



**FRED
ARMISEN**
→ CO-CREATOR/ACTOR
Portlandia

WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT PORTLAND?

Fred Armisen's *Portlandia* (returning Jan. 6 on IFC) is both a love and a laugh letter to the quirky city of Portland, Ore. The comedian explains his affectionate obsession.

BEFORE I'D EVER BEEN TO PORTLAND, I used to try to picture it in my head, and all I could think of was a woolly ski hat. At the time, during the 1990s, there was so much talk about Seattle and flannel shirts that no one really knew anything about Portland. So when I finally went out there, it was like, *Whoa, this is the place!* It's like a European city, nestled away in the hills, where you can get the best Americano ever.

On *Portlandia*, we're not mocking Portland's progressive, feminist, do-it-yourself vibe. We're celebrating it. I remember the first time I realized that Portland was a special city: I saw this feminist bookstore called In Other Words. There was a sign out front that said something like "The Last Remaining Nonprofit, Volunteer-Run Feminist Bookstore." That's a lot of words to put on a sign! I mean, it wasn't just like, Maryann's Books or something. Inside, there were even more signs, creating subgenres for the books or stating the rules for the store. I saw one that said, "We won't tolerate any ageist comments," and I thought, *This is the kind of place that you don't see everywhere.* Carrie Brownstein and I started to imagine what it would be like to work there, and that became the inspiration for our first comedy sketch, "Feminist Bookstore." We filmed it inside that bookstore. You can see those signs.

The best part about *Portlandia* is that we didn't really need to make this stuff up. For the first season, we wrote a sketch about Dumpster diving. Part of me thought, *Is this even a real thing?* But then one of our extras was like, "Oh, I'm a Dumpster diver." She had made some kind of tinfoil Wi-Fi connection with stuff she'd gotten from the Dumpster. We were like, "What?" I don't know how the hell she did that.

But that's so Portland. People out there are always like, "How can I take this very specific thing and turn it into a fine art?" This season, we have a sketch about this specialty-cocktail craze—like ginger-based bourbon drinks infused with rotten banana peels and topped off with eggshells. I'm not a drinker, so to me it's absurd. But at the same time, I love what making those fancy drinks says about the human spirit, especially in this bad economy. Isn't it nice that, even in the midst of so much unemployment, human beings are still like, "I want to make a fancy cocktail, and not just any tropical drink with an umbrella, but a real speakeasy drink"? That's what I love about this country!

Many of the sketches on *Portlandia* came from something real. Whenever we need to cast someone with a very "Portland" look,

we don't need costumes. We just use our crew. (Our budget doesn't allow us to use 50 extras.) In the "Dream of the '90s" sketch, there's a guy using this rope yo-yo thing, and that's our prop guy. He had a "503" tattoo—that's a

Portland area code—and he drove our props around town in an ambulance. He couldn't have been more Portland.

Maybe that's why people in Portland seem to connect with our work, from the artsy people in cafés to the guy who works at a gas station. People are always handing me food, like, "Hey, I work at this bakery and I love what you do, so here's a loaf of bread!" Or they'll hand me a business card, like, "I do karate yoga. If you ever want to do an episode about that..." We get inspiration from stuff like that all the time.

You know something I've noticed lately that I want to write a sketch about? In Portland, they put a fried egg on top of everything, just to make it extra yummy. It's just like, "Crack an egg on that!" We haven't found a way to work that into a sketch yet, but maybe someday we will. I don't know if Portland's ever been

inspired by *Portlandia* in the same way, but it would be cool if the people there took something from the show and made it a reality. We have a sketch about bike valets. As far as I know, there aren't any cities that provide that service. Portland? You should get on that. ■



Carrie Brownstein and
Fred Armisen on *Portlandia*