**Greenville’s Chandler Blends Alt-Country Styles**

—by Mike Miller

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It's been a busy year on the South Carolina pop scene, although not in the high-profile sense of recent years. Edwin McCain's "Messenger" is the year's biggest release, but fine records have been delivered by the Blue Dogs, 25 Ft. Stanly, Live Bait and Six Ten Split. Still to come are new discs from Isabelle's Gift and the Soul Mites.

Here's a look at three fine discs that are buzzing under the radar screen. All three deserve wider recognitions, especially the exceptional solo record from Greenville's Jef Chandler.

Bending the Rules-

The ingredients of Jef Chandler's music might go into the blender like tried-and-true country rock conventions -- assorted guitars, lap steel and mandolin floavors and sweet harmonies. But what comes out is far from conventional.

With his eclectic blend of pop, rock, folk and mountian music, Chandler has tapped into a new vein in the alt-country mine shaft, one that veers away from predictable, three-chord compositions and explores fresh ways to make melodies memorable.

Chandler is first and foremost a songwriter, and the 10 tunes on "Talking Out the Fire" (1F Records) are exquisite stories told with a clarity of insight and a wry sense of humor. "Freedom" finds a languid, Creedence-like groove and takes an optimistic approach to the tear-jerker break-up song. A cool sax solo from Simeon Kuic underscores the glee when Chandler sings, "I'm going out tonight and toast freedom at the bar."

"Moonwriting" starts out slowly, then breaks into a power chord-powered chorus that acts something like Southern rock's answer to Radiohead's "Creep." After building to a huge finish of intertwining electric guitars and pounding drums, it slides seductively back to an acoustic close.

These two tunes demonstrate Chandler's versatility and verve. But just when you think you've got a handle on his Miracle Legion-meets-Green on Red country rock style, he drops something totally unexpected -- such as the light-hearted vibe of "Caught Up," a jazzy little tune that's more Van Dyke Parks than Squirrel Nut Zippers. Or the country ballad "Answer Me," a mellow song that never gets maudlin.

Then there's the Appalachian pop rocker "Ellie," with its sweet harmonies and fancy flatpicking, and "You Drove Away," a beautiful acoustic guitar-based ballad about sad memories and broken hearts.

It shouldn't be a big surprise that Chandler's solo debut is so strong. His music has depth because his life experiences have been rich and varied. A Furman graduate, he taught school in Austria, played for a while on the Austin, Texas music scene and he's studied creative writing in Gainesville, Fla., and Columbia. As a member of the band Big Brown Bowl, Chandler made considerable contributions to the fine 1996 CD "Just Like You Left Us," and he's joined on "Talking Out the Fire" by Larry Hoskinson, Matt Morgan, Kevin Latham and Jeff Hook, all former members of a hot Upstate band, Seconds Flat.

"Talking Out the Fire" is one of the finest singer-songwriter records this year, and I hope there are many more songs where these came from.