



On the Road

Chandler examines current issues with music

By John Mabry

Ask a lot of folk singers where they get ideas for their material, and they'll usually tell you their personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, etc. Not Chris Chandler, a heavily cerebral neo-folk musician who cites his primary source of information as the daily newspaper.

Chandler, who will perform Saturday at The Front Porch Cafe, is a singer with a keen sense for what's happening in today's headlines. Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary fame had this to say about the singer: "Chris Chandler is a true troubadour. A man who gets to the heart of the matter — sings the issues of the day — and takes them to the streets..." Add Chandler's sense of humor with the bite of a rabid pit bull, and you've got one of the most notoriously funny and entertaining new folk musicians to emerge at a number of recent events, including last year's Kerrville Folk Festival.

Consider, for instance, some of the guitarist's thoughts on the abortion issue from his "Embryonic Citizenship": "If life begins at conception," he says, "is it legal for someone 20 years and 3 months to go into a bar and start drinking?"

Such commentary, however controversial, is typical of Chandler's

half-mocking, half-serious treatment of a number of issues including censorship, organized religion ("Jerry Falwell, when'll you stop feeding lines to the Christians?"), civil rights and, of course, the war.

"Singing about the war in the streets and clubs, I'm getting booed, getting things thrown at me," the 25-year-old musician said. "But I can't not sing about the war. My conscience wouldn't let me. It's safe singing about it around Cambridge, but I'm going to do it in the heartland: Dallas; Houston; Laramie, Wyoming. It's going to take some guts."

And while much of Chandler's material tends to parody the more conservative set, left-winged groups such as feminists, liberals and homosexuals won't escape unscathed by Chandler's witty tongue.

The singer uses his acoustic branding iron on these groups with songs like "Whole Wheat Left," "Love Me, I'm a Liberal," and "Heterosexual," a song about how he has to get into drag to pick up a closet heterosexual who has become a lesbian only because she thinks it's fashionable.

"I don't know exactly what to call what I do," he said. "It's folk-rock. It's political satire. It's talking blues. It's

storytelling with a guitar."

Although Chandler's "chainsaw" brand of folk music, as one critic calls it, is highly in keeping with today's headlines, his lifestyle is very much in the tradition of traveling folk singers of the Great Depression such as Woody Guthrie.

Instead of hopping trains, however, the rootless musician has been living out of a 1981 Volkswagen Jetta, traveling the country, playing everywhere from clubs to street corners to protests and demonstrations. He lives off of money from his performances and sales of his cassettes (his newest is titled "A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Abyss"), which he copies on a boom-box plugged into the car's cigarette lighter.

"You can't comment on the scenery unless you take the trip," he says.

His three-year trip back and forth across America hasn't been without its adventures, including a recent run-in with the Raleigh, Va. police at a pro-choice demonstration there.

"I was playing for marchers at the demonstration and the police told me that I had to keep moving and couldn't stand still," he said. "I told them I was tired, and they said they'd give me a place to rest. I

spent the night in jail but didn't have to pay a fine, I don't know why, and then they let me go."

When Chandler's not spending the night in jail, the cold weather and his empty pocketbook often lead him to the doors of soup kitchens and the local homeless shelter, places he refers to as "warehouses for the poor."

"What I dislike about them," he said, "is the way they make homeless and poor people feel subservient to the people who are working these places and getting something for it. They make them feel inferior to these college students who are working there and getting credit for it!"

Whatever his feelings on college credit are, Chandler's musical style and sensibility are strongly appealing to university students, although the musician says today's 18-to-25 generation lacks the concern of students 20 years ago.

"They just don't seem to care. It seems to me, the places I've been, they spend a lot of time making fun of people who care about what's happening."

For more information on Chandler's show call The Front Porch Cafe at 846-LIVE.