

SUNDAY, AUG. 3 | FORT ADAMS STATE PARK | CALEXICO

DESERT AMBIANCE

BY MATT KEEFER

Dust-swirled tumbleweed mariachi Arizona towns. Tex-Mex open-toed sandaled blistering sandscapes. The Southwest, the open deserts, rapid Spanish lyricism and the French connection.

The desert is thematic paradise for Calexico drummer John Convertino. Along with guitarist/singer Joey Burns and the band's newer lineup, they'll take the Newport Folk Festival stage by sandstorm Sunday, Aug. 3. Formed in 1996 by Burns and Convertino, the Tucson band has had a glimmer of commercial success with their 2006 full-length "Garden Ruin," hitting No. 14 in Billboard's Top Independent Albums.

The album eschews their instrumental tracks in favor of lyrical music. Convertino, in a recent phone interview, speaks of the turn "Garden Ruin" took and the Burns-Convertino dynamic: "I think he's always had a really strong sense of pop music. He's always tried to sneak that pop sensibility, and I've been kind of anti-pop about my whole musical career."

Their soon-to-be-released album, "Carried to Dust," partially is a mix of new and old, returning in part to their "desert-noir" soundscapes, and building upon the pop sensibility developed in "Garden Ruin." "Dust" is their second collaboration with Iron and Wine's scratchy-voiced folksy Sam Beam, a relationship established in 2005's EP "In The Reins." Given that album's excellent reception, "Dust" carries a lot of expectation for its Sept. 9 release.

Calexico finds itself in a happy in-between: in between major commercial status and a thriving fan base. Their music often is used in shows and movies, most notably on NPR's "This American Life." "You hear Terry Gross," Convertino says, "her voice will fade away into one of our songs, and I'm like, 'Wow!' It's a good feeling. It's the kind of radio play I'd rather have than being played on a pop commercial radio station."

Calexico is gaining momentum, having toured with such indie acts as Lambchop and Wilco, Vic Chesnutt, and recording with New Pornographers vocalist Neko Case. But right now, Convertino enjoys

their nigh-underground status. "Maybe there's some kind of 'kiss of death' that comes with being successful. We haven't had the pressure to be anything other than what we want to be."

They've had success abroad. Several of their touring dates are European, including Italy, Portugal, Spain and France. "There's been so many French bands coming over here and recording, Tucson bands going over to France and touring ... great food, great wine, great people." And though France may not have a desert, "you don't really need it when you've got all that other stuff."

Whether abroad or at home, there's something distinctly American about Calexico. "There's this little town south of Tucson called Bisbee," Convertino describes a rehearsal location. "It's a mining town, and it really hasn't changed that much since the mining days. It's pretty much stayed the same: centered around an old hotel, a main street, cell phones don't work down there. Joey came up with that song ('Bisbee Blue') while we were down there."

Their next project holds a plethora of possibility; Convertino mentions Burns' desire to work with Chan Marshall's Cat Power (who will perform at the Newport folk fest on Saturday, wink wink, nudge nudge), their interest in Jim White, an appreciation of Buena Vista Social Club's pianist Hank Jones, and jazz bassist Charlie Haden. They also performed with Canadian band The Acorn at the Winnipeg Folk Fest, and threw around ideas of a possible future collaboration.

Though for the distant future, Convertino holds a band-vision from Scorsese's Rolling Stones documentary "Shine a Light": "If I could be anybody, I'd be (drummer) Charlie Watts when I'm 60 years old. There wasn't a moment in that movie where it looked like they were bored."

And you thought singing about sand dunes would be boring.

Matt Keefer caught them in Madison, Wis., a few years back, and is willing to start the rumor that Calexico and Neko Case burned down that club.



Freedom fries? That jab at the French never stuck. 'Thank God,' says drummer, fry-enthusiast and French traveler John Convertino, left. At right is guitarist/singer Joey Burns. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

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