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### REVIEW

## Portlandia - Season One (Blu-ray)

Music Video Distributors || Not Rated || December 6, 2011

Reviewed by Mitchell Hattaway

### How Does The Blu-ray Disc Stack Up?

**CONTENT** 6 (out of 10)

**THE VIDEO** 7 (out of 10)

**THE AUDIO** 7 (out of 10)

**THE EXTRAS** 4 (out of 10)

**OVERALL** 6 (out of 10)



### SYNOPSIS

Weird stuff goes down in the city of Portland, Oregon.

### CRITIQUE

Having its genesis in a series of web videos the duo created under the name Thuderant, the IFC sketch comedy *Portlandia* is the brainchild of *Saturday Night Live*'s Fred Armisen and former Sleater-Kinney singer-guitarist Carrie Brownstein. Written by Armisen, Brownstein, Allison Silverman, and Jonathan Krisel (who also directs), the show finds Armisen and Brownstein playing a variety of characters (and occasionally themselves), most of whom can't seem to move past the Generation X self-absorption that continues to permeate the city (or at least this show's version of the city).

The show's Portland is the sort of town where a cleaning agency sends Aimee Mann to your house (I wish) and the mayor (played here by Kyle MacLachlan, whose assistant is played by Portland's actual mayor) ditches his duties to moonlight as the bassist in a reggae band. So, yeah, it's that kind of show. If you have little or no interest in that kind of show, you'll definitely want to stay away, as one episode would likely be enough to drive you to the brink of suicide.

If you do find the premise and its possibilities intriguing, you're in for a modestly funny show that works when it sticks to skewering hipster nonsense and falls flat on its face when it becomes hipster nonsense. As has no doubt become obvious over the years, my tolerance for hipster nonsense is so low it can't even be measured, which is why I became annoyed and angry whenever a particular sketch was, to borrow a cliché, strange simply for the purpose of being strange.

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It was great to see Armisen and Brownstein (who is by far the better performer) as indie directors talking pretentiously about their work, which they can't seem to realize is just a zero-budget version of the sort of dopey flick Sarah Jessica Parker and Kathryn Heigel keep foisting on the world (they do this during a Q&A session moderated by Gus Van Sant; nice to know he can appreciate irony), but the same episode also has them playing hotel concierges who hand out old turntables and vintage vinyl to their guests (including one played by Shins guru James Mercer), and there's no point whatsoever to the sketch, which naturally goes on forever.

Alternately hitting and missing is a hallmark of sketch shows, even the best ones. *Portlandia* hits more than it misses, but the percentages are still pretty close (thanks in no small part to the fact the entire final episode, in which MacLachlan charges Brownstein and Armisen with starting a professional baseball team, is a miss). Each episode (this first season contains six, which run roughly 22 minutes each) has what could be called an A story, which is broken up by a number of B stories (the final episode is almost all A story, which is a big part of the why it fails so miserably).

The A stories tend to work better (and consequently seem shorter), and the shorter bits often come across as filler. My favorites from the longer bits include the Mann episode, a lengthy sequence in which Brownstein and Armisen go to ridiculous lengths to make sure the chicken they order in a restaurant led a good life before being slaughtered, and a sketch built around a couple of idiots who think anything can be turned into a piece of art via the simple application of a bird cut-out (a joke which extends to this set's packaging).

Even better are the continuing adventures of the owners of the Women and Women First Bookstore, the best of which involves a visit from guest star Aubrey Plaza, who comes in looking for textbooks for a college class (including *Vaginas: An Owner's Manual*) and is given the worst customer service imaginable (upon pointing to a book she needs, Plaza is scolded by Brownstein [sporting a wig that makes her look uncannily like Gina Gershon], who claims that pointing reminds her of a penis).

The show was renewed for a second season, which is scheduled to debut in early 2012. I don't know if the creative team will consist of the same four individuals, but I think the show could use some new blood. I understand the desire to keep the "vision" as pure as possible, but I do think that bringing in a couple more performers could do wonders for the show (would *The Kids in the Hall* been any good if there'd been five writers but only two performers?).

A mixture of too many writers and too many performers can kill a show (this particular genre's landscape is littered with the corpses of many a show to which this has happened), but having one or two more people to write for could open the show up to new possibilities and prevent it from becoming repetitive (which is a real danger here). British shows generally have a small writing staff and a well rounded pool of talent to write for, and the best American shows often have similar infrastructures (regardless of genre), so it's not like having a few more on-camera faces would upset the balance.

And it'd give Armisen a chance to work on a couple new facial expressions and vocalizations; the two he's currently capable got old a few years ago.

### THE VIDEO

The show is presented in its original **1.78:1** ratio; the six episodes that comprise Season One have been encoded with **AVC** at **1080p** onto a **25GB** disc. Taking the show's meager (practically nonexistent) budget into consideration, the image here is pretty good. It was obviously captured on mid-range digital video, but it's reasonably strong, especially in those scenes where abundant natural lighting was available. Some unavoidable anomalies (moiré, aliasing, artifacting) crop up on more than a few occasions, but I don't see any reason to complain too much.

### THE AUDIO

The sole audio option for each episode is a **Dolby Digital 2.0** Surround track. I can't imagine a lossless encode would have done much for the show's audio, which is about as standard (read: uninspired) as it can be. It serves its purpose perfectly well, though, and so does its presentation here. It's mostly dialogue, and you can always make out what's being said, so why carp? The rears don't get called upon that often, but they're surprisingly effective at times (such as when a character played by Armisen becomes increasingly dismayed that his hobbies and hangouts have been co-opted by a hipster doofus; his cries of anguish echo from the back half of the soundstage, adding some punch to the joke). No subtitle options are included.

### THE EXTRAS

**Every episode features a commentary by Fred Armisen, Carrie Brownstein, and Jonathan Krisel**, but I'm not sure why you'd want to listen to all six, as any one will do the job.

With one noted exception, the following are presented in high-def:

**Fred Armisen Speaks to Oregon Episcopal School Graduates** (12 minutes) is footage from a commencement address Armisen delivered at the school.

A **blooper reel** (5 minutes) offers many opportunities to watch the cast crack up in the middle of takes.

**Two extended scenes** (4 minutes) offer longer versions of a couple sketches.

**Seven deleted scenes** (16 minutes) offer looks at a few sketches that were cut altogether.

Also included are **two Thunderant videos** (12 minutes, SD). They're naturally not as technically polished or conceptually refined as the show, but they're not bad.

Closing things out is a brief **Season Two Preview** (1 minute).

A **DVD copy** is also included.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

*Portlandia* works more often than it doesn't (barely), but that could easily change.

## VERDICT: RENT IT



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