

**Remember** when Placebo's "Pure Morning" was a huge hit in 1998? How about "This Picture" in 2003? I don't remember that one, either. But if you ask Placebo, we've simply been asleep at the wheel while they've gone on to become "the biggest and best rock band on the globe."

At least that's what their press materials claim.

But instead of trying to write a couple of songs that might actually prove that brash assertion, Placebo attempts to rewrite every song that's had a modicum of chart success in the three years since they released *Sleeping With Ghosts*. The resulting album, *Meds*, comes off as a desperate, soulless land grab that's as predictable as it is schizophrenic.

Placebo gets the show started with the passable title track, which supposedly features guest vocals from The Kills' VV (although they're mostly obscured behind Brian Molko's nasally yelp). The lyrics are full of Molko's signature histrionic angst, but the musical backdrop is inoffensive acoustic strumming that breaks into a not-bad chorus. Then they transition into the radio-ready light-industrial "Infra-red."

Things really get interesting with "Drag," a serviceable pop-punk number with shiny verses and a big, crunchy pop chorus. It's formulaic and catchy, but it sounds nothing like Placebo. This brand of pop punk is supposed to come from heartbroken 18-year-olds, not self-styled Bowie wannabes who are pushing 40. He actually sings, "You got A's on your algebra tests / I failed and they kept me behind." Molko is supposed to be speaking to our scorched souls, not to our nostalgia for ninth-grade crushes. Placebo wants to channel the Cure, but instead, they're channeling Weezer.

They immediately follow with the dark, menacing, industrial sound of "Space Monkey." It's absolutely impossible to take the drama and lyrics about death seriously after the sunny "Drag." The incongruity is almost comical.

Add to these a few boring mid-tempo rockers ("Follow the Cops Back Home" and "Blind") and a couple of modern-rock-radio pieces flush with outdated nu-metal studio excesses ("Post Blue"), and you have the rest of *Meds*—a mish-mash of styles that unfortunately sinks the couple of decent ideas the band has. "Pierrot the Clown" and "One of a Kind" both make fairly effective use of samples and show some genuine creativity, but they feel hopelessly out of context on the rest of *Meds*.

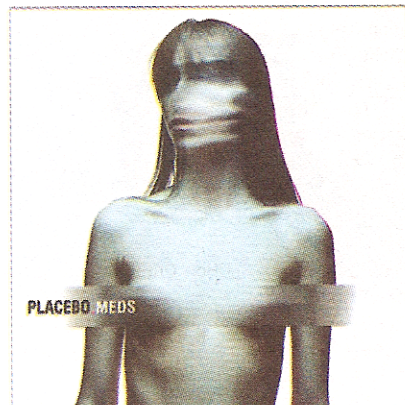
Calexico's fifth studio album, *Garden Ruin*, takes a while to warm up, and as a whole lacks the eclecticism and experimentation that makes much of Calexico's best work, especially 2003's *Feast of Wire*, so fascinating. "Cruel," "Yours and Mine," and "Bisbee Blue" are simple, acoustic country numbers featuring Joey Burns' signature clear vocals and polite guitar strumming with occasional banjo and horn accents. They're gentle, pretty affairs, but not particularly impressive or exciting.

The album gains momentum with "Panic Open String," which introduces some interesting rhythmic changes in the syncopated chorus and opens up into an unexpected outro with strings. Songs such as "Letter to Bowie Knife" and "Lucky Dime" inject cheerful, harmony-laden pop into the mix, and "Roka" explores a faux-South American feel with fun Spanish guest vocals from Eldys Isak Vega. "All Systems Red" ends the album with a dramatic, multi-instrument crescendo that hints at some of Calexico's taste for layering and chaos. But even that song is missing the detail and complexity that characterize previous Calexico outings.

Overall, *Garden Ruin* is a little homogenous and disappointing, especially given the band's history of experimentation. Change is good, but *Garden Ruin* diverts a little too far from the course. **words:**

**Adele Nicholas**

## Placebo, *Meds* (AstralWerks)



## Calexico, *Garden Ruin* (Quarterstick Records)

