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STRANGE THINGS ARE HAPPENING

PORTLANDIA SEASON ONE DVD. VSC.



I have to admit that I'd never heard of **Portlandia** prior to this DVD arriving in the post, which is odd, because it seems precisely to sort of US comedy import that would be snapped up by one of Britain's more self-consciously cool broadcasters. And given how little I know about what's on TV these days, maybe it has been. But for me, this six episode series (see? Even the length is UK-friendly!) was virgin territory.

Sitting somewhere between a sitcom and a sketch show, **Portlandia** takes place in an alternative version of Portland, Oregon, where – as the opening scene of the opening episode says – ‘the dream of the Nineties is alive’... the dream of alternative lifestyles, lack of ambition and the Bush years never happened... a place where ‘young people go to retire’. The ensuing six episodes, starring and written by **SNL** performer Fred Armisen and ex-Sleater-Kinney vocalist / guitarist Carrie Brownstein, take some gentle, some pointed digs at hipster culture that could only come from people with inside knowledge of that scene. The fact that the show was apparently upset from some of said hipsters seems to prove that they've done a good job, and I imagine most of you – no matter where you are in the world – will recognise many of these stereotypes only too well. A couple of pretentious indie filmmakers seem especially on the ball...

There's the unhelpful, humourless owners of a feminist bookstore, the restaurant customers who demand to know *everything* about the chicken they are about to order (eventually visiting the farm it was raised on and getting sucked into a cult), the ultra-aggressive hipster cyclist appalled whenever anything he's into starts to get mainstream attention, the arty couple who ‘improve’ objects by ‘putting a bird on it’, the dumpster divers and more. Each episode has a central story that is interspersed with sketches – some individual, some with recurring characters (all played by Armisen and Brownstein). Chunks of dialogue seem improvised, giving it a spontaneous feel, and the jokes are subtle – sometimes not there at all, instead just drawing humour from the absurdity and the atmosphere.

There are guest appearances from various big names, some of whom I've actually heard of *and* recognise – Steve Buscemi does a great turn in the first episode, Aimee Mann and Sarah McLachlan turn up as themselves, forced into domestic work because of the downturn in the music industry, Heather Graham pops up to be sexy and Kyle MacLachlan has a regular role as the enthusiastic Mayor. Celebrity guests can sometimes feel like they've been crowbarred in (hello, **30 Rock**) but here – in this season at least – they don't seem out of place.

It doesn't *all* work – some sketches are too long, some simply not funny – but viewed as a whole (I watched all six episodes back to back) it's pretty impressive, often hilarious, frequently weird and generally very much within the slacker culture that it both celebrates and mocks.

This DVD also contains a couple of the **Thunderant** webisodes that this series grew from (similar humour but much more potty-mouthed), some extended scenes and deleted sketches (at least one of which really deserved to be in the full show) and other bits and pieces. An impressive bundle.

DAVID FLINT

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