
Carrie Brownstein

JANUARY 15, 2018

SUMMARY

Born in Seattle and raised in Redmond, Carrie Brownstein was a legendary Washingtonian long before she put *Portlandia* on the map. She cemented her status while she was still a student at Evergreen State College, studying sociolinguistics by day and starting the seminal riot grrrl band Sleater-Kinney with classmate Corin Tucker by night. Sleater-Kinney released seven albums before going on hiatus in 2006, at which point Carrie turned her attention to writing and acting. She co-created the Emmy Award-winning comedy show *Portlandia* with Fred Armisen, and in 2015, she published her acclaimed memoir *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*. She has also appeared in the Amazon show *Transparent* and the movies *Carol* and *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot*. Carrie is an Emmy-nominated TV director and is developing her own show.

Jeff Schwager: Hello.

Tori: Hi, is this Jeff?

Jeff Schwager: It is.

Tori: Hi, this is Tori from ID.

Jeff Schwager: Hi, Tori. How are you?

Tori: Good. How are you?

Jeff Schwager: Good, thanks.

Tori: Good. I have Carrie for you. If you are ready.

Jeff Schwager: I am ready.

Tori: Okay. Perfect. And she has half an hour for this. Does that work?

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. That's fine.

Tori: Okay, great. Let me put you on with her.

Jeff Schwager: Okay.

Tori: Carrie, you're on with Jeff.

Jeff Schwager: Hi, Carrie.

Carrie Brownstein: Hi. How are you?

Jeff Schwager: I'm good. How are you?

Carrie Brownstein: Good. Thank you.

Jeff Schwager: Good. Uh, first, let me say congratulations on being chosen, uh, for this exhibit. Um, you're going to be honored alongside of a lot of really fantastic women, um, most of whom you would not have heard of because they work in fields like law and medicine. And, uh, the librarian, Nancy Pearl, is one of them, um, who you might have heard of, um.

Carrie Brownstein: That's amazing. Yes. All the.

Jeff Schwager: Yes.

Carrie Brownstein: Important. Worthy fields.

Jeff Schwager: Yes, but you're probably the most famous person. Um, we are including in this. So, um, do you have any questions about the exhibit before I start asking you questions?

Carrie Brownstein: Why does it, um, go up?

Jeff Schwager: Um, it will go up in the fall. And we're currently negotiating with a few different venues as to where it might be. We've had exhibits in the past at MOHAI, the Museum of History and Industry, and some other local spaces. Um, and it will also be on the website for the historical society. Um, so, so the, uh, the full interview or the edited version of the full interview will be on the website, and then excerpts and images will be at the public exhibit.

Carrie Brownstein: Great. Okay, wonderful.

Jeff Schwager: Cool. Um, so the exhibit is called Agents of Change. Um, I guess I'll start out by asking if you got into music with the idea of changing things, and if so, what you wanted to see changed.

Carrie Brownstein: Um hmm. Well, I think, as with a lot of people, my entrance and foray into music was motivated by wanting to change myself. I think personal transformation is via art, and creativity is often the initial goal, especially when you're young. And music, I think, is such an immediate avenue for escape or exploration. So I think my initial goal was one of. You know, just being able to, I think, figure out who I was and who I wanted to be. And but I think, as you know, especially with a medium like music which and playing in a band and being part of a music community, you quickly realize that it's not an individual experience, that it's a collective experience. And once you're looking at things. Collectivism or community, then I think your goals for wanting to change things start to exist outside of your own, you know, self. And then I think, you know, it became about creating. I think at first just space for other young women or people who felt marginalized to see themselves and hear themselves reflected in our songs, and to be part of a centering of narratives that had theretofore been sidelined. So, yeah, I think it was about, I think the change that I wanted to create was about centering marginalized stories and creating. An aspirational environment that I may not have had. Um, and also to lend validation to anger and dissatisfaction. And, you know, that anger could be a productive. Sort of methodology, that it wasn't necessarily, um, anathema to progress, that it was, you know, sometimes a necessary vernacular.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm.

Carrie Brownstein: Um, so yeah, I think those were some of the goals.

Jeff Schwager: Cool. Um, you said, uh, offering other people, um, a role model that wasn't the word you used, but, um, that you didn't have, um, as you were starting out. Um, but I'm curious if there were, uh, agents of change, as we're calling them, that you did admire, uh, as you started out and, um, in the arts, but but also in the world at large.

Carrie Brownstein: Um hmm. Well, I think. One avenue that I turned to a lot for inspiration and edification. Then and now was books and authors and thinkers, and whether it was James Baldwin or Joan Didion, Belle Hooks, Patti Smith, you know, these people that were, you know, writing in ways that was emotional but intellectual, that didn't make such a distinction between the personal and the political that saw art as a weapon. Those things were very interesting to me. Um, and so, yeah, I think I did a, did a lot of, I guess, reading, um, and then also I think through absurdism, you know, I, I loved things like Kids in the Hall or Monty Python or, you know, people that were making sense of the world through a different kind of dissection. You know, it was it was less of an academic or intellectual exploration. Um, even though I think it was highly cerebral, but it the way it manifested itself was, was via humor and, and silliness. So I think that started to form sort of the two polar, um, like ends of how I look at things.

One is through this kind of seriousness and rigor, and then the other side is through levity. And, uh, I think some combination therein is what I usually like to land upon. Time.

Jeff Schwager: Mm. That's interesting. You say a combination, but it like to me, from the outside, it seems like your work goes down two very separate paths that, uh, there's the, uh, Sleater-Kinney is, you know, does seem fueled by anger, whereas your, um, your humor in Portlandia, obviously I can I can totally see the influence of things like kids in the Hall and Monty Python. Um, so that's that's really interesting. Um, and when I was reading your memoir, I was very much reminded of in thinking of Patti Smith, who of course, had the has written several memoirs lately. So interesting. Um, did you have any specific, um, hands on sort of mentors as you were? Developing your talents both in music and in, um, television? I guess I'll just use as a broad term to describe what you're doing with Portlandia. I mean, you talk in your in your book about, um, uh, your band mate. I've never known it. Or. Corinne.

Carrie Brownstein: Corinne.

Jeff Schwager: Corinne. Yeah. As a as a something of a mentor when you first met her?

Carrie Brownstein: Um, yeah. And certainly the music community in Olympia and the and the other music scenes that were in conversation with Olympia provided a lot of role models who I had access to in an epistolary way or. Became my bandmate. She's still one of my best friends. And I think she had this earnestness to her and a conviction that I found very inspiring. Uh, she had a fearlessness that I had yet to really be able to embrace. There was Kathleen Hanna and Tobi Vail, who were both in Bikini Kill, who had Kathleen both very sophisticated thinkers. Kathleen always had a very. Sharp sense of humor and wit in her work, which I found very admiring. And for how incendiary her lyrics were, she often coupled that with with a wit that I thought was really interesting. And then, you know, Tobi was mostly writing fanzines at the time. She was the drummer in Bikini Kill, but she was almost in continual dialogue with with culture and wrote what I would consider a series of manifestos. And I thought that that approach uh, was was really interesting to me, you know, just to kind of put things out there as hooks that people could kind of latch onto, um, was really exciting to me. Uh, I had a professor at the Evergreen State College named Susan F. I'd. She was my sociolinguistics professor, and she really informed her her coursework and her own, um, pedagogical study really informed a lot of my thinking about language and culture and discourse analysis and really started a lifelong interest in the specificities and the sort of performative nature of of conversation and discourse and that, uh, I think I feel I saw that in Portlandia, you know, a real, um, interest in the ways that people perform personhood or couplehood and the way people communicate within a city or communicate within a, you know, a given context. Uh, and then there was a woman named Allison Silverman who had been, um, I think, at the time, head writer at The Colbert Report, worked on The Office. She worked on Kimmy Schmidt, and she came on the first year of Portlandia, and she knew that I was, you know, kind of coming into this new world through kind of a side door. That's how I felt. I was really saddled with this kind of imposter syndrome that I think almost anyone feels when they're placed in a foreign on a foreign landscape and sort of question their validity in being there. And she was very encouraging, and I felt like I was kind of taking a crash course in comedy writing through Alison. She was very, uh. Yeah, she she just I try to sort of model what she did for me in my own life, which was just, I think, to to listen, to understand that there is that fear when you first enter, you know, a room of figurative or literal, literal room where you're kind of forced to speak in a different register. And, uh, yeah. So I really am so grateful for her generosity and kindness for sure.

Jeff Schwager: Great. Um, in terms of, um, making the transition from, uh, from Sleater-Kinney into Portlandia in sort of broad terms. chronologically in your life when you, um, when Sleater-Kinney went on hiatus, uh, did you have goals in mind? Could you have envisioned where your, uh, where your life has gone since then? Your career has gone?

Carrie Brownstein: Uh, did I have goals after Sleater-Kinney?

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Well, when you went on hiatus, you know, you you, uh.

Carrie Brownstein: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: It seems like, uh, it seemed like, uh, a shock to a lot of people, I think, where your career went. And I'm curious if it seemed that way to you as well.

Carrie Brownstein: Yeah. You know, I. Well, one thing that I write about in my memoir was that while I was in Sleater-Kinney, I was because of who I am and and sort of what my interests are. I was always asked to comment on time and explain the phenomena of the band, the ethos of the band. Sort of concomitant to being in the band. So I was always sort of asked to be the explainer. And I think Janet and Corin kind of like even though they obviously were doing interviews as well. And we were there was, you know, it was a democracy. I was often the one sort of, you know, if they needed any long form explanation, I would be sort of tasked with that, you know, parsing of what we were trying to do and what we were setting out to do. And I think that was a

natural extension of my. Interest in just observing, you know, interactions and minutia. And, uh, I'm fairly analytical. So there was just this sort of sort of storytelling, you know. That was that there was kind of a story. There was sort of the real thing that existed, and then there was an elevated story around it. I was always kind of interested in how those two things interacted, the disparity between what was the actual and then the perceived. And I think with Portlandia, it was in essence, the same thing. It was about examining people's relationship to community and to place. And I think a lot of Sleater-Kinney maybe not literal place, but it was a lot of questioning and trying to comprehend a relationship to maybe a metaphysical place or a, you know, sort of figurative place in the world. And with Portlandia, it was more specific, you know. How do we interact with our friends or with our neighbors or with a city? Uh, in Portland became a stand in for for many places and spaces. So to me, it was part of kind of an ongoing conversation that I was having with myself an ongoing thought process and exploration of relationships and connection, um, two very different mediums. You know, certainly one using the vernacular of absurdity and sometimes surrealism, you know, whereas Sleater-Kinney never did. You know, there was there was a sort of earnestness, you know, and a ferocity that we would never employ with Portlandia.

Jeff Schwager: Right.

Carrie Brownstein: I think that. I think that feistiness, I think that interest in Imperfection and messiness is something that continued between the two different forms. So yeah, there's, I suppose, an element of surprise and how different, you know, the entities of Slater, Kinney and Portland are. But for myself, you know, the through line is writing and storytelling and really wanting to. You know, to, to kind of posit and put forth an idea and to and to hear people's reaction to it and to see whether they felt the same way or that they completely disagreed. You know, like, I, I'm kind of okay with. Divisive, I guess. You know, there was definitely a line in the sand, you know, their sort of love it or it's not to your taste. And that's okay with with me. So anyway, I see I see a lot of commonalities, but but I'm kind of aware that the shape of those two endeavors is very different.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Um, did you know you were funny? Uh, were you worried about being funny?

Carrie Brownstein: You know, I feel like I'm someone who is witty and observational and occasionally I am funny, but, um, I don't, I don't know. I mean, you know, there's kind of people that lead with funniness, you know, sort of. That's the what they put forward first. And I kind of sit back and observe and then and then strike. I think, uh, and that's, you know, that's kind of always been even in Sleater-Kinney or, you know, that was always, you know, that kind of sitting on the periphery and taking stock of everything and figuring out a pithy, potentially humorous way of assessing it was kind of always my M.O., but, you know, it's definitely different than being sort of a stand up comic or somebody who presents in a way that is very like joke forward. That's that's not really me. Um, yeah, that's that's a whole different kind of vibe.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Um, I guess since this is for the Jewish Historical Society, I should ask you some questions related to Jewish identity, which you don't talk much about in your memoir. Um, has, uh, do you feel like being Jewish has played a role in your life an important role in your life? Uh, how would you characterize that?

Carrie Brownstein: I do, and it's interesting because a lot of my relationship to Jewish identity is through this, lacking, you know, this sort of, sort of the fact that it's it's a definitely an identity that is kind of, I think, placed on many of us without sometimes knowing what that what that means, especially if, you know, grow up without, um, the actual practice, you know, religious practice. Um, and I, my parents both were really assimilationist when I was growing up. In Seattle at the time for, you know, not a lot of Jews over there.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Carrie Brownstein: And, uh, so I felt a sense of otherness, but couldn't quite put my finger on what that was because there wasn't a, Like a counternarrative for me to embrace where I understood. Well, this is why I'm different. This is this is what it means to be Jewish. And this is what we practice. This is what we believe in. And, you know, so it was just this kind of no man's land. But to me, in some ways, being Jewish is a no man's land, you know what I mean? It's a it's about questioning who we are, why we're here, what is our place in the world. And you know, how do we do the right thing? It's a lot totally at odds with really what it means to Jewish in general is to kind of feel a sense of displacement, whether it's through the diaspora or because of the Holocaust. Like there is a there is a huge, I think, sense sometimes of. So I think despite it feeling like a lack of awareness or, or or practice or indoctrination. Indoctrination in a strange way. It was also those things, I mean, to to be, you know, a Jewish family in a very predominantly Christian environment. Um, and the older I've gotten and living in Los Angeles, where, you know, there's a lot of practicing Jews across the spectrum of Orthodoxy, uh, it's really nice to, to embrace some of the traditions that I didn't have growing up, you know, that, you know, people here, you know, going to, you know, Shabbat dinner, going, you know, going to Passover, like actually sort of being around people who are really embrace being Jewish and the culture surrounding it. And, um, that's been important to me as I've, as I've gotten older. Mhm. Um, and, you know, I'm someone in the industry who didn't change

my last name. So, you know, it's like it's there their weather. And I think that's always interesting. You know, where it's like whether you want it, whether you know what it means to be Jewish or not from a religious perspective, you know, you're always kind of labeled that anyway. So it's kind of better to. And embrace it, which is, you know, perfectly fine with me.

Jeff Schwager: I guess being in LA, you now have good delis too, which we don't have up here in Seattle.

Carrie Brownstein: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Carrie Brownstein: Yeah. It's really nice to be in a city where there are just a lot of Jews.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah.

Carrie Brownstein: It's it's a good. It's a really good feeling because I, I growing up on the East side, there was kind of a wave of anti-Semitism in my school for a while. You know, there's just it was just much more of an otherness up there for a while.

Jeff Schwager: Mhm. Yeah. You know, I did the opposite. I grew up in LA and I moved up here and I. But I felt the same thing. I definitely felt like an other Jewish comics.

Carrie Brownstein: Yeah. It's just it's it's very much part of the fabric in, in Los Angeles and in comedy. And, um, I, I'm really sort of relishing that, that sense of community down here.

Jeff Schwager: Yeah. Um, cool. Let's see. So, um. I actually am a huge fan of a couple of the things that you've done, uh, recently, which are Carol and transparent. Um. Oh, yeah. Uh, a couple of real prestige.

Carrie Brownstein: Two and a half. 2.5 seconds of a Carol. But. Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: Um, and I understand you're moving into directing now. I saw your short film, which was terrific. Um. Did you, uh, like being around a director like Todd Haynes or a creator like Jill Soloway? I'm curious what you took away from that as you're moving into, uh, what what could be the next phase of your career, would you say?

Carrie Brownstein: Yeah, potentially. I mean, to me, directing is like a very natural extension of writing, producing and performing. You know, it's and I think, uh, it's taking the words on the page and, and being able to elevate them and interpret them visually, which I think as someone that's now been writing for television for nearly a decade, you know, you do start, you see, when you put your script in someone else's hands, you know, sometimes, I mean, in my case, we've been really lucky. We've had amazing directors, but you really just want to be in charge of that visual language. But yes, working with Todd and Jill are vastly different directors and creators, but they both have a very strong point of view. And I think, you know, having a taste level that is impeccable, having a point of view that is fearless in its uniqueness, that is unafraid to be disliked, that is not averse to the grotesque or the profane. You know, these are things that both Todd and Jill have. Um, and so, yeah, I think, you know, very they're both meticulous, though in very different ways. But I think that attention to detail is really important because you're not when it's done right, the audience is not aware of it, but you just realize how you know that the density of that of the world, of the worlds that they're creating, you know, they're so immersive. Um, and yeah, so both really inspiring to work with.

Jeff Schwager: Um, um, we're almost out of time, so I did want to throw something at you about the Me Too movement, since society is just in this intense time of change right now with that going on, and I know transparent has been caught up in that as well. Um, I'm curious about your thoughts on that and, um, where you think that's headed and, uh. Yeah. Take it away.

Carrie Brownstein: Well, yeah. I mean, I think, you know, the MeToo movement, the Time's Up movement, it's part of a long tradition of, uh, although of varying iterations, um, of resistance, of protest, of organizing. Uh, I think what I find the most exciting about it is that it is really aiming to address institutional and systematic oppression. You know, systems like capitalism, you know, systems like patriarchy, that in conjunction can create very exploitative environments that rely on the subjugation of other people. And, you know, I think when we start looking at the ways that those systems of domination are pernicious for men and women, then, you know, and I think that via intersectional feminism. You know, we're able to start to kind of chip away at the primacy of, of those ideologies. And, uh, yeah, I feel like there's a lot of promising elements to to this right now. And part of that is, you know, not ignoring class, not ignoring privilege, meaning that the ways that this affects everyone and that, you know, we kind of need to examine, you know, how we're each kind of complicit. Uh.

Jeff Schwager: Hello. I've lost you.

Carrie Brownstein: You know, has kind of aided and abetted all these things that it actually takes really forward thinking and and real participation, real life participation. And I think people are looking at not only themselves, but their communities, the people right around them, because that's, you know, sometimes it feels so unwieldy, especially when we start thinking about, um, institutions that are the fulcrum of our entire, you know, like, society. It just feels overwhelming, you know, to try to look at the foundation of that and, and change it up. But I think by by keeping it kind of focused on, on the local and, and the communal, um, hopefully we'll start seeing some, some real change. But, um, yeah, it's an exciting time. And I think, uh, I hope it can sustain itself or at least create some Systematic changes that will be in place, even if the media gets tired of reporting on it.

Jeff Schwager: Great. Well, I see we are out of time and I want to be respectful of your time, so I'm going to let you go. If I do have follow up questions, would it be okay if I email them to.

Carrie Brownstein: Yeah.

Jeff Schwager: And she'll pass them on to you.

Tori: Absolutely.

Jeff Schwager: Great.

Carrie Brownstein: Feel free to do that. And I'd be happy to answer more questions.

Jeff Schwager: Okay. And we'll let you know when the opening is. We're planning some sort of gala event, and if you are around, perhaps you can come. And if not, maybe your family, if they're still around here, would want to come. But we'll definitely let you know. And, uh, hope to see you then.

Carrie Brownstein: Okay. Well, thanks so much for having me be a part of this. I appreciate it.

Jeff Schwager: Thank you. Carrie. Bye.

Carrie Brownstein: Okay, thanks. Take care.