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# Movin' On Up

The subversive comic strip *The Boondocks* is now a safely "controversial" adult cartoon.

By Jake Austen



**PLUS** Chris Ware, Ted Cox's Sox wrap-up, trouble for *Punk Planet* and *Venus*, Steppen-wolf does Murakami, chichi sushi in Uptown, the big gay film fest, and more

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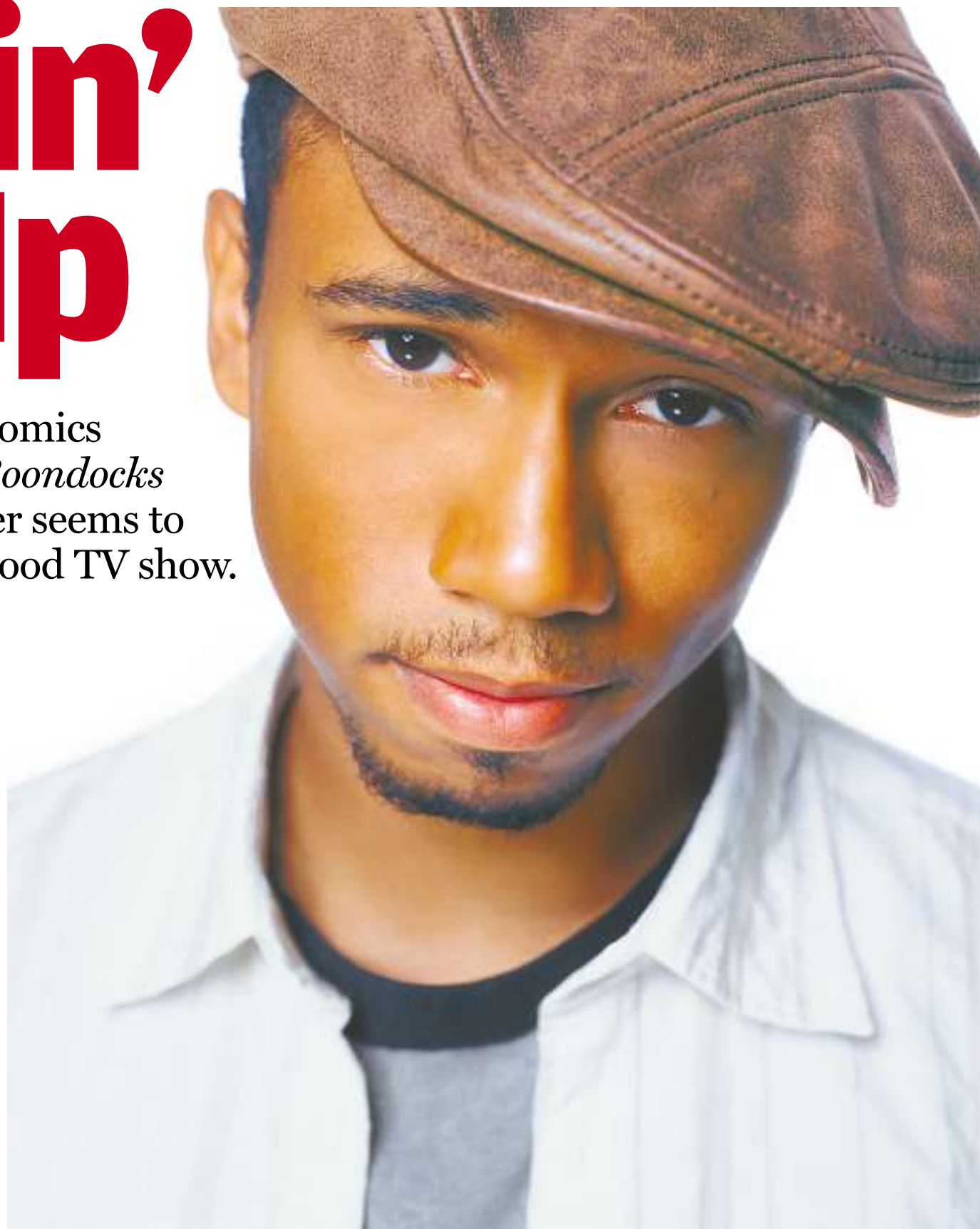
# Movin' On Up

He could still turn the comics world on its head, but *Boondocks* creator Aaron McGruder seems to be settling for a pretty good TV show.

By Jake Austen

In cities with large black populations it's not unusual to see images of black people on billboards, so it's not the color of Huey and Riley Freeman's skin that makes them stand out. What distinguishes the stars of the new *Boondocks* TV cartoon from their brethren in other ads are their expressions. The familiar smiles that populate ads for cognac, cigarettes, and morning-radio DJs are missing. In their place are dire scowls and cartoon eyes as big as Bambi's, but filled with the hate the Disney deer must have felt for its mother's murderers. The anger exuding from these illustrations may be fresh when viewed over a viaduct, but for readers of the funny pages it's been a fixture for years. Since 1999 *The Boondocks* has been a profoundly important, often hilarious, frequently controversial comic strip. It is also one of the biggest disappointments in the medium's history.

Aaron McGruder's comic, ostensibly about two black brothers from Chicago moving in with their grandfather in a predominantly



Aaron McGruder

white suburb, had an instant impact when it hit newsprint. Not only did it stand out thanks to the scarcity of black voices in the funnies, but it was the most fearless comic in decades, attacking the hypocrisy of both conservative whites and hip-hop generation blacks. It had incredible promise, and considering McGruder's age (he was 24) it was certain to over-

come its weaknesses.

McGruder developed *The Boondocks* in his college newspaper only two years prior to its syndication, and it showed. Early strips have the amateurish feel of a campus comic. Their miscues range from slightly sloppy (Riley refers to the trains on Chicago's south side as subways rather than els), to **continued on page 24**

## Boondocks

continued from page 1

technically annoying (the tails of the word balloons frequently point toward characters' elbows or abdomens rather than their mouths), to formally unsound.

The reason so many newspapers bet on *The Boondocks* (it initially appeared in over 150 papers, making it one of the biggest launches in comics history) was that it had a look and feel that was new and dynamic. McGruder's approach to drawing married the crisp, stylized look of Japanese anime to the loose line work of hip-hop graffiti. But though this approach was visually exciting, in McGruder's young hands it was also limited. His character designs narrowed his range of expression, both intentionally (in the case of the angry boys who never smiled) and unintentionally (in the case of the grandfather, whose emotions were hard to read on his overly wrinkled face). Most of the white secondary characters seen in the early strips had sour looks that brought to mind withered apples. While this might have been an accurate visualization of how McGruder saw white suburbanites, from a formal standpoint it hurt the strip. The harshness was not conducive to visual joke telling.

Fortunately for the artist, he would not have to deal with the problem for long. Generally, cartoonists strive to create interesting supporting characters (Peppermint Patty, Mr. Dithers, Cathy's mom) and develop an array of stock situations to riff on (Lucy holding a football, Dagwood making a sandwich, Cathy shopping). McGruder followed suit, introducing teachers, neighbors, even a love interest, and putting the Freeman boys in various scenarios.

But these ambitions quickly

dissipated as the cartoonist's growth as a joke teller allowed him to limit the strip to two characters (or one character and a TV) delivering setups and punch lines about current events.

Instead of Riley sparring with white authority figures or Huey balancing insults and sweetness with the mixed-race girl next door, the current strip is limited to the principal characters in slothful signature situations (sitting on the couch, sitting on the chair in front of the TV, relaxing in an empty field). The original concept of urban kids in a "boondock" suburb is nonexistent.

The strip's stunted growth was formalized in 2003 when McGruder, while maintaining writing duties, hired another artist to draw it. This move was interpreted by some as a sign of laziness and by others as an insult to the medium.

In response, McGruder has brought up health problems, the burden of developing a television show, and the curse of poor time management. The specific reason he offered for moving away from developing characters and narratives was more sensational. "The world changed dramatically in the last four years," McGruder wrote in the *Boondocks* anthology *A Right to Be Hostile*. He became "aware of how valuable that little piece of real estate in the newspapers had become." So on September 11, 2001, he decided to "use my little space to scream out louder against the great injustices the United States government was about to unleash on the planet." Aaron McGruder's characters are underdeveloped because of 9/11!

The most credible explanation for the strip's arrested development is McGruder's focus on the animated adaptation. The cartoon, which debuts at 10 PM Sunday on Cartoon Network, has



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been in the works since shortly after the strip's launch, and McGruder has been intimately involved with every stage of development. After a Fox *Boondocks* cartoon fell through two years ago, McGruder altered the show to fit (relatively) comfortably on basic cable. Simultaneously, basic cable developed into a place where *The Boondocks* will not be the anomaly it is on the comics page. Programs like *The Daily Show* have loudly articulated displeasure with Bush, and shows like *Reno: 911*, *The Shield*, and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* have addressed the realities of racism (by making most of their characters racists). It's unlikely that *The Boondocks* TV show will shock or offend its audience. To succeed it will actually have to be good.

Unlike most of Cartoon Network's other Adult Swim (late night) offerings, which pride themselves on their shoddiness and thrift (recycling stock Hanna-Barbera footage on *Space Ghost*, forgoing animation for stills on *Tom Goes to the Mayor*), *The Boondocks* is a relatively expensive-looking show. The visual design is far more sophisticated than the strip's, the animation is good, and the voices are

provided by familiar actors (perhaps too familiar in the case of John Witherspoon, who's played characters like Granddad in countless black sitcoms and movies over the past 15 years).

The first two episodes feature funny jokes, visually innovative sequences, and a unique voice that could resonate with audiences (including, but not limited to, the stoned college kids who seem to be Adult Swim's demographic). Most significant, the premiere episode overcomes the strip's primary shortcoming by genuinely exploring Riley and Huey's relationship to the white suburbs. The second episode is mostly limited to the Freeman home but introduces a new character into the static household. That the new character is an absurdly cliché ghetto whore is another matter. Given the investment Cartoon Network has made in this cartoon it's likely to be given time to develop, and given time it (unlike the strip) should get stronger and stronger.

The best comics-to-TV adaptation so far has been Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*. But as endearing as those holiday specials are, with their sharp scripts and jazzy Vince Guaraldi scores, Schulz never let their popularity com-

promise his strip's integrity. He was a cartoonist first, and a new strip written, drawn, and lettered by him appeared every day until he died, and then one appeared the next day. McGruder originally developed his characters with an eye toward animation, rarely has a good word to say about the comics medium, and in interview after interview casts a longing eye toward his can't-come-too-soon retirement.

Basically he doesn't seem to like comics. While that's his prerogative, it's really a shame. Although the TV show has the potential to grow into something pretty good, it will not be the best or funniest or most outrageous show on television. McGruder's sharpest talents—a quick wit, boldness, individualism—are muffled in a medium as deliberate and collaborative as animation.

And despite his strip's self-imposed limitations, it frequently is the best comic on the page and on occasion feels like the most important thing in the newspaper. When something awful happens and our president is involved, McGruder is the truth-telling jester desperately needed in the cowardly media. While I'm certain that McGruder could work his gallows humor into a strip that featured a wide cast of characters engaging in rich narrative discourse, I much prefer an underachieving *Boondocks* in the paper to none at all.

If Aaron McGruder discontinues his strip, which seems possible if the show is a hit, it would be the most disappointing action of his cartooning career. And when that day comes, though I'll never match the profoundly bitter faces he's plastered on buses in Brooklyn and on abandoned west-side buildings in Chicago and above LA freeways, I'll be wearing a huge frown. ■

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In the print edition of the *Reader* this page is occupied by a Chris Ware comic.  
At his request, we do not make his work available online.