



The beginning of the end for The Sopranos

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Surreal, then boring, incidental, mildly interesting, foreboding, annoying, boring and, finally, jawdroppingly NO WAY! gaspingly gripping. End credits, try to blink and begin the countdown to next week. This show does draw you in.

If you've never watched an episode of the hit HBO series "The Sopranos," or if you've skipped the past season or two, you might think tuning in at this point is pointless. As the sixth and final season begins, you might be concerned that you'll be completely confused. You will be. But don't let that deter you ... so will even the most obsessive fans of the show.

We're used to our Hollywoodized mafia being roughandtumble, and suddenly we find it arty and intellectual. Then again, the average mob boss probably doesn't have enough of a conscience to require a psychiatrist, the successful premise on which the show has thrived. Psychobabble interludes with Dr. Melfi (Lorraine Bracco) are what's made us care about Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), even sympathize with him as he lies, cheats, steals, womanizes and kills not necessarily in that order.

But it takes an exceptional amount of brain work to keep up with William S. Burroughs' "Seven Souls" text, even on its own. Add a funky avantgarde score by Bill Laswell/Material and visual character cues; now the montage that begins the season with a quote from journalist H.L. Mencken ("Nobody ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public.") is like an unsolvable riddle. Is writer Terrence Winter justifying his cerebral script from frame one? Is the "circleoflife" concept a fleeting thought or a theme for the season, or even the entire series? Forget all that. You're fine if you walk away with an established timeframe.

It's been about 18 months since Tony Soprano owned up to his responsibility and offed his own cousin (Steve Buscemi), ordered the execution of his other cousin's FBI informant fiancée (Drea de Matteo), then fled as the feds pounced on New York boss Johnny Sack (Vincent Curatola), ditching his car in the drive and walking mile after mile to get home.

In real time it's been 21 months since executive producer/creator David Chase gave us news of Tony and his nuclear, extended and professional family. Chase took his time ending our plotstarved suspense.

Likewise, he'll be taking his time bringing the Sopranos' saga to an end. Tonight might mark the first dose of the final season, but only 12 of the 20 episodes will air this year. The last eight are slated for early 2007.

Not to mention that, without blowing any surprises, the first four episodes are like a miniseason of their own; combined, they act as an extended prologue for the rest of the run. Halfway through Episode 2, Edie Falco (as Tony's wife Carmela) throws an early gauntlet for awards season, and by the end, even Robert Iler (portraying son A.J.) achieves a modicum of depth. By the end of Episode 3, we appreciate why Tony needed a shrink in the first place. Per that corny joke, just because he's paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get him.

As Episode 4 begins, it's a brandnew day. And yet, we know that to some extent Tony's days are numbered. Will the series end with his death? His incarceration?

The onus is on Chase to deliver an ending as explosive as the show has been on pop culture since it began. Will it fizzle out with a lame "Sex and the City" reveal like Mr. Big's real name? Or will it match (perhaps surpass) the memorable "Six Feet Under" wake and go out with a mobworthy bang?

A catchy homage to waking up in the morning and getting yourself a gun introduces every episode of "The Sopranos."

It's usually enough to prepare viewers for the world of violence and questionable values they choose to enter for an hour each week. What remains to be seen is whether anything can prepare us for the end.

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