*You woke up this morning*
*Got yourself a gun.*
*Momma always said you'd be,*
*The Chosen One.*

You recognize the syncopated rhythms, baritone lyrics, and quick-cut edits of the depressing New Jersey landscape immediately. You see the cigar smoke, the Pizza Land, the giant pig sign at Satriale's Pork Store, the driveway to the large contemporary house in the suburbs, and then The Scowl as you hear the sound of a needle scratching the record into silence. And you know that all is right with the world again.

On Sunday night, March 12th, 2006, almost two years after Tony's near escape through the snowy suburbs of New Jersey after the Feds busted Johnny Sack; it's back. Tony, Carmela, Christopher, Paulie Walnuts, Silvio, Meadow, AJ, Dr. Melfi, and the rest of the most violently dysfunctional 'family' in television history return for their first new episode since June 2004 as they begin their final season.

In reality, it is their last FULL season, as the first of twelve new episodes kicks off this Sunday. And then "early in 2007" (HBO's words on their website), the show will return for their final eight episodes before either disappearing forever, a la "Six Feet Under", or else heading towards the big screen at some point. It's anyone's guess at this point, as show creator David Chase is doing a good impression of a the Cheshire Cat regarding the future.

Speaking of the future; one thing you aren't going to get here is a bunch of spoilers concerning what's going to be happening with the show. That's because Chase has kept a total control of leaks in a way that would turn the White House green with envy. But at least we do know a few things. Johnny Sack is in prison,

setting up some power vacuum conflicts, particularly with Phil Leotardo and Little Carmine for the New York business, which will of course bleed (probably literally) over to Tony's business interests in New Jersey. When we last left Phil, he was still upset with Tony for killing cousin Tony B. (Steve Buscemi) himself, depriving the sadistic Phil the pleasure of torturing him.

Adriana is still dead, getting mercilessly whacked by Silvio in the harrowing next to last episode after telling Christopher about her cooperation with the Feds. But the Fed story line isn't over. We also found out that she was not the only stoolie in the family, as Ray Curto has been feeding information to them as well. In the aftermath of all this, recovering addict Christopher is going to be severely tested on his road to maintain sobriety. Or is he? Since it's been almost two years, the first fifteen to twenty minutes will be essential watching as exposition of what's transpired since The Arrest.

The kids, Meadow and AJ, are still students. As far as we know, anyway, as when we left off Meadow was still at college and AJ was about to enter his freshman year. Given his lack of interest in school, it was questionable whether or not he'd even get into a college, but towards the end of last season, AJ was showing a desire to head towards a career in Event Planning. At least that's what he said after he exhibited a talent and an enthusiasm for organizing events vis-à-vis the beer party at the home of a friend's absent parents. But what I saw was a young man getting his first taste of money, power, and the ability to inflict both his will and pain upon others. It would not surprise me to see AJ gradually go over to the business side of the family as well. The conflicts that this would cause between Tony and Carmela would be epic, in addition to upsetting Christopher as he would (rightly) feel that his position as heir apparent to the empire would be threatened.

We do at least know of the new cast members…but only in terms of the actors, not in the characters they play. Tim Daly, Julianna Margulies, Hal Holbrook, Ben Kingsley, and Ron Leibman will all make appearances this year. Who will be friend and who will be foe is to be determined, but it's probably a logical assumption that the former ER star Margulies will be another flawed (as in 'total nutcase') romantic interest for Tony. Holbrook can also play an icy patrician type bad guy as well as anyone (remember "The Firm"), and I'm hoping they show Kingsley as the same type of menacing psychotic that he portrayed in the "Sexy Beast".

I'm also hoping to see more of the suppressed passion that has always existed between Tony and Dr. Melfi. I feel that Lorraine Bracco has been underutilized in the last few seasons, and it would be great to see her get back to the levels of confusion, lust, and guilt she had during Season 2, the same season when she was brutally attacked. Her refusal to give in to her desire for revenge by having Tony take care of her rapist was frustrating to me, but understandable given her character. I'd like to see that long buried plot line revisited.

Whatever the twists, I'll definitely be there every Sunday night for the next twelve weeks. This show is a treasure, the flagship and originator of the dominance HBO has established in creating of some of the most outstanding dramas ever seen on television. Since its premier in 1999, we have been captivated by this totally unique look at The Mob. We have seen movies about the inside workings of the mafia since "The Godfather" first burst upon the screen in 1972. And our fascination about the lives and lifestyles of this secret society continued; fueled by scores of other tales, such as "Goodfellas", "Casino" and "Donnie Brasco".

But we have never seen anything like this; a look at a very human, very flawed, fat, evil man who was nonetheless extremely charismatic and most times quite sympathetic. Tony Soprano is not Don Corleone, but Don Everyman; a criminal overlord that still has many of the same problems and concerns as the rest of us. Pressure from work (albeit quite different from the office politics we endure), stress at home from his spouse, and stress involved with raising two adolescent (at the time of the premier) children. As with so many of us, the constant demands coming from all directions, the feelings of inadequacy they can cause, and the helplessness that comes from worrying that it's all spinning out of control can overwhelm a person. The introduction of the psychiatrist gives us a unique vantage point into the psyche of an anti-hero, a tactic that had not previously been employed in episodic television.

In Tony's case, the stakes are quite a bit higher than what you and I would see; and that's what makes his character so irresistible. I can't imagine any other actor that could have made Tony as complex, lovable, despicable, violent, loving, callous, and caring of a man as James Gandolfini. You are often uncomfortable watching him, but you never fail to be enthralled.

And so at long last the addiction picks up again Sunday night. What it will bring, no one other than David Chase truly knows. For certain, there will be shocking violence, unexpected tenderness, gallows humor, and enough f-bombs and

gratuitous sex to make a sailor blush, along with some of the best acting, writing, and directing in the history of television. I may be a Midwestern Scot-German, but come 9 PM on March 12th, I'm a New Jersey Italian-American kind of guy just looking for some Bada-Bing and a wire-tap free phone conversation to my bookie. So youse just come along for the ride, or fergeddaboudit. Capiche?