

# WHAM CITY COMEDY



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# Baltimore

ARTS / By Ezra Winter



## Funny Guys

Wham City Comedy has gone from the Copycat Building to Adult Swim.



The first time I saw Wham City Comedy, their performance consisted of ultra-specific jokes about train maintenance, a troubling read-through of a post-apocalyptic *The Simpsons* script, and a vicious back-and-forth with an audience member—which turned out to be completely staged. It was one of the best shows I'd ever seen. It also created a possible fire hazard. The guys were guests of a monthly comedy show I used to run, called *The Hustle*. It ran in the bar attached to the Creative Alliance. On a good night, the comic revue would see a crowd of maybe 30 people. That night, some 100 people crammed into the bar. They were there to see Ben

▲ **Pictured, from left:** Alan Resnick, Ben O'Brien, and Robby Rackleff, aka Wham City Comedy.

O'Brien, Robby Rackleff, and Alan Resnick. Somehow, the trio even *look* like a comedy troupe: Resnick, 29, is short and lean with a trim beard, while O'Brien, 30, is a bit taller and in surprisingly good shape for a comedian. Rackleff, 34, looks like he might work on utility poles, or possibly *be* a utility pole—he towers over the other two performers. Wham City musician Mickey Freeland rounded out the bill, and I served as your humble emcee. It made for a memorable night and most likely a solid fire-code violation, according to bar staff. Luckily, the only thing on fire that night was the comedy.

"Wham City is alternative comedy without the pretension," says veteran Baltimore

sually exciting comedy that could compete in a music show context."

Then and now, their shows are a mix of standup, bizarre improv, and carefully scripted skits, punctuated with bits of digital video. Each member takes a turn in the spotlight. Sometimes, it's O'Brien or Rackleff playing straight man to Resnick's silent "MEMIME" character. Sometimes, it's one of the other two barely making it to safety as Rackleff storms around stage wearing a Sonic the Hedgehog costume. Every performance is different and every performance has a zeitgeisty energy.

Their live performances drew the attention of Dave Hughes, creator of Adult Swim's *Off The Air*, who eventually worked with them as executive producer on a few video shorts.

Since then, it has been something of a whirlwind for the trio. When they're not doing live comedy or making videos, they're pitching shows in Los Angeles and working closely with Adult Swim executives. The group's latest project? Filming a pilot presentation for Fox—well, sort of. Fox has teamed up with The Lonely Island—the cheerfully irreverent comedy-music troupe featuring SNL alum Andy Samberg—for a comedy development project called Party Over Here.

"Party Over Here approached us and said, 'Give us some ideas for shows,'" says O'Brien. "It's funded by Fox, but it's a show incubator. With this deal, they can sell it to other places like Netflix, Hulu, etcetera."

He can't let on too much about the show itself, but shares its intriguing working title, *The Internet*. And yes, they got paid for the pilot presentation, but O'Brien wants to make it clear they are hardly raking in the cash. No one's really committing to these projects; they're just kind of taking fliers.

"I joke that we're like the adjunct professors of TV," O'Brien says.

This is literally true for Rackleff, who's balancing his comedy duties with an adjunct professorship at the Maryland Institute College of Art in the fall. Appropriately, he'll be teaching video.

As for O'Brien, he's also teaching video at MICA and working on personal projects. His latest venture is producing a concert film for longtime collaborator Dan Deacon, about Deacon's most recent tour. In keeping with the group's multi-platform ethos, O'Brien did standup as Deacon's opening act.

Resnick, a visual artist, has had his work shown in some local galleries. For him, jumping from medium to medium is part of the fun. "I like site-specific projects that only make sense in the context of the

**"Wham City is alternative comedy without the pretension."**

medium," he says via e-mail. ("My phone is all broke," he explains.) "Sometimes a new platform will inspire an idea."

The group also has another video for Adult Swim in the works, their fourth. "It's one of our strangest ideas yet," Resnick promises. (Then it must be very strange, since one of their videos is a nature film that abruptly segues into an over-the-top miniature horror film about a suburban mom and her evil dopelgänger.) "We're very lucky they keep letting us make this kind of thing."

For a couple of years, O'Brien and Resnick lived in the Copycat warehouse on Guilford Avenue. The Copycat is a storied Baltimore institution, a former factory and industrial space that began renting out art studios in the '80s. Artists started moving into their studios full time and it eventually turned into an apartment building. Rackleff lived in the City Arts building, a similar setup nearby.

O'Brien liked the creative energy of the Copycat, but says it could be stressful to be surrounded by so many working artists. "When you live there, you have to convince yourself you're not at work. You end up obsessively working, and getting anxious."

Just this past year, O'Brien and Resnick moved into "real" houses in Hampden and Station North, respectively. Rackleff still lives in the City Arts building.

# VIDEO PRODUCTION

Wham City has written, directed, and produced multiple videos for Adult Swim including the critically acclaimed viral hits *Unedited Footage Of A Bear* and *This House Has People In It*.



## Adult Swim's 'This House Has People In It' Is The Best Horror Short of the Year

Emily Gaudette | March 16th 2016

Adult Swim released *This House Has People In It*, a short film special as part of its Infomercials block, at 4 a.m. on March 14th. The special is stylized as security footage taken in a middle-class home. The family living in the house — including a father, mother, teenage sister, little brother, baby, and a grandma — argue and watch television while prepping for a birthday party. Around the 4-minute mark, it becomes obvious that something horrific is happening in the house, though there are several clues leading up to the reveal: the teen girl, named Madison, isn't just lying on the kitchen floor and pouting. She's sinking through the floor, and can't respond to her parents.

**“Some will call it a 'Too Many Cooks' sequel, but it's much cleaner and smarter.”**

Monsters lurk in the house, while an unidentified creature stalks a deer outside. The grandmother watches a television special about pottery, and the host says at one point, clay should feel “wet like, like, uh, like a warm body, like the inside of a body”. Later on, the baby escapes the house and wanders off, undetected by the camera. At face value, the Adult Swim

special is a fantastic bit of contemporary horror. It recalls all the low-fi dread and false-found-footage style of Todd Haynes's *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, which spun the true story of musician Karen Carpenter's anorexia and death through purposefully gritty-looking scenes acted out with Barbie dolls.

Filmmakers have long been entranced by found footage and family drama. The combination was used most effectively in Jonathan Caouette's 2003 film *Tarnation*, in which Caouette analyzed his mother's mental illness with old home movies. In fact, if Alan Resnick, director of *This House Has People In It* isn't following Caouette's filmography, it would be surprising. *This House* sets its tone using the characteristically dramatic irony of found footage film. We see things in the house that the characters can't, and we are linked, throughout the film, to the unfeeling eye of the house's security camera. It zooms in on moving stimuli, assumedly not controlled by any character — and its blank voyeurism adds to the film's effective horror.

COVER  
STORYA photograph of Charlie Kaufman and another man sitting at a table, looking thoughtful. Charlie Kaufman is on the left, wearing glasses and a dark suit, with his hand on his chin. The other man is on the right, also wearing glasses and a dark suit, looking down at the table. The background is dark and out of focus.

# IN CONVERSATION: CHARLIE KAUFMAN

“Oh, you’ve got to see [Unedited Footage of a Bear]. It’s really good. It starts out as a nature documentary about bears, and then it goes to commercial, and the commercial is just for some allergy medicine ... I won’t even tell you what it does. I won’t do it justice if I [do]. But it’s just this really horrifying, really well-done surreal nightmare. I’ve always loved things that purport to be one thing but turn into something else.”

By ADAM STERNBERGH

Photographs by AMANDA DEMME

## This Year's Scariest Show Aired on the Cartoon Network

The horror of Adult Swim, from *Too Many Cooks* to *Tim & Eric*

By Sean T Collins | 12/19/14 2:27pm



The most terrifying television show of 2014 debuted without fanfare at four in the morning the other day, and like the dead lady in *The Shining's* Room 237, you had to pass through layers of comforting illusion to uncover the horror within.

When **Twin Peaks** returns in 2016 courtesy of Showtime, it's *Unedited Footage* that it will have to top. O'Brien, Resnick, and company drive Adult Swim's scary side further down the treeless, McMansion-lined road than anyone else so far, dropping the comedy completely and crafting a work of straight-up horror. Some of this is accomplished with tried-and-true imagery — the doppelganger standing motionless in the distance, centered in the frame, ought to be familiar. But it's equally rooted in everyday sources of anxiety, like the buzzing of a phonecall you don't want to answer, the uncanny effect of row upon row of near-identical houses, or your suspicion that you and your next-door neighbors are so isolated you might as well live on different planets.

### “The most terrifying television show of 2014...”

and periods of muffled silence as frightening as anything we actually see. An eerily deteriorating tie-in website — like the warped-VHS aesthetic of *Too Many Cooks*, the cursed video in *The Ring*, the digital distortions of long-running online horror series *Marble Hornets*, or the partially destroyed comics of Al Columbia— makes it feel like the evil is corrupting the very object that contains it.

Meanwhile, the soundtrack, supplied by Dan Deacon, Drew Swinburne, and Ed Schrader, alternates between pleasant jingles, ominous ambient hums, cacophonous *musique concrète*, deafening noise rock,

But it's the portrayal of mental illness that really gets under the skin. Maybe there's a supernatural or science-fictional reason for the mother's meltdown, but it plays out just as convincingly when looked at as an elaborate metaphor, a you-are-there immersion in a woman's psychotic break. (In much the same way, Lynch's *Peaks* prequel *Fire Walk With Me* dropped the quirk in favor of brutally intimate, crowd-alienating violence and abuse.) Sleep-deprived mania, inscrutable scribbling across family photos, a sense of possessing extraordinary powers dueling with a sense that equally powerful forces are aligned against you, the helplessness of children to escape a caregiver trapped in this dynamic — this is heartbreakingly recognizable shit, and the genius of the piece is its full-throttle drive to make it all as real and as frightening to us as it is to the person experiencing it.



## The Creators Project

“Just when *Too Many Cooks* finally stopped getting stuck in your head, Adult Swim releases the next esoteric, primal, frightening, captivating internet video we're fated to be obsessed with, *This House Has People in It.*” -Beckett Mufson

## TheObserver

“When *Twin Peaks* returns in 2016 courtesy of Showtime, it's *Unedited Footage* that it will have to top.” -Sean T. Collins

## PAPER

“*Unedited Footage of a Bear* is the most terrifying thing you'll watch all week.”

“Directors Alan Resnick and Ben O'Brien along with their Baltimore-based music/comedy/whatever collective Wham City have created a unique and terrifying vision best watched alone in the middle of the night when you have no idea what's coming.”  
-Daniel Kibblesmith

## BuzzFeed



“Adult Swim's latest weird “infomercial” is deeply unsettling. *Unedited Footage Of A Bear* starts out with a simple, unassuming premise (the titular bear footage), pivots to something new (in this case an ad for allergy medication), then pivots yet again to something truly surreal and terrifying.” -Eric Lindvall



# LIVE PERFORMANCE



From house shows to comedy festivals: Wham City has made a name for itself around the country with its unique brand of absurdist performance art, opening for acts such as Dan Harmon, Tig Notaro, and Reggie Watts.





## WHAM CITY

SEASON 1, EP 9 07/18/2016

Alan Resnick, Ben O'Brien and Robby Rackleff of Wham City face a major setback when bringing an Italian restaurant to life. (4:50)

## The Wham City Collective Brings Its Crazy Genius



WRITTEN BY

**Michael  
Byrne**

“It's a collective of hilarious weirdos that dig on the absurd. It's performance art, oddball and experimental theater, film, comics, and, yes, Wham City is comedy. More so, comedy is the thing that connects all of the above. Consider this tour a vital piece of the collective's evolution on the national stage, a chance to show everyone else what Baltimore already knows.”

“Truth be told, the Wham City Comedy tour is full of a ton of bleak, cutting stuff. Maybe that's another misconception about the group: that it's full of cartoon people that live cartoon lives. Watching nearly all of them do comedy, you can't shake the feeling that, funny or not, the collective's stacked with some seriously cynical people.”



Alan Resnick & his avatar in Adult Swim's 'Live Forever As You Are Now' created by Wham City.

**W**ham City Comedy doesn't cater to the mainstream, but doesn't suck either. Founding member Ben O'Brien told me, "My goal with Wham City Comedy is simply to make a great, weird comedy show. I strive to make it honest in a way that a lot of alt-comedy rarely is. I want it to be able to grow and sustain itself while holding onto its integrity. I generally believe that anyone who is working in comedy whose main focus isn't just 'being good' is probably in it for the wrong reasons."

**“The humor is genuine, the bizarreness is unforced, & the success is increasing.”**

He's not lying: the humor is genuine, the bizarreness is unforced, and the success is increasing. Yes, that's right. Success. Apparently, humor that focuses on the art of crafting real comedy, that is creative and fresh, instead of shock and awe, or middle-of-the-road yupster, blandness (I'm looking at you recent trend of nerd-comedy), doesn't have to reside solely in the dusty rooms of local DIY shows. In fact, the Wham City folks have recently made it all the way to Adult Swim on Cartoon Network with the motivational, Ted-Talk, esque, [Live Forever as You Are with Alan Resnick](#) short, and the cynical, right-wing-extremist parody, [Commencement Speech](#). The almost-disturbingly-surreal, [Drinking Out of Cups](#) (an audio recording of a sick, sleep-deprived, Dan Deacon rambling over a cheap-CGI lizard) has gained such an amount of Youtube-fame, that an episode of *Family Guy* is named after a line from it ([Seahorse Seashell Party](#)).

The Wham City comedy crew will also be taking the show on tour this November for those of you unfortunate enough to not live in Bmore. They close Bentzen Ball October 5 with Reggie Watts and Tig Notaro at the Lincoln Theatre and will kick-off at the Baltimore Fringe Fest on November 7th before spreading the love throughout the land. Check these guys out America!"



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