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## Culture Desk

### Notes on arts and entertainment from the staff of The New Yorker.

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December 27, 2011

### “Portlandia”: My Favorite Sketches

Posted by *Margaret Talbot*

If you haven't seen “Portlandia,” the delightfully trenchant sketch-comedy series starring Carrie Brownstein and Fred Armisen that I write about in this week's issue of the magazine, you might want to start with this clip from the show's first season, featuring two fretful, well-meaning foodies going very deep into the provenance of a restaurant's offerings:

For a lot of fans of the show, though, the signature sketches of the first season were either this one, "Put A Bird On It," about D.I.Y. crafters heavy-handedly wielding their whimsical motif:

Or this one, "Dream of the Nineties," a music-video-style salute to the show's version of Portland—a "city where young people go to retire":

My favorite of the recurring main characters from the series, all of whom are played by Brownstein and Armisen, are Toni and Candace, the passive-aggressive and sometimes aggressive-aggressive proprietors of Women and Women First, a feminist bookstore where few books are ever sold. This is a setup that works particularly well for guest stars, who bring a befuddled reality check into Toni and Candace's cocoon. The hapless interlopers in past sketches have included Steve Buscemi, Heather Graham, and here, the wondrously deadpan Aubrey Plaza:

The show's second season starts January 6th on IFC, and many of the same self-involved activists, locavores, and hipsters will be back. But there are new characters, too, like the "sanitation twins" in this cheerfully unhinged P.S.A. for recycling, and the lingeringly adolescent Doug and Claire, who go on a "Battlestar Galactica" binge.

Armisen and Brownstein's creative collaboration started with a project called Thunderant, a series of videos they made before "Portlandia," mostly for fun and because they enjoy each other's company so much. They first developed the feminist bookstore characters for Thunderant, and in this sketch, are joined by the singer St. Vincent ("Portlandia," too, often features guest appearances by indie musicians), who does an in-store concert. One of the Thunderant sketches I'm particularly fond of—as anybody who has ever adopted, or tried to adopt, a dog from a very caring shelter probably will be—is this one.

For a sense of what Carrie Brownstein is like in her other creative dimension—as an impassioned musician with riot grrrl roots—take a look at this recent performance with her band Wild Flag on "The Late Show with David Letterman." Say what you

will about how far women have come in rock music, it's still a rare and exciting thing to see four very loud, very skilled female musicians command the stage like Wild Flag does. And if you want a quick hit of Brownstein's previous band, Sleater-Kinney, watch this eerie, exhilarating video, directed by Miranda July, for the song "Get Up:"

## Keywords

- Carrie Brownstein;
- Fred Armisen;
- Portlandia

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At times very funny, if a little arch considering who created it. The "Did you read?" and bookstore couple sketches are great. The enraged bicycle rider is classic. To me the best sendup of these sorts of things will always be- with far less gesturing and effort, in general ( in other words hipsters are given just what they deserve) latfh.com (Look At This F\*cking Hipster.com). Priceless.

**Posted 1/1/2012, 6:21:07pm by sloor**

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Brilliance at it's best. Last season I never missed an episode--this season I intend the same. My favorite characters are the feminist bookstore owners, my favorite sketch with them was the time they had a new visiter for their journaling class. Completely priceless.

**Posted 12/31/2011, 5:51:12pm by mestvanko**

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