertino concurs. "I never really believed that Joey was a singer-songwriter. I believed that he was an instrumentalist, a great musician, arranger, melody man. He could learn people's songs and remember them long after they had already forgotten. But he never really saw that within himself, and I think he's gotten to that place where he can translate what he's feeling into words, and really sing it and believe it."

"It's true that he learned a lot from Howe, and he learned a lot from Rainer [Ptacek, the late Tucson guitar genius], and he learned a lot from me, and he learned a lot from his brothers and his sisters. He learned a lot from his own stuff, from college — he's an individual. He draws from everything. He draws from his life. He's an artist and musician. And...he progressed. He allowed himself to progress. And he enjoyed the progression. I

think he's done a great job, and I think he continues to grow."

For all his hard-earned poise, songwriting skills, vocal range and leadership, Burns retains the soul of a sideman. He regularly sits in with Tucson bands and thrives on playing with musicians he meets on the road. "Sometimes people just drop by someplace and say, 'Hey, you want to do it?'" he relates. "I just enjoy the interaction in the sound itself and the songs, and also getting the chance to work with people. You might meet some musicians and you really want to connect and you know that when you go home it's going to be difficult to get back to that place again, wherever that may be: New York City or Brooklyn or Barcelona, New Zealand, wherever. So the music acts as a great bridge. You can plan a show or you can follow through to do some recordings and just get back there."

So what's the next quest? "I was just thinking about making two different records," Burns says. "Maybe just a minimal two-piece record, and then I was thinking about making a full-on record with mariachis doing all original songs, but make it a fucked-up production."

"There's no real plan that's laid out, 'This is where we want to go.' It's more, 'This feels good. Let's just follow this feeling with the music or playing shows or collaborations.'"

Says Foster, "If [*Garden Ruin*] expands their fan base to new fans, I think those fans had better expect a curveball next time out, too. I don't think they've finished growing. You stop being an artist when you finish growing."



ND contributing editor Linda Ray, inspired by Calexico's daring, tried an entirely new approach to writing this story: She started with an outline. Alas, it didn't work past the first paragraph. She remains grateful, however, for the inspiration to buy herself a Bisbee Blue turquoise ring.