

relix

CALEXICO AND IRON AND WINE

In the Reins ● Overcoat Recordings

Somewhere along the dusty indie trail, **Calexico**, the Tucson, Arizona-based collective that reconfigures the classic sounds of the Southwest crossed paths with **Iron and Wine's Sam Beam** and his minimal, southern folk. They thought it would be a good idea to record together and eventually produced *In the Reins*, a 7-song EP. Like neither parent but with elements of both, *In the Reins* is an immensely enjoyable and captivating album. On "Red Dust," they combine for a funky strutting blues groove that has elements of Califone with more swagger. Other songs lean more toward one side, the opener "He Lay in Reins" is classic Calexico with guest Mariachi singer **Salvador Duran** and Beam whispering the lyrics over pedal steel guitar. The closer, "Dead Man's Will," is pure Iron and Wine with subtle textures provided by Calexico. If there's a problem with the album, it's that the affair ends too soon, but the certain success of this endeavor should be enough for them to give it another go.

★ Tyson Schuetze

SCRAPBOOK

It's spring 1989, and teenage curiosity-seekers have packed themselves into a high-school auditorium for an annual male "beauty pageant," meant to be a humorous analog to the more serious female version. But of course, the strutting jocks are taking things far too seriously. Unintentional homoerotic overtones abound.

Into this burlesque strides a skinny freshman, previously known—if at all—as quiet, unfailingly sincere and, most of all, serious. But with a smirk on his face, no shirt on his chest, and—oh yes—sporting goggles, flippers and towel, this "swimmer" strides about the stage flexing his largely nonexistent muscles. The audience goes wild, and the Darwinian high-school hierarchy has been temporarily upended.

The freshman, one Sammy Beam, obviously doesn't care one bit about popularity. As a result, he becomes the most popular kid at Chapin High School (the South Carolina alma mater he and I share) for at least the rest of the year.

Dangerous though it may be to judge character based on an event 16 years in the past, a few things haven't changed: Beam, introvert to the core, isn't afraid to stick his neck out, and he doesn't like to be pigeonholed. And now, again, he's popular almost in spite of himself. Of course, he laughs when I proffer this interpretation.

"I guess you could look at it that way," says Beam, now better known by his musical alter ego, Iron & Wine, and a more grown-up

first name, Sam. "I prefer to look at it like it was a stupid, dumb-ass..." he chuckles, momentarily trailing off. "But yeah, I was into doing something interesting."

Doing "something interesting" seems to have been the impetus behind *In The Reins*, the new collaborative EP from Iron & Wine and Tucson, Ariz., rock collective Calexico. There are 2,254 miles between Beam's Miami home and Tucson, and almost as many between the four-track home recordings that put Beam on the map and his most recent effort, but one gets the sense he likes it that way.

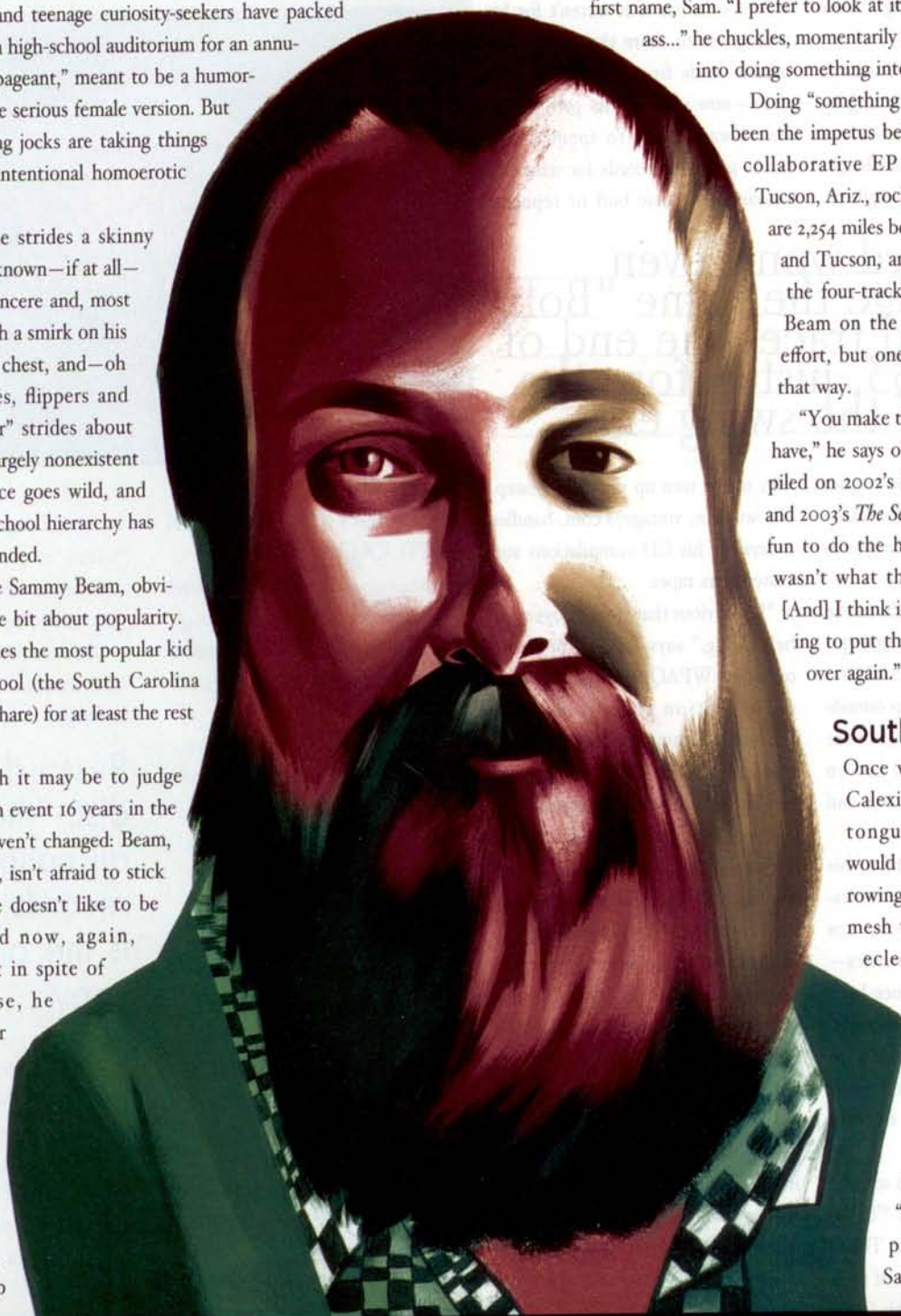
"You make the best of the tools that you have," he says of the early recordings, compiled on 2002's *The Creek Drank The Cradle* and 2003's *The Sea & The Rhythm* EP. "It was fun to do the home-recording stuff but it wasn't what the whole thing was about. [And] I think it would be silly or really boring to put the same record out over and over again."

Southwest, ho

Once word of Iron & Wine and Calexico's collaboration leaked, tongues began wagging. How would the hushed, emotionally harrowing dynamics of Beam's songs mesh with Calexico's expansive, eclectic, Southwestern vibe?

Quite well, it seems.

Beam's songs were even flexible enough to accommodate an operatic interlude *en español* adorning the loping 6/8 shuffle of opening track, "He Lays in Reins." The part came courtesy of Salvador Duran, a local per-



IRON & WINE: ADVENTURESOME SPIRIT, QUIET PACKAGE

Well, I'm just lazy. I don't like to shave. I'm just kind of private so people take it as mysterious or whatever.

His visit to the Lomax Archives in New York:

I had no idea that he was developing this system to track the migrations of different groups of people based on their music or dances. So he had these criteria he would categorize all the folk music he collected. He created this schematic, basically maps. It was the musical genome he was working on.

His first experience performing at Bonnaroo:

Ah, it was crazy. It was a lot of fun. I had really no expectations. People who had played there before told me how great it was and I was always skeptical. I was always like 'that's cool, that's cool.' But it was really great, and the crowd was amazing. I think they really come to listen to music there.

His reaction to hearing I still had a high school yearbook with his picture: I'd appreciate it if you burned that. [laughs]

former Beam met in a hotel lobby after the first night of recording and invited into the studio.

"[Salvador] starts making up some vocals and singing along, and Sam was just completely blown away," recounts Calexico's Joey Burns. "Salvador loosely translated them as being on this long road in somewhat of a struggle and a heartache. And Sam just thought it was perfect. It worked so well with the lyrics he had written."

there's a theme at work. "I thought it would be fun to pick some songs that had to do with some kind of entrapment, whether it was in a good way or a bad way," he says. "In the Reins' to me means a lot of different things. So each of them has to do with something in the reins of a relationship or mortality or these kinds of things."

"They're a bunch of my old songs that ... would have never made it to an official release," Beam adds. "I thought it would be fun to reinterpret those."

Mortality certainly comes to the fore on the disc's last track, "Dead Man's Will," a litany—presumably for surviving relatives—of what to do with the effects of someone recently passed, right down to "this bone." Appropriately, a skeletal John Convertino marimba reinforces the whispered lines, among the first Iron & Wine lyrics anyone ever heard some five years ago.

Son of the suburban south

As Beam puts it, it's been an "ugly road," and a long one, since he and I last crossed paths in late-'80s suburban South Carolina. After graduating, Beam decamped for an undergraduate education in Virginia, where he met his wife, before getting his film bona fides at Florida State University. By the time most people caught up with him, Beam was teaching cinematography in Miami and recording in his spare time.

That changed when South Carolina-turned-Seattle friend Ben Bridwell (Carissa's Weird, Horses) coaxed Beam to submit "Dead

hearing the track assumed Beam was some sort of backwoods rustic, but the reality—if interesting—wasn't quite as romantic.

Chapin, some 20-odd miles from Columbia, forms an interesting variant on the suburban motif. Driving through the area on Highway 76, the main two-lane drag, you'd think you

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were in the middle of nowhere. Yet every southward turn leads to a peninsula jutting into Lake Murray, containing impressive homes, largely occupied by Columbia's corporate and professional class, and one lake-side golf course.

The kids at Chapin High School generally think well enough of themselves to poke fun at their rivals, further up the road, as rednecks and rubes. So it isn't tarpaper-and-tin-roof shacks, but it's certainly a representative slice of the modern South.

Although Beam, like many, initially fled his Southern aesthetic heritage—he chuckles about a high-school love of skate-punk—he's returned to embrace the region's distinctive imagery and cultural

southern imagery without lapsing into cliché.

At the same time, his film work has given him a solid grasp of how to structure his music, as Burns testifies: "I think he has a pretty good command of the way things naturally come together. So, whether it's music or art or film, lyrically he

definitely has a good sense of structure and phrasing and breadth and space. I learned a lot from working with him. There are a couple of tracks from our new Calexico record that I would love to get him on, just to get his genius on there."

With such a fruitful collaboration and promising partnership, Burns and Convertino are looking forward to a joint tour. "The idea," Burns says, "is to have both bands—Sam's and our own—each do its own set, and at the end come together and do the EP and a couple extra tunes," Burns says.

Although Beam readily admits "performing in general is not really my bag," you can bet that the irreverent, risk-taking star of high-school pageants won't miss it. *Reid Davis*