

A song that's still worth singing

To those who complain they are sick of hearing how great *The Sopranos* is: I don't feel sorry for you. Once such whiner is *Saturday Night Live*. When the formerly cutting-edge sketch show unfurled its parody of the mob series, the only dig the comedy writers could muster was a string of mock testimonials from fawning television critics, such as: "*The Sopranos* is such great programming that I don't dare miss an episode, for fear that my life will no longer be worth living and I will be forced to kill myself."

If, to paraphrase Swift, a good parody can serve as a mirror of ourselves, then a bad parody, such as the above, is a transparent manifestation of jealousy, sour grapes, and the petty inability to handle greatness in others.

There is no real danger of Soprano over-saturation, in any case. Season Three, which begins on March 4, is likely to be the penultimate one. (HBO, Sundays at 9pm.)

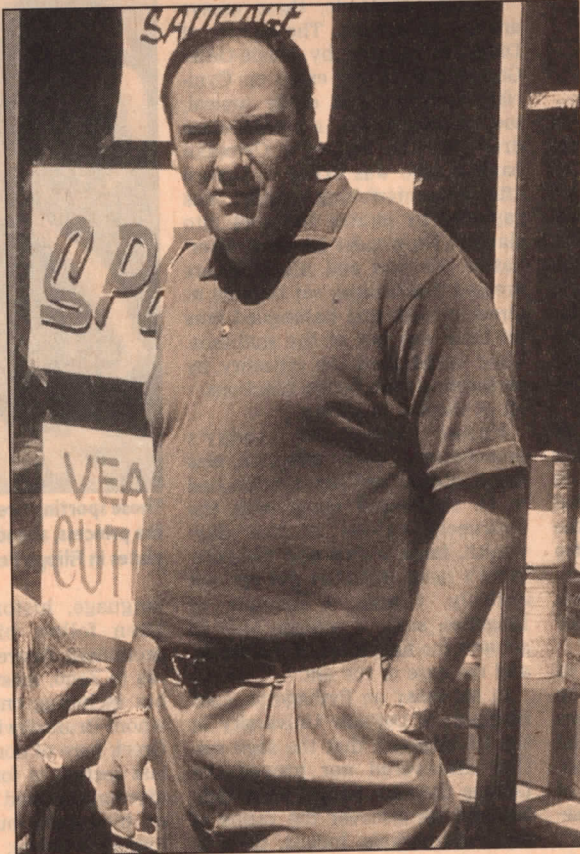
David Chase, the programme's creator, has announced that he has no formal plans to continue the series beyond next year, the fourth season. As he explained, he doesn't want to sink to the point where he is writing "amnesia episodes" – referring to the clichéd, preposterous storylines to which a long-running series resorts when it runs out of ideas.

If the first few episodes of the new season are any indication, however, Chase is not about to reach that fatigue point soon.

Episode one deals with one of this programme's pet issues: the ineptitude of the FBI in gathering evidence against Tony Soprano (played by James Gandolfini).

Actress Nancy Marchand, who was fabulous as the choleric, scheming Livia for the first two seasons, lost her battle to lung cancer last June. Tasteful tribute is paid to her character in this season's second episode, "Proshai, Livushka."

This season also sees Christopher Moltisanti (Michael Imperioli), Tony's hot-headed nephew,



James Gandolfini as Mafia capo Tony Soprano

becoming a made man, but not gracefully. Failing to make his weekly contribution to the family earnings' pool, he is reduced to holding up a Rutgers charity concert to make up the difference. "Most of the students charged the admissions price to their student cards," says the adolescent ticket-collector, his hands in the air, offering his defence as to the dearth

by Ariel Kiley) in Tony's girlie bar, Bada Bing. She's such a messed-up kid that her idea of a sensitive guy is Tony Soprano, and she's so pitifully naive that even the lecherous Tony cannot take her sexual advances seriously.

In one scene, a naked Tracy sidles up to Tony and asks him giddily: "What do you think, Tony? I just got braces." With a few lines,

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of funds in the cash-box.

One of the programme's greatest strengths has been its ability to bring an incidental character to life within the first few minutes of an episode, kill him off 40 minutes later, and yet, during that brief span, make the audience care deeply for his fate.

In a future episode of *The Sopranos*, we meet Tracy, a 20-year-old stripper (played

she evolves from a pest to a fully honed character, and she takes centre stage so quickly that even though we know her fate, we still can't believe it when it finally happens.

The fact that even a single-episode character is permitted to run her full course is part and parcel of David Chase's signature style. In an interview with film director Peter

Bogdanovich (*Paper Moon*), Chase explains: "I wanted every episode to be like a little movie."

(Bogdanovich has gained recognition in his side hobby as an interviewer of such luminary directors as Orson Welles and John Ford. His 75-minute interview with Chase appears in the recently released DVD version of *The Sopranos: The First Season*, and is well worth watching.)

Chase wanted each *Sopranos* episode to stand alone "as a mini film noir"; he had never been interested in the serial, the "soap opera" element of *The Sopranos* – that aspect, he says, was HBO's insistence.

"In the first season, when [the character of] Pussy disappeared, I didn't think anyone was going to care; he was just gone. But then people were saying 'Where's Pussy?', and the press called it a cliff-hanger, when part of [the reason we didn't explain Pussy's absence] was just sloppy storytelling."

Part of Chase's uniqueness lies in his aggressive development of leitmotifs, even if this required him to set aside the main storyline. In this third season, he brings closure to the symbols he introduced two years ago: we finally learn the childhood origins of Tony's fainting spells, and their bizarre connection to luncheon meats.

Chase claims, however, that he doesn't have tidy little agendas in mind at the outset. "We decided to trust our subconscious and make sense out of it later, rather than design an architecture of symbols."

Contrary to Hollywood tradition, there's no "story arc", no "character arc". We care about the characters, but we don't "relate" to them, to use that horrible word. They don't remind us of anyone we know. Nor, on the other hand, do they represent any desire or fantasy we have.

The characters are, in a sense, operating on an allegorical level. And as any great story-teller will attest, it is the allegorical, mythical characters who have the most staying power of all.