Things are getting very interesting as The Sopranos heads into the final three episodes of this season before coming back next January for eight more episodes. The Mitch Man is here with all the latest on last Sundays episode, and also to project how things will shake down.

Nine episodes in, and I think the central theme to this year has come into focus. The world is changing, as it always does, and the entire Sopranos clan keeps fighting to maintain their status quo. Tony, Carmela, Janice, Christopher, and Paulie all proved in this episode that they are basically the same screwed up people with the same vices that we first met. But while they act the same, the passing years have faded them, slowed them down, and changed their playing field in ways that find them struggling to adapt. The world as they wish it and the world as it really exists are heading for a collision over the final three episodes…which then lead into the final eight episodes starting next March.

Recap. I have no idea who Kelli is, other than the dumb blonde babe on "American Idol", but evidently on this show she's Chris's semi-long time girlfriend, who starts the show out by announcing she's pregnant. Luckily this time, startling announcements don't get you whacked, so it's off to Atlantic City for a quickie wedding and then a trip out to the suburbs to purchase a McMansion with a bumper pool table in the basement. Seriously, can you see Christufuh living life in Suburbia? The only way those summer block parties could be any more screwed up would be if the Henrickson families from "Big Love" lived next door.

Chris makes the announcement to the guys at the Bing…so you know what this means? Road Trip. Chris and Tony head to Pennsylvania for no good reason other than to give us some male bonding. And also to prove that if Chris had been the navigator on the Santa Maria, Columbus would have discovered Scotland. Tony finally pulls the Escalade behind a strip mall for some bladder relief when he spies a van with some lowlife biker gang types stealing some booze. And if there is anyone here reading this that is part of a biker gang…please remember to spell my name right when you contact me. It's R-I-C-H S-W-E-R-B-I-N-S-K-Y.

Tony and Chris chortle like Beavis and Butthead as they do a quick weapons check before driving down to boost someone else's ill gotten gains. Just as they have most of the wine cases loaded, Easy Rider and compatriot walk out toting an ATM…making it rather hard to draw weapons without breaking all their toes. Tony and Chris aren't exactly impressed when they're threatened with, "you're messing with the Vipers!" Can't say as I blame them. Any biker gang members that would be ripping off 18 year old wine instead of cases of Jack Daniels probably needs to be cruising with Jim and Vito.

But the boys aren't as nimble as they used to be. The van backfires, startling our heroes and allowing the Viper-ettes time to reach for their pieces, leading to showdown at the OK Bistro. Tony sprains his ankle, Chris pops one of the greasers, and they ride off into the moonlight laughing like two teenagers who just toilet papered the principal's house. However, after draining three bottles of the Good Stuff (by the way; nice enabling, Tony) they admit that it was a bit scary, and it's not exactly like the old days.

We also get to resurrect three minutes of edited footage from Season Five, flashing back to when Christopher confessed Adriana's betrayal to Tony. This was a very powerful scene providing insight into some of the demons still haunting Chris. Later, he ends up not just being satisfied with booze, but also goes for some heroin that he scored from Corky. Really wise move by whichever moron decided to have Chris deliver some heroin along with the cash for the Rusty Whack. I suppose that same genius would also think it would be wise to load up his golf cart with whiskey and beer while playing a round with John Daly, assuming it would be safe. So Chris shoots up, hurls, and then staggers around the Festival looking at pretty lights and airplanes. I liked the touch of adding the stray dog. Who couldn't emphasize with a wasted guy petting a dog, saying, "I looovvve you, puppy! You're the only one who really unnnershtands me!" Not that I'VE ever gotten so drunk as to do something like that ("Bullshit!" barks the Aussie Shepard, remembering the aftermath of the last Steelers/Browns debacle).

But maybe Chris won't slide too far down just yet. He does at least sell his five cases of the wine instead of drinking them. For $300. That's $5 a bottle for 18 year old Cabernet Sauvignon?!? Hell, you can barely purchase a bottle of cheap assed White Zinfandel for five bucks! (and remember, friends don't let friends drink White Zin).

He should have turned it over to Paulie for distribution, for no one knows

squeezing every last penny until it cries like our favorite hypochondriac. But Paulie's a busy boy, as he's in charge of 'organizing' the annual Feast of St. Alzear…which appears to be New Jersey Italian-Catholic version of the old Bratwurst Festivals I used to attend in Ohio as a kid…same greasy food, cheesy rides and booze…less lederhosen.

Paulie's eye on the bottom line pretty much pisses off the entire state. He won't cough up a higher tribute to the church, so the statue of the saint is missing his traditional gold hat, which doesn't endear him to the AARP crowd. He also scrimps on the quality of rides, refusing to pay extra for an owner's "A" equipment, instead getting ones that are old and in need of repair. Later the teacup ride breaks down while Janice and her "soon to be screwed up forever because mom's a friggin' loon" baby girl are on it, causing a few injuries. One of which isn't to Janice…but of course after she hears Kelli and Meadow talking about lawsuits, she's into a neck brace faster than you can say "insurance fraud". Another reminder of why Janice has always been my least favorite Soprano. When Bobby finds out from the Carny owner about Paulie's negligence, he finally seems to grow a set, and has to be restrained on the street when he goes after El Cheapo.

Looks like Paulie picked the wrong week to give up sniffing glue…everything seems to be going wrong for him. He's given the silent treatment when he shows up at Vesuvio's for Chris's belated bachelor party and is told by Tony to "make things right with Bobby." But why dwell on someone else's pain when the world revolves around you? Paulie has had a biopsy to rule out prostate cancer, and he's so upset while awaiting the results that he even shows back up at Aunt Mommy's place to whine, since no one else wants to hear it.

There were a few other short scenes that are either developing some plot lines for later, or else re-affirming some existing problems. Carmelapatra is back on her barge on the River Denial, as Tony blows smoke up her ass when she talks to him about Adriana's mom accusing Chris of murder. Tony "schooling her" on domestic violence was a hoot.

Phil is heading for a fall…as if I hadn't been predicting that for something like six weeks now. Tony elicits his help off-loading a highjacked truck filled with multi-vitamins (heh), which Phil agrees to as long as Tony doesn't report it to Johnny. Seems Phil can't get the clues through his silver MelKiper Helmeted hair that pissing Johnny off usually means you won't be able to enjoy spending that 401(k) in your golden years.

Finally…Tony is bored. “Every day is a gift…but does it have to be socks?” Great line, resulting in a wonderful poker face from Melfi. But the same ol’ – same ol’ is driving Tee up the proverbial wall. Seeing Julianna on a ride at the Festival didn’t help matters. Tony was pretty melancholy for a lot of the episode, and I think the next time he meets up with Julianna, the results will be different.

All in all, this was a very good, but very bleak episode. What I found interesting was contrasting it to the previews HBO showed for the upcoming season of “Deadwood”. That western reminds me of how the Sopranos used to be in the first two seasons; heavily reliant upon the violence as well as the intellectual. But for the Sopranos, it is now a lot more introspective…a lot more cerebral, as we getting deeper into the souls of these characters rather than just watch them react to something by the use of bloodshed. Therefore, the moments of violence are more unexpected and shocking when they do happen.

To some, this is seen as a betrayal…as they prefer “24” style action and implausible chases, hence the advocates on some boards saying that the show has “jumped the shark”. That is hardly the case. We have watched these characters for seven years and I’m now more interested in seeing them as individuals and not action figures. Don’t get me wrong; I still love the action parts, but only if it’s in the right context. I think Chase has done well with it for the most part this year. Hopefully the payoff will be worth it. HBO already set the bar pretty high with the final episodes of “Six Feet Under”, so Chase has his work cut out for himself.

Best Line: “You’re doing a heckuva job, Brownie”…Tony to Paulie, a humorous comparison of Paulie’s handling of the Festival to FEMA’s mismanagement of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Best Scene: The entire Road Trip with Tony and Chris.

Most Humorous Scene: The humor quotient has been pretty low the last few weeks (not really a problem, just an observation)…so I’ll have to got with Paulie ending up at Aunt Mommy’s, watching “Lawrence Welk” on the non flatscreen TV.

Latest Whacking Odds:

Time to flip/flop our Top 2 once again.

1) Vito (odds – 1:4) – I'll go out on what I think is a fairly sturdy limb and say Vito goes to that Great Barbra Streisand Concert in the Sky this week.

2) Phil (odds – 1:4) – I've got the odds the same for both Vito and Phil, but I think The Hairdo will get it in the last episode this season.

3) Uncle JuniorMummyHead (odds – 4:1) – I thinking now that Tony may take care of it…but he'll have to do it in a very cautious manner since he'd be the prime suspect. Expect it to be in the form of something that could be interpreted as natural causes or a suicide.

4) Benny Fazio: (odds – 8:1) – I'm now starting to back down from my belief that one of Tony's major players such as Paulie or Chris buys the farm this season. It won't happen to one of them until next year, but someone on Tony's side will probably go, so who better than the Family's favorite punching bag.

5) Artie (odds – 10:1) – I'm not sure if this will be onscreen, or a drug overdose by the actor portraying him. (yeah, I know…low blow…get over it).

6) Bobby: (odds – 15:1) – While Chris and Paulie are probably safe…Bobby probably isn't considered sacrosanct by Chase. The only bad part about this would be watching Janice deal with it…maybe it could be a two-for-one deal? (please).

7) Finn (odds – 20:1) – We actually had a Finn sighting this week.

8) Patsy (odds – 25:1) – Just because he's lame, I'm tired of seeing him, and SOMEONE has to get whacked, dammit.

9) Johnny Sack (odds – 100:1) – I've learned my lesson. The fact that in the previews Johnny is being told to co-operate with the Feds will in fact mean that he won't do it.