

On making work for your friends



Actor, comedian, and musician Fred Armisen discusses welcoming writer's block, being the drummer of every situation, and why he doesn't mind if no one laughs.

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As told to J. Bennett, 2902 words.

Tags: [Comedy](#), [Acting](#), [Beginnings](#), [Failure](#), [Collaboration](#), [First attempts](#).

You do many things: writing, acting, comedy, playing music. Now you've got this new sound effects album. Is there a certain attitude or spirit that you bring to all of your endeavors?

It might be an overused word, but there is a spirit of fun. Meaning less that I want it to be fun for everybody else, but more like, will I enjoy getting to do this? Will it be fun for me? As opposed to it being anything torturous or time-consuming, I just want it to be fun in the process.

If I feel like something is missing in life, then I fill in the blanks. Like, "Oh, it might be nice if this one thing existed." It's not literal filling in the blanks, but trying to do something that isn't around. *Los Espookys* is an example of that, where I felt like, "I've seen stuff in Spanish, but I haven't seen this sort of mysterious goth culture covered." It felt like something that was missing. I thought it would be fun to try to explore the sort of weirdo side of Spanish-speaking culture—weirdo in a good way.

How would you describe your creative philosophy, in terms of what's worked for you and what hasn't?

Every kind of art that I've enjoyed seeing, it gives me a feeling of being happy to be alive. If I see a movie or a band that's a surprise, I think, "I'm so happy to be alive." That's kind of my approach to making things because that's the feeling I want everyone else to have.

Seth Meyers said he always regarded you as the calm and steady one when you were in the cast of *SNL* together. You've also mentioned that you weren't even nervous at your *SNL* audition. Have you always been like that, even back in the Trenchmouth days?

No. When I first was in a band, I did put pressure on myself. There was more of a frantic energy to "make it." There was a competition for no reason, like, "Come on, come on, we've got to get on the road. We've got to..." And then, because it didn't fulfill my wants and expectations, everything just seemed like icing on the cake when I got to *SNL*. Everything was just like, "Oh, I've been through it all." It helped that I was a little older maybe, and that I'd been through so many years of *Trenchmouth*.

That's not saying I didn't enjoy being in *Trenchmouth*. I loved it. It was great. I'm so glad I got to play the drums. But I really had my eye on the prize, in a way. I was like, "We've got to get a record deal. We've got to tour more." Once I started doing comedy, it was all so joyous. It was awesome. Every bit of being on *SNL* was a total joy. My attitude all the time was like, "Oh my god, I can't believe I'm in the building at NBC. This is so official. Whoah, I get to meet all these people." Everything was like a gift. Because of that, nothing stressed me out, nothing got me down. Everything was great.

Did you ever experience stage fright before *Trenchmouth*?

No. No stage fright. I think it's because I loved doing it. It was just something that made sense. Also, my experiences of seeing people onstage were of imperfection, and that was fun. I remember seeing the Replacements do a show where they didn't even finish one song. They were drunk or something. I kind of learned that it's all great and it's all okay. It doesn't have to be perfect. I knew that as a teenager, and I still paid money to see bands onstage... I knew that if you go onstage, it really can be anything. If the audience isn't into it, they won't show up next time. So what? The people who are into it will show up and then you've found your audience.

You were never burdened with perfectionism. That's liberating.

Yeah. Even though I certainly do try to write jokes or bits or whatever you want to call them, I do try to perfect the sentence structure of things. But to your point, yeah, it's liberating also. Do you know what else is liberating? I think I don't care if people are rolling with laughter or not. I've seen so many shows that are kind of dead, and I still love them. Before I was on *SNL*, I did a bunch of shows, and they were met with silence. And I was perfectly fine with that. I mean, we're all going home in an hour anyway. So if this is not your cup of tea, great. I'm not up here for very long anyway.

You're known for creating and embodying all these great characters on *Portlandia*, *SNL*, and *Documentary Now!* What appeals to you about the process of creating a character?

I like the weird telepathy of it arriving. Meaning, I don't sit down and think, "I'm going to come up with a character." It really does feel like it just floats into my day, and all of a sudden, I'm like, "Oh, maybe I should try this thing." And then it just happens. I like the mystery of it.

I don't even think in terms of, "I need to do this kind of character because people need to see that this kind of person exists." It's more like, "Wouldn't it be fun if there was *this* kind of guy?" For example, on *Portlandia*, I did a guy who has a home recording studio that's really high-end, and he's talking about all the equipment: "This was used on *Pet Sounds*," and stuff like that. But it's more like a question mark. It's more like, "Have you ever noticed this kind of person? This kind of person who records a lot of stuff and talks about the equipment?" It's more open-ended.

You're making fun of the guy, but it's not mean-spirited. It's more exploratory, like, "What would he do?"

Yeah, never mean-spirited. There're people like that who are in my life, people I admire. It's always complimentary.

Is that a goal of yours when you're creating these characters? To find a personality that feels like someone we've all encountered?

Yes, but even the word "goal" might be too strong of a word. It's almost like doodling, you know what I mean? There's no goal at the end of it. It's more like, "Wouldn't this be fun to try?"

What makes a great character for you? What are your criteria?

For me to watch, or for me to do?

Both—and if there's a difference, please point that out.

For me to watch, I like believability—where I'm watching it and I'm like, "This might not even be a fake character. I think this might be real." It happened to me when I first saw *Fargo*, the original movie. I didn't know how show business worked. I remember seeing William Macy's character and I actually thought, "Did they get some Minnesota actor? Did they get some guy who talks like that, and they gave him a script?" I didn't know the difference. That's what makes a good character to me.

On the sketch side of things, it's totally different. Let's say it's *Saturday Night Live*. You know it's a sketch

show. But nonetheless, "Unfrozen Caveman Lawyer" is, of all things, weirdly real to me. Even though it's so exaggerated. I know they didn't get a caveman, but I don't see the actor. I don't see Phil Hartman. "Sprockets" is like that for me, too. I don't see Mike Myers. There's something about that character. I know he's not German, but the part of my brain that wants to be entertained is like, "Oh, it's that German guy."

On the opposite end of the spectrum, you're playing Uncle Fester on *Wednesday*. This is an established character who's been played before by Jackie Coogan and Christopher Lloyd. It's not someone you invented. How do you find the balance between staying true to a beloved character and making it your own?

Oh, I just stick to being true to the character. Also, I want to make the director and the showrunners happy and all that. I want to make sure I'm keeping with what's been established. What you see is what you think is me making it my own. The physicality of my vocal cords is only going to do one thing, but I strive for an impression of the two actors who have played it before. I just stick to that and the rest kind of works itself out. No one's asking me to reinvent him, anyway. And the character is already so exaggerated. It's a cartoon, so it's probably better to lean into the cartoon-ness of it.

You've collaborated with others in sketch comedy, in bands, and onscreen. You also work by yourself in many capacities. What do you see as the pros and cons of collaboration versus the total control you have in doing something on your own?

I prefer collaboration because there are so many more ideas. It's such a simple way to explain it, but there are so many things I never would've come up with on my own that I'm like, "Oh, of course this is the way to go." With *Portlandia*, Carrie came up with so much of it. Even in the pilot episode, she came up with so many ideas that would've never occurred to me... And it's good to say things out loud. [Like,] "Hey, what do you think of this?" All of a sudden, you're forming these ideas. It's kind of nice to hear it in a conversation.

I don't really like working on my own, but for something like this sound effects album, it's just faster to do it that way. But then, I did have some help. I had other people producing it and recording it. So, in a way, there's always some version of collaboration.

100 Sound Effects was inspired by old Halloween sound effects records. Who is the target audience?

I would say record collectors, comedy fans, or music fans. Or how about musicians? I guess maybe even people who work in the TV and film industry, people who do sound design for shows. Even if they don't use it because maybe it's not quite what they need, at least they have a reference. Like, "Oh, okay. Maybe we should think more about crowd reactions," or something like that. Maybe it could spark something for somebody else.

Do you think about the audience when you're making stuff in general?

Not really. I think of my friends. Will Bill Hader like it? Will Andy Samberg or Tina Fey like it? It's more for them. I think that's as far as I go. Or I think of my musician friends. But it's always my friends.

You're obviously a busy guy. From an outside perspective, it seems like you're working constantly. At one point, your *Portlandia* and *SNL* seasons were overlapping. What kind of time management tips do you have for people?

Oh, wow. Time management? I'd say be patient with yourself. It's okay to go little by little. It's okay to say, "I don't know; I'm going to try for next week." It can be frustrating to some people, but it's better than overbooking yourself and then having to cancel. When you have to cancel, you're creating so many problems for everybody. So, I prefer to go little by little. But that's just me.

And then, for the more serious things, when you really have to set aside two weeks to shoot something, try to take those seriously. If you have two weeks booked in December, just remind yourself that you can't flake out of this. Especially for benefits or for things that you gave your word that you would do. Even though something bigger might seem like it's coming along, you've got to honor that thing that you agreed to. I'm not saying this

to lecture anybody. I'm sort of reminding myself.

Here's another practical one. How do you deal with writer's block?

I welcome it. "I can't think of anything today. Oh, well. I guess it's time to go listen to some music. It's time to go organize my office a little bit, pack away some drums." That's the way I think.

You don't try to force anything?

No, no, no. And by the way, that's just me. Some people do force themselves and they come out with gold. I know people who are like, "My writing time is from this time to that time," and boy are they prolific. I think more in terms of, "Something will arrive at my brain. And if not, so what?"

You played in Trenchmouth for eight years in your 20s, which is a very formative period for anyone. How do you think that experience shaped who you are today?

Well, most importantly, it made me a better drummer. And drumming to me is not a fun hobby. I don't take it lightly or casually. I love drumming. It's right up there with the most important things in my life. What drums bring to me is not just the actual act of doing it, but I approach everything as if I'm a drummer. Even on *Saturday Night Live*, I was like, "If I'm in the sketch, I want to be the drummer of the sketch."

So many of my friendships formed back then, and I got to know the country. I was in a van, traveling all over the place. What a gift that I got to see the Midwest and the South and the Pacific Northwest—all over the place—really getting to know it and getting to know people and getting to know audiences. I loved it. Even getting to know what the live music business is like, I use all of those things today. I still think about what it means to load in and soundcheck. All those things come from Trenchmouth.

What about punk in general? What did you get from it that you carry with you today?

I dress the same. That '90s punk uniform, whatever it was, I can lean on it now and be like, "This is what I'm wearing today." Just like a hippie wears what a hippie wears. I kind of like music-specific style. If someone is a mod and they do that 'til the day they die, I love it. Or jazz musicians—they dress a certain way and it's great for getting older.

When I'm listening to music, even if something at first doesn't seem like punk, to me I'm like, "No, this is a punk move." Also the idea of a small venue. If I show up somewhere and it's literally a record store, and that's where I'm performing, I think, "Awesome." I don't think, "Oh, but it should be bigger." There's none of that, even though I get to play big places. I did a tour of England recently, and I'm not as well-known there. I was playing little places. Fantastic. I want more of that. I'm like, "This is what punk used to look like to me. Great."

Fred Armisen recommends:

Virgin Rock: This is a thing on YouTube, and it's this woman who's a classical musician. She's a harpist, and she's listening to rock for the first time. She describes what she's hearing, and she comes from a really positive place. She doesn't have all the baggage that we all have with a band and what they represent. It's more like, "Oh, I can hear that there's an organ. And it's nice because it reminds me of..." It comes from that place, which is so fun to watch.

A History of Rock Music in 500 Songs: This is a podcast by Andrew Hickey. It was recommended to me, and it's made me re-think how rock music was made. It's not just classic rock songs that everyone loves. It goes back to 1938, with Benny Goodman. It asks questions like, "Why did *this* affect *that*? What did this represent? Why did this open up country music stations to playing this R&B song?" I listen to it so intensely that I rewind.

Never Enough by Turnstile: I really like their new album. With new albums, you're like, "Okay, where are they going to go?" This reminded me of the impact that The Police had, when you first heard The Police. This feels like that.

Eddington: This is a really good movie that really captured the moment [of the pandemic] that it was set in. It felt like one of those things that was missing, like we haven't looked back at this time in this way.

Ciari: This is a foldable guitar for traveling. A lot of travel guitars are a little flimsy, but I use this all the time. It's like a real, actual guitar and they've figured out a way for it to fold. It's really well-made. You undo this lever, and it makes the whole thing go slack and you don't have to retune the strings. I'm a fan.

Name

Fred Armisen

Vocation

comedian, actor, writer, musician

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