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Best of Cincinnati for September 11, 2008

'Tooned In

Cartoon Network's Adult Swim delves into deeper waters

By CHRISTOPHER TOMLIN

One of basic cable's top-rated crime-fighting programs doesn't feature police officers, judges or forensic scientists. In fact, it features three anthropomorphic fast-food products -- a giant milkshake, a flying box of french fries and an expired meatball. And they never fight crime. They do, however, destroy numerous household appliances weekly and freeload in their neighbor's pool. Oh, and aliens drop in from time to time to steal cable or further their pyramid sales schemes. So how on earth are you missing this?

It's probably because the network is Cartoon Network and the time slot is 15 minutes after midnight -- 12:15-12:30 a.m. The aforementioned program, inexplicably titled *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, is but one part of the network's extraordinarily successful *Adult Swim*, a programming block airing nightly from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. and aimed specifically at adults 18 to 34.

Since its debut in 2001, *Adult Swim* has regularly faced off against the network talkers with a hodgepodge of clever 'toons -- at times even winning the demographic battle over Leno and Letterman. In 2005, the eclectic programming block sustained the No. 1 spot in delivery of adults 18 to 24 for 38 consecutive weeks, the best total day delivery in ad-supported cable history. 2005 also saw Cartoon Network cited as Yahoo!'s third-most searched term, ranking just below Britney Spears and 50 Cent.

But the real coup is how a network known for archaic *Scooby-Doo* reruns found a way to nab *The Daily Show* crowd through smart, funny, hip thinking. Originally airing late on Sunday nights with a handful of animated shorts, *Adult Swim* pulled WTBS' wee-hours cult time-filler *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* off the shelves and paired it with original programming in 15-minute increments. At the time, it seemed almost experimental.

Shortly thereafter, *Adult Swim* became a runaway train, adding more new series and mixing programs in a variety-show format. Aside from single-handedly saving *The Family Guy* from Fox's death row and keeping Matt Groening's critically acclaimed but ratings flop *Futurama* alive in reruns, *Adult Swim's* true victories lie in bringing an old generation of cartoon watchers a new generation of cartoons.

Remember Birdman, one of the less-spectacular *Superfriends*? He's now *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*, defending Grape Ape against steroid accusations and mediating a nasty custody battle between Dr. Quest and Race Bannon over custody of Jonny and Hadji. One of *Swim's* more

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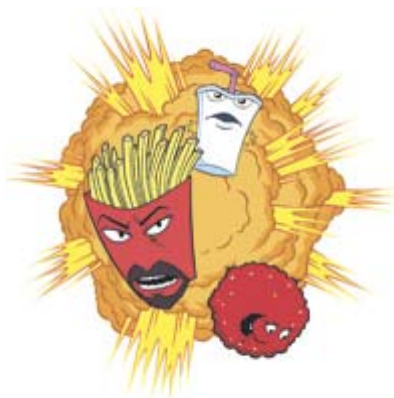


Photo By CARTOON NETWORK

Aqua Teen Hunger Force to the rescue -- during Adult Swim on the Cartoon Network

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To Do List
Main Event: Sampler Weekend

post-modern entries, *Sealab 2021*, features repurposed animation and audio from 1972's Hanna-Barbera ecology cheesefest *Sealab 2020*, and routinely ends with everyone dying.

For twenty-somethings who grew up watching cartoons back when they actually aired on Saturday mornings, both *Sealab* and *Birdman* fill a unique niche. They reacquaint us with characters we loved as children, characters who seem to have aged with us. Like their original audiences, they've grown up and have seen a world beyond the safe, unthreatening '70s and '80s. They're not reruns anymore. They've got real problems: They wrestle with bills, work in dead-end jobs and struggle with a modern world.

As *Adult Swim* continues to keep its lineup fresh, it's acquired smart, edgy programming. Aaron McGruder's award-winning, racially-charged urban comic strip *The Boondocks* debuted in animated form on *Adult Swim* in November 2005, and in January won the coveted Chairman's Award in this year's NAACP Image awards after only two months on the air.

In an era when Elmer Fudd haplessly blowing his own head backwards with a shotgun is nonexistent on the airwaves, *Adult Swim* is returning a generation of cartoon fans to a new heyday. Cartoons are back and ready to be enjoyed on the living room floor with a bowl of cereal. Only now the characters are just as smart and world-weary as we are, and political climates shape their cell-shaded worlds. And *that* can be just as funny. ©

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[Back to Top](#)

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