**Jef Chandler Sings Snapshots of Southern Life**

 —by Vincent Harris

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Singer/guitarist Jef Chandler writes addictively melodic songs that work their way into the listener's subconscious before he even realizes it.

Chandler's lyrics are often snapshot-style views of the Southern way of life, delivered in an unassuming, here-goes-nothing vocal style that makes his songwriting skill all the more endearing. Chandler plays constantly around the Upstate, both on his own and with The Bad Popes, a local supergroup of sorts that also includes guitarist Charles Hedgepath and pedal-steel player Mike Bagwell.

Chandler's musical roots stretch back to his preteen years.

"I started taking piano lessons when I was about seven," Chandler says, "and that's when I started writing songs. But I guess I just thought guitar was cooler when I hit puberty, so I asked for a guitar for Christmas when I was 12. I played in some little bands in middle school and high school. I still have some old tapes of those days, and I'll listen to them and grin. It was an honest effort, anyway.”

In my conversation with Chandler, the thing I found most fascinating was the perfect storm of influences around him that led him to a career in music.

"My older brother had this huge record collection," Chandler says, "and he was into all kinds of music. Any kind of money he had, he'd buy records. And he bought everything from Motown to groups like Uriah Heep or Black Sabbath. He was all over the place.”

But family wasn't the only thing that had an influence on Chandler's musical development. During his formative years, FM radio was still a free-form arena.

"Back in the '70s, they had a radio station called WQOK, and WQOK played everything. So you had this radio station that would seamlessly go from Motown and James Brown to heavy metal to Marshall Tucker. I grew up in an era where everything wasn't so compartmentalized.”

Chandler says that there were several key musicians that directly influenced him.

"Elvis Costello blew my mind when I first heard his stuff," he says. "I'd never heard anything like that before. And when I started playing guitar, I got into Jimi Hendrix, because everybody said he was the best. But the first group that I ever really liked was Three Dog Night. Of course, they didn't write their own songs, but they had a lot of great people writing songs for them, like Hoyt Axton and John Hiatt. I still cover some of those old Three Dog Night songs to this day.”

Chandler discovered a more recent influence on his writing when he began collaborating with fellow Bad Pope Charles Hedgepath.

"When I work with Charles, we build songs together, essentially. I really enjoy co-writing songs with people, because it gives you another perspective. Someone else's ear might hear something that yours doesn't. There's that element of being surprised."

Chandler remembers "one song that Charles and I wrote called 'Wrong Turn,' where I pretty much had the whole song, and Charles just came up with this part that sounded nothing like the rest of the song. But it makes this nice little segment in the middle of the song, and it expands the song into something bigger that it was. And I like that. You can get in a rut or get stuck writing a song, and somebody else will have an idea, and the song has new life.”

Chandler will be playing with The Bad Popes at The Handlebar on Dec. 21 as part of The Work's annual Christmas Jam, and at Smiley's Acoustic Cafe on Dec. 29.