Every town has a character that colors and adds depth to our work: an artist in New York City; a session player in Nashville. Portland attracts and fosters earnest hard-working creativity in a community of astounding excellence. You don’t come here to become rich—we live modestly. You certainly don’t come here to become a celebrity—we don’t much care for that. You live and work in Portland to develop your personal chops and stretch the limits of the greater craft—as an artist, musician, microbrewer or electronic circuit designer.

We have a radio station that plays only Northwest bands—KKSN 910 AM. Yes, AM. We have a vinyl record and vintage clothing scene. Northwest bands sound better on vinyl and AM radio. Word is slowly leaking out that The Beatles did too. Over a century ago, photography rendered painting obsolete, and the outboard motor sounded an obnoxious death knell to recreational sail craft. Then, in out-of-the way harbor towns and along the Left Bank in Paris, artists reinvented the ancient medium and set lovely sailboats newly designed by Herreshoff and Crowninshield to canvas. As soon as Pop Culture/Time Magazine declares a particular medium/technology dead, someone in Portland says—wait a minute....I could work with that... Film Photography is the latest casualty in the cold war of advancing technology. Dead, buried, useless. Just don’t tell the folks at Blue Moon Camera and Machine in St. Johns. Check them out on line.

Portland owes much of its character to an instrument company that thrived from the 1950s through the 1970s—Tektronix, arch rival to Hewlett-Packard. Although the company names live on, this paragraph is a history lesson. California had celebrity governors and engineers—Ronald, Arnold, Hewlett, Packard, Viterbi.... Engineers at Tektronix made the finest oscilloscopes in the world... then went home and walked their kids out the back door and up into the hills, taking time to dig into the soil and think about what might grow. They planted grapevines and built radios in the garage. Tektronix was a pioneer in what we now refer to as “Work-Life Balance,” but it went a step further into “Work-Creative Life Balance.” An unusual number of Tek employees had serious garage workshops—taking advantage of the company policy of offering stockroom components at cost and surplus test equipment at a few cents on the dollar. Tek actively fostered a thousand spin-off ventures—most of them purely for the continuing education of a technical creative class. The Tektronix Employees Radio Amateur Club was legendary, directly impacting the work of generations of professional Radio Frequency (RF) Designers around the world. During the first decades of the ARRL Technical Excellence Award (presented once per year for the best technical paper in the HF-VHF-UHF field published in one of their Journals) fully half of the awards were for work in Portland area garage and basement labs. Others went to Ulrich Rohde (yes, that Rohde) and Joe Taylor, 1992 Nobel Laureate in Physics.

A few of these “Innovators with Day Jobs” self-titled their new ventures—for example Dick Erath. But most Tektronix spin-off companies have names like “Cascade Microtech” and “TriQuint Semiconductor” that allow brilliant start-up founders like Eric Strid and Reed Gleason to pursue anonymous Northwest lifestyles in jeans and sandals—with socks in the winter. It’s part of who we are. The Northwest Band Sleater-Kinney was not two people named Sleater and Kinney. That’s the name of a road near where they used to practice.
Enough of history. The more profound impact of Tektronix was the generation of kids who grew up in homes where dad and mom came home from work and dove into a second creative life. Parents pursuing world-class excellence in evening and weekend activities was the norm for Portland. Excellence isn’t all that hard if you start with talent and aren’t trying to become rich and famous. It just takes years of evenings and weekends—immersed in a community of world-class musicians, artists, designers, winemakers and brewers.

We are a culture where the pursuit of excellence is not limited to our workplace and paycheck. We generally don’t chase after celebrity, and often make career choices that accommodate the time and geographic needs of our creative and athletic passions. We think nothing of working long hours, for years, on a craft that pays little or nothing. As musicians, artists, designers of everything from clothing to sports equipment, aircraft, and integrated circuits, as craft brewers and wine makers—we are world-class. Portland has a unique and somewhat twisted personality. Some folks come here to hone their craft, get “Portland” on their resume, and then leave to find a more like-minded community. Others embrace the rain that makes everything green and body art that begs the question: “What was she Thinking?!?”

Welcome to Portland’s State University. There is no clear boundary between city and campus. Things are a little different here.