

CALEXICO: GARDEN RUIN

"Ultimately I really wanted to write some songs that would last, where the song and sentiment stick to the ribs like oatmeal."

Joey Burns, December 2005

"A band has got to keep changing and moving or it will get boring and break up," says CALEXICO's John Convertino. Fortunately CALEXICO have barely stopped moving for ten years. Even when they're not on the road – and this band tours hard – they're recording: for themselves, with others. It's a tradition that Tucson, Arizona residents Joey Burns and Convertino – the engine that drives CALEXICO – have maintained ever since they worked with another endlessly productive individual with an intense work ethic, Howe Gelb, with whom they constituted Giant Sand for over a decade. And it's a tradition that ensures that, whatever they're involved in, it's going to be at least a little different from what you heard last time. If that wasn't the case, CALEXICO would still be trading in the lo-fi dusty instrumental cassettes recorded on an answering machine that represented their very first work back in 1996.

Case in point: since their fourth album *Feast Of Wire's* release in early 2003, CALEXICO's work ethic has birthed a live DVD as well as collaborations with Nancy Sinatra, Neko Case, Françoise Breut, Gotan Project, Amparanoia, Marianne Dissard and Niam Amor, while Convertino even found time to release a solo album, *Ragland*. And now comes *GARDEN RUIN*, the band's fifth album (and that's if you don't count their unofficial releases and tour only CDs). Once again, it highlights how CALEXICO refuse to stand still...

CALEXICO now is very different to the duo that started out in 1996. Joey and John remain at its heart, but the multinational touring band they have gathered around them – fellow Tucson inhabitant Jacob Valenzuela, Germans Martin Wenk and Volker Zander, and Lambchop pedal steel player Paul Niehaus – now plays an important role not only on stage but also in the studio. To record *GARDEN RUIN*, CALEXICO also called in the services of a producer, JD Foster (Richmond Fontaine, Marc Ribot, Green on Red).

They began with a week of rehearsals in Bisbee, a turn of the century Victorian era mining town in southeast Arizona, now a stronghold for left wing liberals, artists, writers, touring circus acts, and people who prefer the more creative lifestyle of a small town rather than the big modern cities of Tucson and Phoenix. "Plus," Burns notes, "it's always 10 degrees cooler in Bisbee than in Tucson."

"Our friend Bill Carter, writer, film maker and photographer, recommend we practise on an empty fourth floor flat at his friend's restaurant, Cafe Roka," Burns continues. "The surrounding proved to be inspiring on many levels. Great food, everything within walking distance, down to earth people, and no working cell phones since the old town was barricaded inside a deep ravine. It's an amazing place, perfect for making music or hanging out in thrift stores and haunted hotel saloons, both of which the town has a healthy supply."

Inspired by their surroundings, the band explored musical avenues that they had previously left untouched. "This album was a conscious decision to try something new and tap into strains in our musical fabric that haven't been highlighted in the past," comments Burns. The fabric he refers to is still inherent in their music, of course – the band has always admitted to being influenced by sources as diverse as Portuguese fado, 50's jazz, gypsy or romani music and its offshoots, 60's surf and twang from Link Wray to country's Duane Eddy, the spaghetti western epics of Ennio Morricone and dark indie rock singer songwriters like Smog, Richard Buckner, Will Oldham and Vic Chesnutt. But this album, he states, "turned out to be more about songs, songs that didn't necessarily go back to the same pool of influences as before. At home I'd picked up the steel acoustic guitar

rather than the nylon strung guitar, and the difference in sound immediately took me down a different path. For starters, I wound up playing more in major keys, and there are more pop elements and a bit more rock too."

John Convertino is well aware of how things have changed. "I've been channeling Charlie Watts while Joey channels Mike Watt," he laughs. "I've finally come back around to enjoying a simple rock beat, while praying for some roll in there as well."

This is no doubt one reason why *GARDEN RUIN* seems a more accessible album. Where the open blue skies of the landscapes they chronicled were normally tempered by the smoky dark blues of their jazz influences, *GARDEN RUIN* is musically brighter, though this time the sky blues are tempered instead by a darker lyrical content in which "Birds refuse to fly / No longer trust the sky". Opener "Cruel" is a case in point, its potent melody and upbeat, almost uplifting arrangement masking stories "that break like branches in the cold". As Burns says, there is rock in there too. Closing track "All Systems Red" is massive, guitars surging round Burns as he howls in a way that will be as surprising to those who followed the band throughout their career as to the late converts brought in by their cover of Love's "Alone Again Or".

Lyricaly, too, the album sees Burns taking a left turn, addressing contemporary America rather than the mythical America that always previously inspired him. Stories of the little man are now set alongside far more personal insights into Burns' world view. "There is much more of an influence of the current state of affairs in the lyrics on this album than before," Burns believes. "In the past there were songs like "Service and Repair", "Sanchez", "Sunken Waltz" and "Across The Wire" that brought up social political issues, but never has an album been so concentrated on these themes as this album."

Convertino agrees. "I think we are trying to do what we can in the music and lyrics to help people relate to the frustration that's been ever present since Bush became President. I don't think we have ever had such 'political' thoughts going through our brains in the process of making a record as we have had with this one. There are monsters lurking all over it, even in the pretty bits."

The result of the thousands of miles travelled since 2003's *Feast of Wire*, *GARDEN RUIN* takes into account the enlarged line up of the band, its multicultural roots, the band's growing input into the songwriting and arrangement process, the arrival of a producer, new domestic arrangements, international affairs, broadening horizons, developing ambitions and changing scenery. *GARDEN RUIN* is definitely not the sound of a band standing still.

Put succinctly, *GARDEN RUIN* is where CALEXICO fill those dusty, empty landscapes they documented with a big, big sound...



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