

The Elliotts: Harpswell's Comedy Clan

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# Live! From Harpswell



# ...The Barrymores of Comedy

Comedy clan Bob, Abby, and Chris Elliott navigate their careers from here.

INTERVIEW BY JEANEE DUDLEY



One of two Harpswell vacation homes for  
merly owned by Sen. Margaret Chase Smith.  
Above: Bob Elliott (right) purchased his  
Maine getaway in 1961.

## Who knew Harpswell was the center of the comedy universe?

Three generations of the Elliott family have independently found the world's funnybone: *Saturday Night Live* star **ABBY ELLIOTT**, 23; her father, **CHRIS ELLIOTT** (*Late Night With David Letterman*, *Cabin Boy*, *Get A Life*, and a starring role in Conan O'Brien's brainchild series *Eagleheart*, just renewed for next year), 51; and her grandfather, **BOB ELLIOTT**, 88, the dry wit of legendary radio duo "Bob and Ray."

All three believe their summers in Maine provide the emotional touchstones that make them who they are today. Unknown to most of us—even while we've watched them in movies and on TV—they've been walking among us for decades, living in Harpswell homes two doors apart.

Then there's the double-decker coincidence that both ocean-front getaways so dear to this trio don't just surround property formerly owned by Senator Margaret Chase Smith—Chris and his family share the extraordinary privilege of living in Maggie Smith's first resort home.



Bridley, Chris, and Abby Elliott at the  
62nd Annual Writers Guild Awards at the  
Millennium Broadway Hotel, 145 West  
44th Street, New York City.

Portland is where I go to get my shopping fix.... And Freeport—I like walking around in L.L. Bean and seeing everything... it's the retail version of Maine. —Abby Elliott

Our house was one of the original eight built in the late 1950s, on the point. The view is southwest, and we can see Halfway Rock, between here and Portland. —Bob Elliott

Our view is almost identical to my dad's. —Chris Elliott



Are you the Barrymores of comedy or are the Barrymores the Elliotts of drama?

BOB: Haha, close. It didn't start off that way.

Perhaps... the Carradines of comedy?

CHRIS: Ooooooh, I don't know. That might imply something we wouldn't want to imply about our family. Until Ben Stiller's kids start acting, I guess there isn't another three generations in comedy.

ABBY: I don't know about a direct comparison to the Carradines—with less kung fu? Is comedy genetic?

Maybe it's something in the water.

BOB: My mother and grandparents were born in Brooks, Maine, a small town near Belfast. I was

born in Boston, and my parents would bring me up from there to visit. The older I got, the more time I got to spend here. My wife and I bought our house in Harpswell in 1961. We live here year-round now. I haven't been out of Maine in two years. If I ever thought of leaving, my car would just bring me back. My car knows the way.

ABBY: I've been coming to Maine since I was born. My grandparents have had the house since the 1960s. I was like ten when my parents bought our house, but I've been coming up since I can remember.

Do you have a nickname for your house?

BOB: I wanted to call it Somersault. Of course I



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Gui  
Aww



wanted to spell it one way, and my wife wanted to spell it another way. She wanted it to be two words: Summer Salt. We couldn't agree, so we just don't call it anything.

So...you and Maine are like this?

CHRIS: I just feel like I belong. We've been coming to Maine since I was a kid. I didn't go to camp, but my brother and sisters did. I stayed home and played around the ocean, even though I didn't learn to swim until I was nine. I had horrible allergies—both me and my sister did—and asthma, bad. We finally grew out of it, but I remember our eyes would itch so bad. We'd

put cotton swabs with witch hazel on our eyes when we went to bed.

Good times. Tell us about your house, Chris.

I live two doors down from my dad now. We love it. I'm not sure whether we could live here full time. It's kind of isolated. It's where we'll want to retire, though.

ABBY: When we bought it—well, my parents bought it, look at me, talking like I'm a property owner—it seemed like it was just a cabin, Adirondack-style, really tiny, like being in a closet. Me and my sister Bridey's room was, seriously, like a closet with bunk beds! Then my dad, who's always dreamed of building a second floor, had an idea, and my mom

# Will the Real Abby Elliott Please Stand Up?



Some celebrities portrayed by Abby on *Saturday Night Live*\*

- |                    |                     |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Angelina Jolie     | Laura Linney        |
| Anna Faris         | Lea Michele         |
| Anne Hathaway      | Leah Remini         |
| Brittany Murphy    | Maggie Gyllenhaal   |
| Brooke Hogan       | Marie Osmond        |
| Chloë Sevigny      | Marilyn Monroe      |
| Christina Aguilera | Mary Kay Letourneau |
| Donna Reed         | Melissa Etheridge   |
| Heather Menzies    | Meryl Streep        |
| Jamie Lynn Spears  | Nancy Grace         |
| Jessica McClure    | Rachel Federoff     |
| Joan Cusack        | Rachel Maddow       |
| k.d. lang          | Sally Field         |
| Katy Perry         | Sara Haines         |
| Ke\$ha             | Sarah McLachlan     |
| Khloe Kardashian   | Shaun White         |
| Kristin Cavallari  | Wynonna Judd        |

## MAINE MYSTIQUE

was up for it. He built the upstairs, along with a widow's walk. That's my favorite spot. In the morning, I like to have some coffee and go up there. You can look out over the water. You can even go outside and walk around. It's nice at night, too. You can go up and look at the stars. It's really clear and beautiful. You don't have that in Manhattan.

**Loving Harpswell is one thing. Living in Sen. Smith's home is another. How did this come about?**

CHRIS: Really, I guess it was in my early twenties, when I was on *Late Night with David Letterman*, that I decided I wanted to buy this house. Even earlier than that! The house was always abandoned—there was never anybody there. I'd climb over the rocks and play by myself by the house.

BOB: Chris bought his house ten years ago, as part of the Margaret Chase Smith property.

CHRIS: I brought my wife up here when we were dating and she fell in love with Maine and the house.

This was actually the first house Margaret Chase Smith lived in. She loved this house. She actually showed it to us. She wasn't ready to sell it yet, but she said we'd have a chance when she passed away. When she did, there was no way we could afford it because we'd just bought our house in Connecticut.

**Still, you could dream.**

CHRIS: That summer, my wife and I rowed out in front of it and there were people toasting in the yard in front of the house. We should have bought it! Six months later, the owner was transferred to California for work. There was a for-sale sign out front, and we knew we had to buy it. We scrambled and put everything together that we had and bought it. It had a lot of history, but it was also very similar to the house I'd grown up in—same wood, same smell, very similar. It was like going back in time.

**The myth of the repeatable moment. No wonder you sparkled in *Groundhog Day*.**

CHRIS: It's more like *On Golden Pond*. The first thing we do when we come back here is say hello to the ocean.

All these houses were developed by one person. They're similar, one-level ranch vacation homes, just built for the summer season.



**ABBY:** Actually, Margaret Chase Smith owned the house next to us, too. The other house was empty for a while, but all of her furniture was still there. I have a ton of cousins, and they'd come up and we'd all play in the yard. There were big windows, and we could look in and see her furniture. It was kind of like a haunted house for us. We'd always say we could see things, try to freak each other out. We didn't really know then how cool it is to have that history now in the

**What can you see from your porch?**

**BOB:** Our house was one of the original eight built in the late 1950s, on the point. The view is southwest, and we can see Halfway Rock, between here and Portland. We're in view of Ragged Island, the island Edna St. Vincent Millay owned.

**CHRIS:** Our view is almost identical to my dad's. We can see Bailey Island, Ragged Island. We're slightly more south, so every-



Cast of *Sundays with Ray* 2011—sort of! Upper right: Chris was a cast member in 1994. Bob (and Ray) co-starred on a *SNL* Christmas episode in the 1978-1979 season.

house and around this great place.

**When you bought your house, Bob, Margaret Chase Smith was a big political star. As Maine's first female senator, she stared down Joe McCarthy and was the first woman nominated to be president of the United States. What was your take on her?**  
I had great interest in Margaret Chase Smith and respect for her time in the political ring. She seemed like a very practical, enjoyable person. She wasn't here much. During that time, Ray and I were doing satire on the radio shows; we were the only ones doing McCarthy. There was a small group of fans—they liked that stuff. I liked Margaret Chase Smith. I find I vote more on personality, and I pretty well went along with her views at the time.

thing is just shifted a bit. Flash Island is in front of his place, so it's a bit to the right for us.

**Not a bad view for inspiration. Where do you do your writing?**  
**BOB:** My office is on the second floor, which we built after we accumulated too much stuff for the first floor. We're still unpacking boxes.  
My office has windows on both sides. The front goes to the road. The other side looks out to the open ocean. This house was built at a time when you could place a building much closer to the ocean than you can now.

**How about you, Chris? A follow-up to 1989's *Daddy's Boy: A Son's Shocking Account of Life with a Famous Father*, where**

**your dad wrote rebuttal chapters that took place right here in Harpswell?**

Coincidentally, I *am* working on one. It's an unauthorized autobiography.  
But it's hard to work here—sense memories kick in. It's my place to chill out, relax. The Internet is dial-up, and there isn't cable TV. It depends on how much work I have to do. Any time I have free time we try to be here as much as possible.

**ABBY:** We're really disconnected, you know, no Internet and even the phone service is pretty bad. It's time away, even from my friends. It's time away from just everything. It's really nice. I don't check my phone, I'm

There's a **wharf** near our **house**, it's only like a **minute** away. There's all this **outdoor seating**, and it's **just** open in the **summer**...

I love  
**Cook's Lobster House**  
on **Bailey Island**.  
—*Abby Elliott*



The Elliotts go to fishtraps in Clarys Harbor to track ovens and lobster claws.



Cook's Lobster House on Bailey Island.



Cook's favorite seafood board of the Elliott family.

not constantly looking at the *Huffington Post*.

**Ludily**, you can still see *Saturday Night Live* up here. Especially since all three of you have appeared on the show.

**Bob:** When I can stay awake! I watched most of it last week. There was Elton John—and they did a skit where he has three girls doing backup for him, and Abby was one of them. She got lots of screen time.

**What else do you watch, Bob?**

We pretty much just watch *Jeopardy*, and the one with Pat Sajak—*Wheel of Fortune*. That runs into the talk shows; we watch them.

**What do you read when you're up here, Abby?**

Other than scripts, I like chick lit, haha. If I read, it's magazines—trashy ones. Well, I bring my kindle. Last time I was here I think I was reading *Love and Other Impossi-*

*(Continued on page 67)*

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...*The Barrymores* (continued from page 43)

*ble Pursuits*. They're making that into a movie, I guess.

**When you think of Harpswell, you think of boats.**

BOB: We had boats the first few years, but whenever we came up they were always swamped or the engine wouldn't work. It would take two days to get the boat going—it was too much time, so we haven't had them since.

ABBY: We have a motor boat, you know, this little thing with a big motor on the back of it, but I don't know how to use it. I really like kayaking because it's good exercise, and you can just be alone and enjoy yourself. Sometimes I kayak out to this little island and just park and go swimming. It's a tiny island, just a big rock with a sandy beach on one side. Sometimes we would go out there to have a picnic when I was younger.

**Naturally, you all hate *homarus americanus*.**

CHRIS: Lobster! Whenever we're up here, even if it's just for two days, it's something we have to do. We used to all go to River Meadows. They had an enclosed room in the back that looked out over everything. They're not open anymore—I guess it's pretty much someone's house. Now there's so many of us, it's easier to do lobsters at the house.

ABBY: There's a wharf near our house, so we drive down there, it's only like a minute away. There's all this outdoor seating, and it's just open in the summer. We also go down to a place where the boats come in where they're hauling in their traps. So we pull them up and take them home, cook them in sea water, and have a feast.

**What haunts appeal to the tourists in you?**

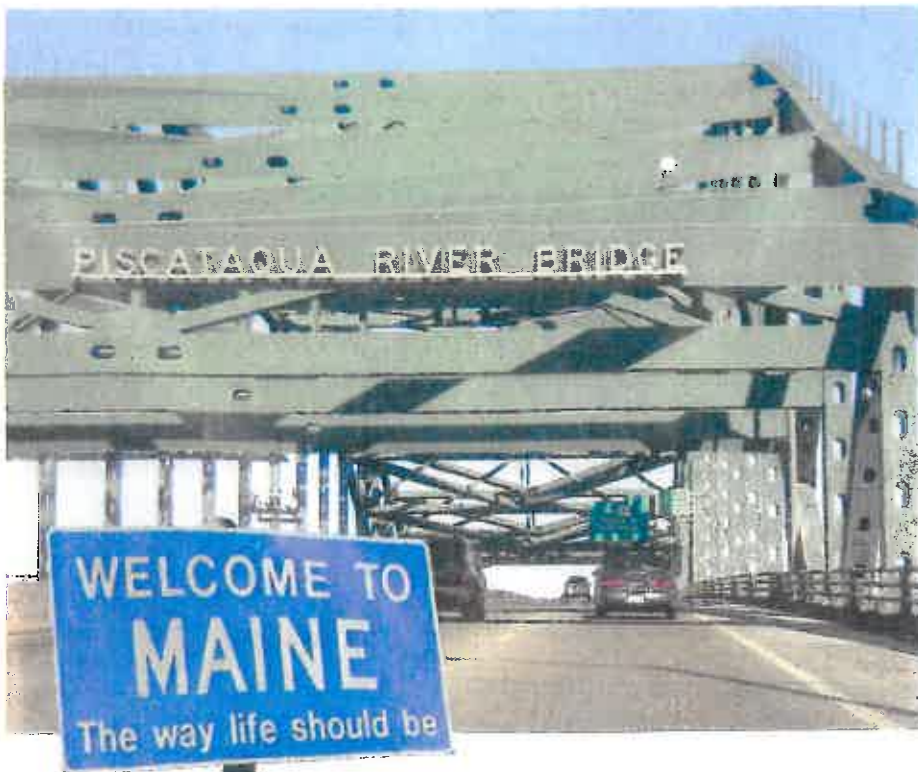
CHRIS: Popham Beach, Reid State Park—we love the beach. We love Cabot Mill Antiques and the flea market. We like to go to L.L. Bean at 3 a.m.

ABBY: I love Cook's Lobster House on Bailey Island. Fat Boy is great—I like the fried clams, they're so yummy. We used to go to Steve's Lobster house when I was a kid, I don't know if they're still open, but that's on Orr's Island, or maybe Bailey.

Portland is where I go to get my shopping fix. There are so many cute stores and little boutiques. And Freeport—I like L.L. Bean. I'm not super outdoorsy. Actually, I wouldn't describe myself as outdoorsy at all, but I like walking around in L.L. Bean and seeing everything. It feels like Maine—it's the retail version of Maine.

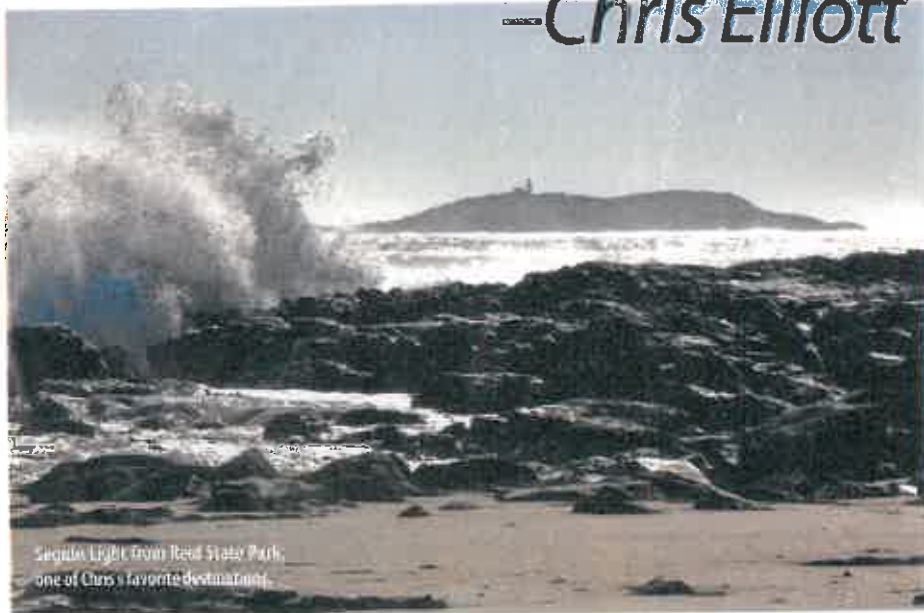
**But you're outdoorsy, Chris. And handy!**

BOB: Chris and I built the garage here at the house together 15-20 years ago.



# The first thing we do when we come back here is say hello to the ocean.

—Chris Elliott



Secrets EPIIC from Reed State Park, one of Chris's favorite destinations.

**CHRIS:** We used to do a lot of building. We built a shed for a generator at my house. My dad is just that kind of guy, you know? He's a renaissance man. He can do anything. He just absorbs something and always knows how to do it. I pick something up every now and then, but it doesn't stick with me that way.

**BOB:** We're lucky Bob, Jr. is here. He does the work I haven't been able to for a few years. I miss the work—I love to build things.

**Is there a magic feeling that comes over you when you've entered Maine?**

**BOB:** Maine to me is that first sign you see coming over the bridge in Portsmouth. Growing up, we'd always look for that. We knew we were close to where we were going when we saw that sign. It took us a long time to get to Belfast from Boston back then. We could always count on a few flat tires. We'd stop in Wells at a convenience store, maybe have a picnic.

**CHRIS:** As soon as you're over that bridge, you

know you're here. We have a countdown as we get closer to the center of the river. It's kind of like—

**ABBY:** A countdown to the way life should be.

**Like Dorothy kicking her ruby slippers. When are you all most likely to be here?**

**CHRIS:** We've had a lot of Thanksgivings up at my dad's house. As a kid, it was more frequent. We've had a few Thanksgivings at my house, birthdays, Memorial Day, Labor Day—July 4th is big. Dad likes to mark the summer holidays with cookouts. We have lots of family get-togethers in Brunswick—my oldest sister lives there.

**Has Maine rubbed off onto your work?**

**CHRIS:** I think I've done kind of a Mainer character here and there. As far as Maine influence, mostly I can just forget about business here, and just be myself. People are incredibly nice. I mean you go to Shaw's, everyone is smiling.

**Are you sure that's a smile?**

**BOB:** My only measurement is people we

meet. I guess the audience is pretty much the same. Ray and I did an appearance at Bowdoin in the 1960s. College fans were particularly taken with what we did. We get a lot of emails, and a lot of emails from Maine. When I go to Shaw's, someone'll come up to me and say they listened to me when I was in Boston, or later in New York. We did a lot of character humor. I found the Maine audience very progressive in many ways—very familiar with the voice-of-the-people kind of humor. We were never big joke comedians.

**Settle a bet for me. Between you and Ray, who was first banana and who was second banana?**

Ray was bigger than me, so he stood out more in pictures, but we worked really well together, no one tried to outdo the other.

**So it's more like... a banana split! What do you do when we're not looking? Lift a curtain on your secret life.**

**BOB:** When I can see a stretch without interruption, I paint—as a hobby. I had a show at Bowdoin, and some watercolors in Brunswick.

I never took formal lessons, except once when I was ten. When I was finishing high school I was wrapped up in radio, so I put art on the back burner.

Then World War II came, and I spent three years in uniform, two overseas. I was in Patton's army. We went across France. I was in the supply corps, special service. We weren't in Battle of the Bulge, but we were the supply chain.

After the war ended, I went back to work on the radio a week after I got back. I was one of our armed forces who didn't complain beyond the usual—food and living conditions. As bad as the war was, for hundreds of thousands of men it was a great school. We obeyed orders.

**So great you could find painting again, or let it find you. Or is it just you?**

Chris paints. He's excellent. So is Bobby! I'm very proud of all of them. My daughter Colony publishes children's books. My youngest, Amy, was with Yale Press, doing layouts and art. Shannon, in Brunswick, is very artistic. She has a studio, she's very inventive. Abby and Bridey don't paint.

Now I've got to mention all of them, haha. I have ten grandkids. Haley is a legal assistant. Aubrey works with Nickelodeon, with, eh, Mr. Squarepants. Bronwen is also with Nickelodeon, producer of a new show.

## MAINE MYSTIQUE



That's really a lot of show biz. How's it go? "My mother thanks you, my father thanks you, my sister thanks you, and I thank you!"

I never tried to influence Chris. He knew how I was wrapped up in the business. He just sorta fell into it. He went to a theater program when he was 15 and it stuck.

When Abby's up here, usually she's with friends or family. *SNL* takes up most of her time.

We may have another show-biz member. Bridey is interested in theatrical and film work. She went to that school up in Rockport [Maine Media Workshops]. She wants to write and direct.

ABBY: She's getting into comedy through stand-up. We worked together a couple times, but I was pretty scared. I don't really like stand-up, I don't want to be up there and use my own voice—I'd rather be onstage as a character. Bridey's confident, though. She's really the funniest person I know.

**It must have taken you full circle, Chris, to watch David Letterman interview Abby.**

It's very strange, as I'm sure it was for my dad to see me. Now, you know, I see Abby walking down the same hallways in Rockefeller Center. I do get a weird feeling, but I'm incredibly proud. Both of our daughters are incredibly in-

**LATE NIGHT WITH THE ELLIOTTS**—Bob Elliott and Ray Gouking were frequent *Tonight Show* guests as "Bob & Ray." Chris, whose star rose with *The Late Show with David Letterman*, cheers daughter Abby from the Ed Sullivan Theater's green room during her recent *Letterman* spot.

dependent. We never pushed them into the business. We just let them find it. If they love it, they stay in, if not, well that's just as good. They've mapped out their own courses. It's great. They inherited my father's ability to create situations for themselves. I know it's a tough business for women. As a father, it's tough because I know what's out there. But so do they. They've seen my career, and my dad's.

ABBY: It was so exciting. Dave was so great with me. He told me he was nervous, and of course I was nervous, but it was really great. I talked to him a lot about my parents.

**You weren't looking around nervously, expecting your father to pop up from under the seats?**

Oh, no. That would have been embarrassing. I would have been like, "DAAAAD, STOP. COME ON."

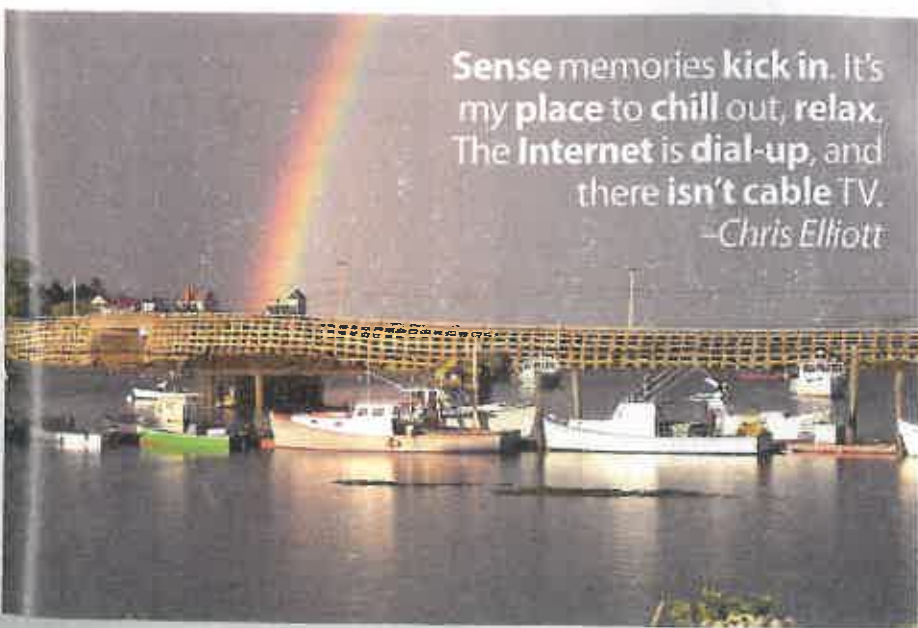
**Tell us something we don't know about your dad, Abby?**

He definitely has a serious side. He could be strict while we were growing up. He's a really great actor—he's a deep person. He does a lot of comedy, but he could do great drama too—a movie or a play.

**As detached observers, what is the state of comedy in Maine?**

CHRIS: There really is *something*. It's hard to

Sense memories kick in. It's my place to chill out, relax. The Internet is dial-up, and there isn't cable TV.  
—Chris Elliott





Chris showing her truly 'daddy' body.

think of a state and say what makes you laugh about it. I guess it's funny to see people, I mean we know a lot of locals, some we're close to, and they have to deal with all these outsiders—people who have never been to Maine before. I guess I couldn't tell you.

**BOB:** There's that Bob Marley. He's very, very Maine oriented. Maine humor probably compares pretty well with a national audience.

**CHRIS:** I know Maine has a good comedy scene—and definitely Portland.

**Abby, when you bring friends home, do they dare to crack a joke in front of these people? How young were you when you started to become aware of Chris's humor? And how does his style differ from Bob's?**

I think at a young age, we figured out what he did. He's always been goofy. We had so much fun growing up, we're just goofy around the house—it's always been encouraged. Papa [Bob] has always been really dry and funny. When we were teenagers, we really picked up on sarcasm and that kind of comedy.

**We're proud to confer upon Bob the title of official Mainer. But we're still not sure about you, Chris. What's the longest you've stayed up here?**

About a month or so. I lived here for awhile when we were doing work. It's back and forth. You know—you're gone for two weeks and you come back maybe for a week.

**Tell us about your new movie *The High Road*, Abby.**

It's coming out soon. The premiere is in L.A. The improv makes it very real. Horatio Sanz from *SNL* is in it, along with a few [UC-Berkeley] theater actors from Upright Citizens Brigade who perform in New York and L.A. I took classes there and did a sketch show.

**Not that you'd necessarily want to use *The Method* to prep for "Monica, pregnant girlfriend of pot dealer."**

Um, we had a couple of sessions with the director and writer, where we pretty much just

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decided where the character came from. For a few weeks, we'd come in and speak as the character, really delve into it. I've done a lot of improv, but I've never had to improvise a whole person before.

**When will you buy your house on the Point, Abby?**

I'd love to! It would be amazing if someday I'm able to. It would be a great place to bring kids. It's always nice to come back, especially since me and Bridey have moved out. It's good when all four of us can be together, and then in Maine we're so close to Nanny and Papa. And then we have lots of cousins—they live in the city, but they'll come up and bring their dogs, and we bring our dogs.

**If Harpswell were a restaurant, what would it be like?**

That's an interesting question. It would have to be a seafood restaurant, a place where either you can go and sit and eat by yourself without feeling weird, or one where you could come in with a huge group and have a large, loud, family dinner.

**What's it take to make you, Bob, and Chris laugh at once?**

Something silly that someone in our family does. More than any written joke or skit on TV, there are just times when, "Ahhhhh—that's funny!"

**We met you and fellow *SNL* cast member Fred Armisen in the Old Port. Cute couple.**

**ABBY:** I don't want to talk about that.

**You've always brought friends here... to keep it real.**

Yeah, I always will, and I always have, growing up. They're excited. I always have plans to throw some big thing up here. Get all of my friends up for one big sleepover. *During a storm.* Oh, yeah. ■

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Audrey, Denise, and Fred Armisen (left) and Abby Cadabby (right) at Mr. Basset Ice Cream in the Old Port.