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Laughing With You

When *Portlandia* debuted in the spring of 2011, it seemed like a longshot for breakout success. Fred Armisen, despite being a nine-year veteran of *Saturday Night Live* and countless TV and movie cameos, had never been the star of anything, always a brilliant member of an ensemble cast but never the face of a franchise. Add to him Carrie Brownstein, a truly legendary guitarist and vocalist, first for indie rock icons Sleater-Kinney and then for supergroup Wild Flag, who was nonetheless almost completely unproven as a comedic actor or writer. With hipster haven Portland as the show's backdrop, the subject matter would revolve around satirizing the mindset of somewhat privileged, somewhat pretentious urban adults—the kind who eat vegan, shop local, protest corporatism and sexism in all their forms, and aren't afraid to humorlessly demand that everyone else should, too. These same people, the ones being mocked, would also be the audience for the show. For *Portlandia* to succeed, it would require its audience to see itself lampooned week after week and, ultimately, to acknowledge its own eccentricities and absurdities. The audience would have to laugh at itself.

Words by **Matt Fink**

Photos by **Maarten de Boer**

Wardrobe by **Henna Koskinen**

Makeup by **Toby Fleischman**

Hair by **Nikki Providence**

Carrie Brownstein is wearing:
Pussybow blouse by Saunder. Faux leather skirt by
Peace + Love Missguided. Heels by Zara.

Fred Armisen is wearing:
Shirt and suit by Topman. Loafers by H by Hudson.

www.missguidedus.com / www.thesaunder.com
www.hudsonshoes.com / www.us.topman.com



“[Carrie’s] very factual, so it’s almost like she makes fun of facts...with other facts.” – Fred Armisen

Carrie Brownstein is wearing:
Jumpsuit by Topshop.
Cuff is vintage YSL.
Heels by Zara.

Fred Armisen is wearing:
Shirt and trousers by Topman.
Jacket and shoes Fred’s own.

www.us.topshop.com
www.zara.com

"The fact that *Portlandia* enters the conversation at all and has become a part of people's lives, that people want to dress up as our characters for Halloween, that's all very surreal and flattering and, of course, surprising," Brownstein says from her home in Portland. "I think the question [for] the first season was 'Will people understand this outside of Portland?' That question was answered and became a moot point soon after, because we realized that probably people outside of Portland got the show *better*, because they weren't trying to look for the verisimilitude—how similar to Portland is this?—they were just looking at themes and ideas and the mindset. Even internationally people get the show. It's definitely surprising, but everywhere I go there is a version of Portland, and what it aspires to be, in all corners of the world."

Now, after three seasons of critical raves, a Peabody Award, and an Emmy nomination, *Portlandia* enters its highly anticipated fourth season as arguably the best sketch comedy show on television. By any measure, the progression of the show has been swift, and (as Armisen and Brownstein are quick to point out) not without obvious parallels to the creative trajectory of a musician. The first season, Brownstein says, was typical of first albums—a little scattered and unfocused but featuring standout moments that would grab people's attention. In many ways, the very first sketch on the show—a music video called "Dream of the '90s" that presented Portland as a beacon of admirably naïve idealism—has set the tone for everything that has followed. That was the season of the farm sketch, introducing well-meaning yuppies Peter and Nance, who were so concerned that the chicken they were ordering in a restaurant was appropriately raised in a fully organic setting that they drove to the farm to inspect it themselves. It was also the season of the "Put a Bird on It" sketch, the show's first viral moment, a delightfully odd introduction to Bryce and Lisa and their simple campaign to beautify the world by emblazoning everyday items with birds. Two million YouTube hits later, they had their equivalent to a hit single.

Season two, like a second album, consolidated the gains of season one, sharpening the sketches and deepening the character development, and the ratings jumped accordingly. And just like a third album is often used as an opportunity to experiment and reinvent around previous themes, season three was *Portlandia's* experimental moment, entangling their now sprawling cast of characters in larger story arcs and having multiple sketches revolve around the same central plotline. In the process, *Portlandia* moved from being a cult hit to IFC's most-watched show, routinely pulling in over a million viewers per episode. At a glance, it doesn't seem like a show that would find much more than a niche audience—too many obscure references to indie rock bands and esoteric subcultures—but it turns out that not only do hipsters enjoy laughing at themselves, so do people that probably don't even know what a hipster is.

"I used to think [the show] was for music fans and art people, but at the risk of sounding braggish about it, it has been all kinds of people," Armisen says. "For me, I grew up in New York, so when a typical New York guy says something to me, it almost sounds unreal. Like a New York guy [saying], 'Hey! I like your show, Poort-land-eeya,'—like someone that would be at a Mets game. I grew up around these people. I feel great. I feel very lucky. More than feeling weird, I feel like that is really, really nice."

This point seems to be particularly satisfying for both Armisen and Brownstein, as each of them report multiple instances of being approached by grandparents and children, construction workers and gutter punks, who love the show for different reasons. ("That did not happen to me in music," Brownstein says.) Continuing the music metaphors, Brownstein compares season four to *Sandinista!*—The Clash's famously sprawling fourth album that functioned as both a culmination of everything that came before and an expression of everything they wanted to do. In that same way, the fourth season of *Portlandia* has the brilliant one-off sketches from season one, yet makes time to include the deep character development and storytelling that defined season three. As before, there are guest stars galore—Steve Buscemi as a down-on-his-luck celery salesman, Jeff Goldblum as the owner of a store specializing in pull-out king sofas, and Dead Kennedy's Jello Biafra as himself, awaking from 28 years in a coma to find the world overrun by yuppies. But just as fourth albums present unique challenges for musicians, fourth seasons can be tricky for a television show.

In particular, how do you move forward and challenge yourself, as well as your audience, without drifting too far away from what made you successful in the first place? How do you take very timely themes—incurring wrath for taking too long to comment on a Facebook birth announcement or subletting an apartment five ways to save money—and not create a

show that could be dated in a decade? Most essentially, when so much of your humor comes from satirizing your own audience, how do you continue to convince them that you're laughing with them and not at them?

Out of the Woods

Though recent years have seen a number of indie rockers dabble in comedy, none, aside from Reggie Watts (who was never particularly well-known as a musician in the first place), has made the transition quite so smoothly as Carrie Brownstein. In fact, there just isn't a precedent for such an accomplished musician having this kind of success in comedy. Imagine if Louis CK, after 15 years of accolades as a comedian, suddenly joined a band and, against all odds, ended up creating some of the greatest music of his era, too. That's what we're talking about with Brownstein, going from one of the most acclaimed rock bands of her generation to writing and starring in what is quickly becoming one of her generation's most-loved sketch comedy shows. That just isn't done.

"Well, I still don't know if I'm taken seriously as a comedian," she says. "But certainly I felt a sense of fraudulence and like an imposter the first season. I think everyone in some ways feels like that a little bit, but I felt like I snuck in the side door, whereas you had all these people coming up through the usual channels. And those channels are proven, whether it's Groundlings or UCB [Upright Citizens Brigade] or Second City. Those places are chock-full of talent and really exciting performers and writers and ideas. But I think because Fred and I were already friends and already working together, there was an understanding with the audience that this was an extension of that and potentially the show wouldn't have worked if someone at a network had put together two actors or performers and said, 'Okay, here's this concept. It's about the mindset of people trying to do good in the city....' Fortunately for us, the dynamic and chemistry was in place and benefitted the show, and me feeling like an imposter, that dissipated because what I brought to the show worked. Now I don't really think about it as much."

Though Brownstein and Armisen had circled around each other for years on the indie rock circuit when Armisen was the drummer for '90s hardcore band Trenchmouth, they didn't meet until years later in 2003 (or 2004, accounts vary), when Armisen invited Sleater-Kinney to an *SNL* after party. They immediately hit it off, with Armisen soon realizing that Brownstein's quick wit and considerable intellect would make her doubly dangerous as a comedy writer. By July of 2006, a video appeared on their ThunderAnt website, the first of a series of Armisen and Brownstein's comedy sketches that are essentially *Portlandia* in embryonic form. This also marked the beginning of their extensive use of indie rockers in their sketches, starting with St. Vincent's Annie Clark—who will guest on *Portlandia* for the second time in season four and whose 2010 "Laughing with a Mouth of Blood" video featured Armisen and Brownstein—and continuing with Joanna Newsom, Fleet Foxes' Robin Pecknold, The Smiths' Johnny Marr, Modest Mouse's Isaac Brock, The Shins' James Mercer, and Dinosaur Jr.'s J Mascis, among other luminaries to make guest appearances on the show.

With no particular expectations, the duo had Armisen's manager approach Andrew Singer at Broadway Video—Lorne Michaels' production company—to discuss the prospect of turning their disparate, underdeveloped sketches into a TV show. Paired with director Jonathan Krisel, a veteran of *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* and several *Funny or Die* and *SNL* digital shorts, they found a kindred spirit to help them navigate through the process of translating their vision into 30-minute episodes. Brownstein, it turned out, brought something different to the process of comedy writing simply because she hadn't been doing it for the past 10 years.

"Carrie is a brilliant writer," Armisen says flatly. "The way she thinks, her scope of how she sees the world is just tremendous. She's so conceptual. Even her use of language doesn't come from comedy school. There's nothing wrong with comedy school. It's great, and it works in some places. But she comes from another place. She's very factual, so it's almost like she makes fun of facts...with other facts. There's this thing that she does, she doesn't approach it like 'This is a joke.' It's more like 'Here are two conflicting things that happen in life—that kind of thing,' he says, drifting off, as if in a daydream. "Ahh, she's fantastic..."

Though they've always denied any rumors of a romantic relationship (including during a particularly awkward grilling from David Letterman when



Carrie Brownstein is wearing:
Short Sleeve Houndstooth print shirt by
Emerson by Jackie Fraser-Swan.
Cut out dress by Zara.

www.emersonbyjfs.com

the two were guests on *Late Night*), one gets the sense that Armisen and Brownstein have become something approaching platonic soul mates. As Armisen tells it, they didn't even have to get to know each other; they already had all of the same music, film, and comedy references in common. More than that, they had both spent their formative years living immersed in a DIY lifestyle, touring around the country, sleeping on friends' floors, and formulating a worldview through the lens of the culture that would end up providing much of their material.

"I think so much about how being young and being in an esoteric punk rock scene informed how Fred and I think of in-group, out-group dynamics," Brownstein explains. "You have these communities and these scenes that were supposed to be this catchall for freaks and musicians and weirdoes and whoever—kind of a come-one-come-all counterculture. But the reality is that there's a lot of very proscriptive rules. Something that professes to be very inclusive becomes very exclusive, and there was

always a group of people that felt very alienated by these very codified rules of dress or engagement with punk or indie. It can be very alienating. So I think that Fred and I are both people who, even though we were desperate to feel a sense of belonging and inclusivity, were ones to notice the absurdity of all of this, like, 'Here we are professing to go against the grain, but we've really just reconstituted our own rules that can be just as strident as the ones we're rebelling against.' We were noticing those hypocrisies and absurdities, even though we were loving it at the same time."

For lack of a better word, "love" is probably the one essential element that animates Armisen and Brownstein's portrayals of their charmingly clumsy characters. In the wrong hands, these same character sketches would almost certainly be one-note caricatures to be held up only for ridicule, an indictment of self-important people and their privileged lifestyles. But despite the pointed social critique underlying most of their sketches, they seem careful to make sure that

the fundamental decency inside each character shines through. If Armisen and Brownstein feel comfortable laughing at others, it's probably because they're also laughing at themselves at the same time, having created their characters by amplifying aspects of their own personalities and those of their friends. Among those recurring characters is punk couple Spyke and Iris, perennially agitated activists Dave and Kath, and even fictionalized (and far goofier) versions of themselves, BFFs that live together in Portland, complete with matching twin beds, Bert and Ernie-style. But no characters are more representative of Armisen and Brownstein's formative experiences than the combative owners of Women and Women First, a feminist bookstore that operates on the principle that the customer is always wrong.

"The feminist bookstore owners to me are like a lot of the punk rockers and indie rock snobs that I knew growing up, where it's like 'Do you want us in your store or not?'" Brownstein says. "Do you want us at your show or do you

not want us at your show?’ And the meaner they are to you, the more you’re like, ‘Yeah! I love you!’ I’m not separating myself from that snobbery, but there was definitely a lot of that. So much of music sometimes was like you couldn’t even tell if the band wanted an audience. So, yeah, our characters are either the ones making the rules, the ones trying to follow the rules, or the ones that have given up on the rules and are just going to break them because they are too frustrating. I think you could boil a lot of our characters down to those three situations.”

An Impression of Genius

Fred Armisen doesn’t say “hello” when he answers the phone. Seeing that I’m calling from Akron, Ohio, he greets me by repeating the name of the town as a question, then pauses for an uncomfortably long five seconds. “Home of Devo,” I say, and that’s all the prodding Armisen needs. The first 10 minutes of our conversation will be spent talking about the legendary Akron natives—about how their drummer was one of the first to experiment with electronic drums, how they looked and sounded completely different from other bands in their era, how they had a uniquely odd sense of humor—and it’s obvious that Armisen knows his stuff. But what seems like a tangent at first really is representative of a much larger theme in Armisen’s worldview, one that repeats throughout our 75-minute chat: he admires iconoclasts and innovators. And when he thinks about the future of *Portlandia*—about how the show is going to remain vibrant and fresh at a point when most shows start recycling themes and running out of ideas—these are the sorts of artists whose examples he ponders. “I love doing [*Portlandia*], but I want it to really have its own voice, so much so that it becomes something unexpected,” he says. “I want the tone of it to change. I want the idea of what a sketch is—I want that to change.”

Today, Armisen is buzzing over the new Beyoncé album that was dropped on the American public with no high-profile media blitz, no publicity tours, no hype—something that he sees as an example of the kind of daring he’d like to bring to *Portlandia*. He’s not sure what the equivalent for his show would be, but he has obviously spent considerable time considering just how *Portlandia* is going to surprise viewers, especially as they grow more accustomed to the off-beat universe of the show. He has his inspirations—Bowie, Picasso, Warhol, *SNL*—all examples of how to stay alive through constant reinvention. Knowing he appeared in The Flaming Lips’ film, *Christmas on Mars*, I mention to him something lead Lip Wayne Coyne told me once, about how the band has stayed vibrant for 30 years largely because they’re still not sure what kind of band they are, so, as a result, they’re free to reimagine themselves however they want.

“That is so brilliant!” Armisen replies, his voice rising excitedly. “To compare it to comedy, the direct comparison is when a performer or comedian says, ‘I’m a genius, and I’m brilliant. Everything I do is going to be important and is going to define TV or standup comedy.’ It’s exactly those moments when they go off the tracks. What [Coyne] said is exactly right, and

comedians and performers suffer exactly the same thing. I think it takes humility and you have to embrace the question mark. You have to embrace that you don’t know what’s next. You have to reinvent yourself, like David Bowie did. He moved to Berlin to make music. All of these things—I think you have to make things uncomfortable for yourself.”

Luckily for Armisen, in Brownstein he has a writing partner that keeps him just a little off-balance. He’s a natural optimist, not to mention one of the nicest people in show business that you’ll ever come across, and his gift for taking everyday scenarios and stretching them to their most farcical conclusions is perfectly balanced

“[Fred] will veer so far off from the story or the dialog, and it’s like a top spinning. You can see it gathering momentum and it becomes very dazzling and strange.”

– Carrie Brownstein

by Brownstein’s more caustic, cerebral, and focused sense of humor. Put them together, and you have a keenly observational, bizarrely surreal representation of modern life, one that hasn’t been articulated in quite the same way by any other comedy show. Like many of the great musician duos—John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Keith Richards and Mick Jagger, Joe Strummer and Mick Jones—the brilliance of *Portlandia* lies in the fact that Armisen and Brownstein are often pulling in different, yet entirely complimentary, directions.

“There’s definitely a lot of overlap and there are ways that we diverge,” Brownstein explains. “I think that Fred on his own is much more of an absurdist than I am, and I tend to be more observational in my humor. I think when those two things combine those are some of our best sketches. He loves a tangent, and he’s brilliant at making the tangent become the center. He will veer so far off from the story or the dialog, and it’s like a top spinning. You can see it gathering momentum and it becomes very dazzling and strange. And I tend to stick with the center and try to bore into that, like, ‘How can we take what we have and keep digging?’ And I think Fred thinks, ‘How can we take what we have and veer off from that in a way that’s very surprising and chaotic?’ I think that tension is something that

we’ve learned how to work with.”

As conflict is the heart of all good drama, comedic or otherwise, this sense of tension serves *Portlandia* well. But Armisen says he doesn’t spend much time thinking about why their dynamic works. Even now, after all of the success the show has had, he says he still isn’t sure why it connects with people as it does, and he’s content not to know why sketches worked in the past. He’s far more interested in how they are going to work in the future.

Where Young People Go to Retire (and Shows Go to Stay Young)

“A grand mystery”—that’s how Armisen describes that tendency for most creative endeavors, no matter the medium, to slowly run out of momentum the longer they’ve been in motion. He’s thought a lot about this question, he admits, and he has come to no clear conclusions. He isn’t even certain that his premise is correct. But, like most musical acts, even the great sketch comedy shows don’t tend to last very long. With the obvious exception of *Saturday Night Live*, which Armisen officially left in the summer of 2013, the great ones tend to burn brightly and then call it a day. *The Mighty Boosh* lasted three seasons. *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* lasted four. *The Kids in the Hall* and *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* each made it to the five-season mark. And while he admits he dreams of doing something with *Portlandia* that has never been done in the sketch comedy medium, fundamentally changing the way that audiences experience the show, Armisen seems to have reached at least one of his goals.

“I wanted to be part of a scene that started somewhere with *Tim and Eric*,” he says. “I wanted to be a part of the arena with *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls* and *Louie* and *Veep*—all that. I wanted to be in it. I wanted to be a part of this thing. Just like the late ‘70s when there was The Police and The Clash and all these other bands, but it was part of one record collection,” he says, trailing off. “I know it can’t go on forever, but I love it. A lot.”

For Brownstein, the goals appear clearer: she wants the show to experiment more with form, to go deeper into the lives and backstories of their characters, perhaps even to walk the line between comedy and existential drama, similar to what Louis CK has done with *Louie*. As they’ve already signed on for a fifth season and have no intentions of stopping, the question remains: how will *Portlandia* find ways to continually reinvent itself? Won’t they eventually run out of new ways to explore the sillier side of Portland? How much absurdity can one city hold?

“When people ask ‘Are you going to run out of topics?’ that always seems strange, because we’re not just trying to be topical,” Brownstein says, before pausing in thought. “I mean, there are *certain* things here that I think we just can’t do. You’ll read in the paper that there’s a professional cuddler here, or I see this delivery company called Soup Cycle where people bike around and deliver hot soup. It’s funny and strange, but what would we do with that?” she laughs. “It’s already a story.”



Fred **ARMISEN** and Carrie **BROWNSTEIN** vs. Stephen **MALKMUS**

One More Mountain

Intro and Moderation by **Matt Fink**

Portland is the place where young people go to retire—that’s arguably the most widely quoted line from season one of *Portlandia*. But if that’s true, Carrie Brownstein and Stephen Malkmus must be the old-soul exceptions, as both relocated there when they were in their prime early retirement years and have continued working at more or less the same prolific pace. Now 47, Malkmus has returned to Portland from a two-year sojourn in Berlin with a new album, *Wig Out at Jagbags*, a smartly literate collection of effortless rockers that are looser and more carefree—not to mention more fun—than just about anything in his post-Pavement oeuvre. But even if he’s embracing middle age, don’t mistake the album’s reflective tone for complacency.

His shrugging “golden boy of indie rock” image may be fading, but the older, wiser Malkmus is no closer to collecting his Portland pension. Joined by *Portlandia*’s Brownstein and Fred Armisen, the trio discusses touring, mountaineering disasters, and why it’s probably best to avoid your own press.

Stephen Malkmus: Hello. Where are you guys? Are you in Portland?

Carrie Brownstein: No. We’re both in L.A.

Stephen: So you’re just hanging out there? Do you live there, Carrie?

Carrie: No! I live like a quarter of a mile from you [in Portland]!

Stephen: Yeah, I know. But it doesn’t seem like you really *live* there. You are getting too famous. Tell the truth! [Laughs]

Carrie: I’m not! I flew down for some meetings, like *Portlandia* stuff.

Stephen: Well, you know, after my [last] album [2011’s *Mirror Traffic*], I

was getting so famous I just had to go to Berlin. I couldn’t take it anymore, the small town.

Carrie: It’s nice that you absconded to Berlin. I like the expatriate narrative. I think that’s a good artistic narrative to have, to have the word “expatriate” on your resume.

Stephen: It definitely works unless the music doesn’t sound any different from what you did before. Then you’re kind of forced to say that it has just influenced your mindset or is some sort of really loose thing. Our music doesn’t sound much different even though I went to Berlin. It’s almost kind of sad sometimes. It’s like you go there, and it’s just the same. I’m like, “I’m an American, man. We don’t change. We bring the America there. We don’t get you into us. We infect you.”

Carrie: Yeah, cultural imperialism.

Fred Armisen: Where are you now?

Stephen: Matador office with Nils [Bernstein, Matador publicist].

Carrie: Oh. You’re in New York?

Stephen: Yeah, we’re all here. We stayed here after that [*Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*] show, and we’re doing

an in-store, for instance, at Other Music. And we saw Fred’s genius drummer video that’s coming out, where he looks like a drum teacher with a foreign accent of an indeterminate origin. It’s really funny.

Fred: Thank you! Jens Hannemann...

Stephen: It probably just comes out of you. You don’t even have to try.

Fred: I saw this DVD once of a drummer from Germany named Marco Minnemann, who did the same thing. He was just talking about how he drums and there were close-ups of his feet and hands, so it’s based on that.

Stephen: Well, it’s a role you were meant to play, since you were already a drummer. I don’t know if that’s praise.

Fred: I’ll take it either way.

Stephen: It definitely is. It’s super funny. When it that coming out officially? It’s on Drag City, right?

Fred: Yeah, it’s out already, a little while ago. [*Fred Armisen Presents Complicated Drumming Technique: Jens Hannemann* was released in 2007—Ed.]

Stephen: Oh, it is? I didn’t know that. Sorry.

Carrie: I was confused. I thought maybe you had another one coming out.

Fred: Yeah, I shot some more for a second one, but that’s not done yet.

Stephen: Maybe this was some of that. Or maybe this was the classic. I never saw it before, but it was super funny. Are you guys filming more *Portlandia* for this season in Portland?

Fred: We just wrapped a couple months ago, so now it’s coming out at the end of February and now we’re just starting to do some of the promotional stuff for it.

Stephen: Are you going to go on tour again?

Carrie: No. I don’t think so. We’ve talked about it, but we’d have to come up with a real show. I think the first tour we did, it was okay that it was clumsy and charming and just an extension of Fred and I, like an in-person hangout with the fans and creating some kind of moment.

Stephen: Yeah, the amount of energy you’d have to come up with for a better concept, maybe you don’t want to spend it on an ephemeral tour. I can see that. Did you guys play in Florida last time?

Carrie: We didn’t. Are you playing in Florida on your tour?

Stephen: No. [Laughs] I have, as you have. I played everywhere but Miami for some reason, which is the place everyone likes these days. Miami is having a renaissance, it seems.

Fred: Have either of you ever played in Alaska?

Carrie: No.

Stephen: No. There was a little trend for going there. The Hawaii and the Alaska shows, I would hear about

them in hushed tones backstage but we never did them. I'd like to go to Alaska. I'm into misery places, like hiking tragedies and snow disasters. *Into the Wild* and that kind of stuff. I'm really into that, so I'd really like it there, I think.

Carrie: Did you read that book, the Cheryl Strayed book, *Wild*? Is that what it's called? Where she just hikes the Pacific Trail by herself...

Stephen: No, but I will read it. And I'll like it.

Carrie: What is that movie? It's a true story. It's about two guys that go climbing, and they fall and the guy is like, "Just let me go"? Did you ever see that movie? That's another really good adventure film.

Fred: *Into Thin Air*?

Stephen: That's the one about Everest, I believe. It's Krakauer, and Krakauer is an underrated genius. I read a lot of these mountaineering disaster stories, and his is like Dostoyevsky compared to the other ones that I read. So I really have to give him his props. He doesn't need them from me. He's probably quite well off as far as writers go and critically lauded.

Carrie: Maybe some of the readers of *Under the Radar* will not have read Jon Krakauer.

Stephen: That's true. He's great.

Fred: Every little bit counts.

Stephen: Yeah. If we can make some kind of triangular connection between him and us it can be good for us, too, right? The Krakauer readers get into *Portlandia* and The Jicks, not to mention your drummer video...

Carrie: And anything else we want to promote.

Fred: "I started listening to The Jicks and watching *Portlandia* up on a mountain, way high above everything..."

Stephen: [Laughs] Yeah, that can happen now. People often die with their satellite phones on up there. That's one of the new things, like, "Honey, I made it. It's so beautiful. I can see so far." And then they freeze to death.

Carrie: They die?

Fred: Yeah. They freeze to death by falling asleep. They just take a rest and they fall asleep.

Stephen: Yeah. Your brain gets a little confused up there, and you decide, "I can push it." And nighttime comes and there's no chance, and this is regardless of accidents, which can happen. You have to bivouac, it's called. And then bivouacking is digging a little hole in the snow that becomes your grave, unfortunately.

Fred: Oh, my God.

Stephen: Yeah, it's quite a folly, but people have these weird impulses to do it. Often fame or wanting attention leads people up there.

Fred: Or wanting a story to tell your family when you get down.

Stephen: Yeah. And a lot of people with families go, too. It never ceases

to amaze me. I probably wouldn't even go skydiving because I have kids. But those people do that. I *will* go on tour. That's my one risk. You've got to put food on the table.

Carrie: How high are the risks of touring in the risk category of life?

Fred: Well, there's driving. Being in an automobile or van is probably the most dangerous part.

Stephen: Exactly. That's risky. The countries that you visit—we went to Brazil. You could say that's risky. There are a lot of small commuter flights, and the electricity is not guaranteed to be grounded there. And there could be, conceivably, rabid fans there, because there hasn't been as much rock and roll, so virtual rabies could infect you. So that's risky. That's a high-risk tour, as far as I'm concerned. But as you're traveling around America and Europe, it's not too dangerous, right?

Carrie: No. I think we're good. It's probably no more dangerous than someone working, driving around the same city over and over again.

Stephen: Yeah. Flower delivery. It's more dangerous if you think it is. If you're afraid of flying, it truly is more dangerous.

Carrie: Tour used to stress me out a lot, because I was afraid of flying, and I would think that I was likely going to die on tour. I would look at an Australian tour and think, "Okay. There are 11 flights between me leaving and coming home. For sure, one of those will not make it." But that's totally irrational.

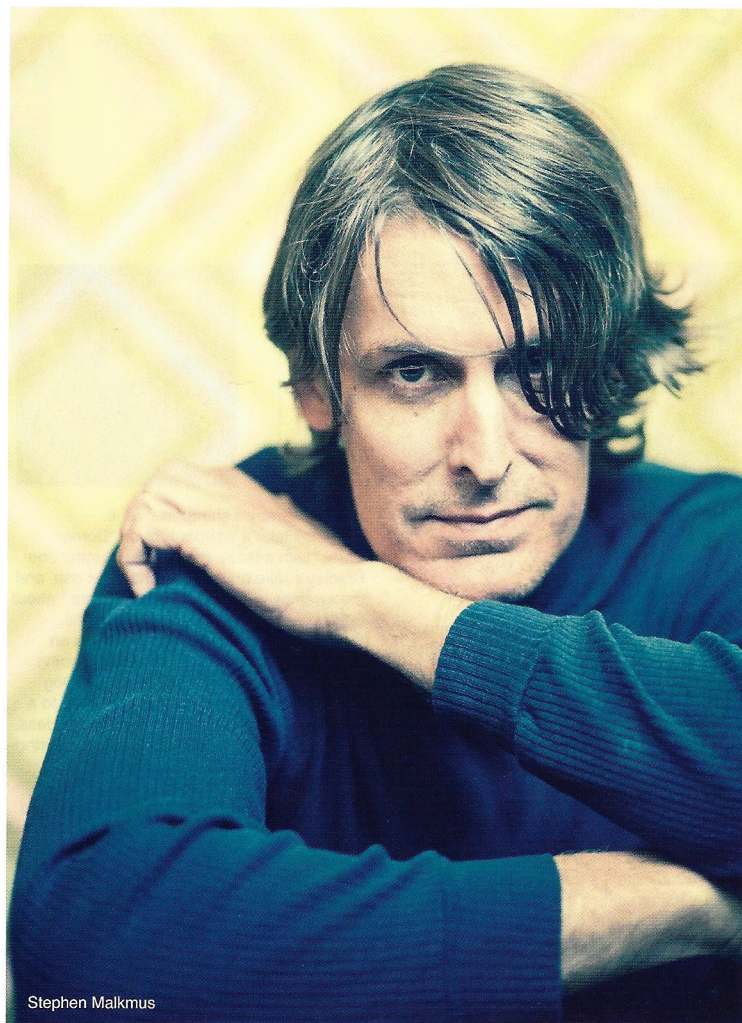
Stephen: But you were getting tired of touring in Sleater-Kinney. Or something was happening, according to Janet [Weiss, former drummer for The Jicks and Sleater-Kinney]. You were just burned out on it, I guess. Right?

Carrie: Yeah, I think that tour became the container that I put all my stress into and all my anxiety. So it seemed to embody it. Also, my body was rejecting it. I would go on tour and just get sick. I think a lot of people burn out on tour. It seems like you don't, really.

Stephen: Well...yeah. I do, but I like it conceptually, because I don't do much else in my regular life. I mean, I do stuff, but nothing outwardly productive or outwardly connecting. So it's my connection to the world. I make the best of it, I guess. I don't know how it got to that, but I never found another way.

Fred: How do you do it? Do you treat yourself well? Like by driving a nice vehicle?

Stephen: Yeah. I go to nice restaurants. I look at the Internet in a really self-loving way. [Laughs] I didn't mean that in a sexual way, like masturbation or something, but I just sit there and look at sports. That's what you do, really—look at the Internet. Watch movies. It's almost like I can't remember what I did [on the last tour], and it's only been two years. Maybe



Stephen Malkmus

I can reinvent myself this tour. As you have to reinvent yourself on your show, so they say.

Fred: Do you have a lot of people with you?

Stephen: No. We just have a tour manager and a sound man. Maybe T-shirts. Not counting groupies, which come and go. And assorted other hangers-on. The drug guy—Spanish Tony.

Fred: Thugs.

Stephen: Yeah, thugs. [Laughs] And our posse—I don't really consider them part of it, either, because they have to make their own way.

Fred: It's protection. Just think of them as protection.

Stephen: Maybe we should wrap this up, because I have to go to Other Music for an in-store, and you guys have other stuff to do, too.

Carrie: Yeah. I'm going to meet Miranda July, who you both know.

Stephen: Well, cool.

Carrie: Good luck at your in-store. I really love your album, by the way.

Stephen: Well, that's nice of you to say. I think it's good. It's fun. It's too wordy, probably, but other than that, I like it. But that's also when you read reviews, and that's all they talk about is words.

Carrie: But you're an artist where

people focus a lot on your words. That's the thing. They think, "Oh, a Malkmus record. What is he singing about?" Other people, they focus on something else. Like what the person's new outfit is.

Stephen: It's interesting, because when you're in a band, you don't really talk about the words. Whatever words that Corin [Tucker, former Sleater-Kinney vocalist and guitarist] was singing or you were singing—I don't know if that's what it was like for you—but you just did it, and it was like, "Okay. Those are the words." You talk more about the groove or the overall sound. And you make the mistake of reading the reviews, and that's all that they're really talking about. It's kind of funny. I know why, but it doesn't mean that it doesn't fuck you up.

Carrie: Yeah, I try not to read anything about what I'm doing. What about you, Fred?

Fred: I've been diligent about that, not reading anything about what I'm doing.

Stephen: Wow. You guys are good. I have to do it. Not obsessively, but I like to see it come in. I bend until it hurts and then I stop. [Laughs]

Carrie: That's a good metaphor for life.