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Fred Armisen: The ESQ+A

The actor/writer/comedian talks about season two of *Portlandia* and *SNL*, Steve Jobs and feelings

BY SCOTT RAAB

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Chrissy Piper

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Monday night, late dinner at Quality Meats, a steakhouse in midtown Manhattan.

SCOTT RAAB: One of the wonderful things about *Portlandia* — and I'm not just blowing smoke, although I can blow smoke, but I'm not — is that there is an expansive feeling to each segment. It's not reductive. It doesn't seem like sketch comedy.

FRED ARMISEN: That's nice of you.

SR: How scripted is it?

FA: It's mostly improvised. We shoot on location at all these houses in Portland, so it doesn't feel like it's at a studio. And Carrie [Brownstein, cocreator, cowriter, and costar] and I try to keep things positive. Not cynical, not ironic.

WAITRESS: What can I get for you, gentlemen?

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SR: Rib steak, medium rare.

WAITRESS: It's gonna be warm and red inside.

SR: The way I like to think of myself.

FA: I'm gonna do the salmon.

SR: You're in an interesting pocket right now. I don't mean you're on the cusp of something, because you've put in like decades of work at this point.

FA: I started comedy in like 1998.

SR: Then you haven't put in *decades* of work.

FA: But being in a band is part of it. That counts. Because it's still being in front of people.

SR: In terms of punk, how hard was your band, Trenchmouth?

FA: It was a cacophony of noise.

SR: Johnny Rotten/Sid Vicious kind of punk?

FA: It came from a generation of punk after that. We lived in Chicago, but the music we were inspired by was from D. C.

SR: Like Bad Brains?

FA: And Fugazi, Minor Threat.

SR: Is your fame manageable at this point?

FA: People are always nice, so I can't complain. My name used to be *SNL!* More and more, people call me by my name.

SR: I can't imagine having your divorce [from *Mad Men* actress Elisabeth Moss] play out in public.

FA: Very strange. But everyone goes through all kinds of relationship situations. I'm lucky that I get to be on two comedy shows. The moment that I start complaining that it's not going exactly — then I've lost.

SR: You're a mensch.

FA: I spent a lot of time lifting my drums into a van, playing to ten people night after night. I can't complain about anything now. That stuff was heavy.

SR: Are you gonna have to retire your Steve Jobs forever?

FA: I guess so.

SR: It's not worth one more sketch? iDead?

FA: I felt very sad about him dying. Steve Jobs was a real rock star to me. I looked forward to his products like people look forward to albums. I met him once. In '06? He had a sense of humor.

SR: He'd already been diagnosed.

FA: He looked healthy. I have a picture of it. [Shows the picture] That's him and me being him.

SR: Fred, that's beautiful.

FA: That smile on his face ... My impersonation came from being a fan.

SR: It's always seemed like more of a parody.

FA: I hear you. But I like it when people are driven. I love that in any field of work, in architecture or whatever. Like Lorne Michaels — he pays attention to every detail.

SR: It's actually a part of genius, I think. It's a skill. It's a talent. Would you describe yourself as driven that way?

FA: I see other cast members writing all day on Sunday. I wish I was one of those people who could write script after script and pages and pages. I can only aspire to do that.

SR: You know, your range is pretty amazing. You can really run the gamut, from the president of the U. S. to the president of Iran to ...

FA: Got my parents to thank for that. My father came from Germany. My mom came from Venezuela. My father's culturally German, but his father was

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Japanese. I was raised in New York and spent two years in Rio. My parents met at the University of Southern Mississippi, and they had me there, and then we moved to New York. I'm not very familiar with Mississippi.

SR: You were never aware of living in the Deep South?

FA: We were gone right away. Someday maybe I'll go back and see what it's like.

SR: You really wanna go back?

FA: I guess I would have by now.

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