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['THE SOPRANOS']

'We wuz robbed,' fans complain

By Martin Miller and Carmen Gentile, Special to The Times
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The fat lady finally sang for "The Sopranos" on Sunday night, and when it was over, much of the audience was left shrieking — and not with pleasure.

This message from the Television Without Pity website was fairly typical: "David Chase, you and your show are dead to me."

Then there was this from an AOL message board devoted to the series finale: "I'm canceling my HBO tomorrow. After 7 years of watching 'The Sopranos,' I feel totally manipulated. What has happened to creativity and respect for the audience?"

In general, audiences weren't exactly clapping for the much-hyped and highly anticipated finale of HBO's "The Sopranos."

Rather, within moments of the show's ultimate close, thousands of "Sopranos" fans apparently ran to their keyboards and unleashed their disappointment and a few threats — many issued with the same dark humor that characterized what is frequently referred to as one of the best shows in television history — at series creator Chase and HBO alike.

Spoiler alert — stop reading if you haven't seen the finale and want to be surprised. But even those who saw it were left to puzzle out what might or might not happen to Tony Soprano and his family as they sat at a New Jersey restaurant waiting for either a meal or a violent death at the hands of ominous-looking characters who arrive just before the screen goes dark.

The vast majority of messages banged out within an hour of the show's unresolved conclusion on the East Coast thought the finale flamed out like A.J.'s yellow SUV.

A scant few argued that the finale's fade-to-black ending shortly after the onion rings arrived at the family's table was crystal clear — and brilliant and in keeping with Chase's unconventional storytelling and darkly existential vision.

"A wonderful ending," said another fan on the TVSquad .com website. "Why does everyone keep on expecting Chase to wrap it with a bow.... They should watch the CW for that crap."

At the Seminole Hard Rock Casino in Hollywood, Fla., where "Sopranos" fans paid as much as \$1,200 a plate to send off the landmark series with some of the cast, the reaction mirrored that of the Internet's message boards and chat rooms. Unflattering language, the kind that peppered the show and can't be printed in a family newspaper, dominated the swank affair.

Stefanie Papazonlou, 20, said the final episode was a cop-out. After the last scene, the North Jersey native cried out, "What the hell was that anyway?"

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Much of the cast showed up for the event, including a bearded James Gandolfini (looking somewhat lighter than the super-heavyweight Tony of the final season) and Tony Sirico, who played Paulie Walnuts. A crowd of about 400 was in the massive ballroom next to the casino, which was decked out like an overdone Mafia wedding, complete with large red sashes draping from the ceiling, 4-foot-tall rose centerpieces and crystal chandeliers. The wine was from the winery of Lorraine Bracco (Dr. Melfi).

Outdoor tables were set up like an old-fashioned Italian restaurant, complete with red-and-white tablecloths, along with an ice sculpture carved like the sign outside the Bada Bing. There also was a spread of Italian cold cuts that would have clogged even Tony Soprano's arteries.

The biggest gasp of the night came when Soprano rival Phil Leotardo was shot, then had his head run over with his own SUV.

But overall, the feeling was one of a letdown. Sheila McGee from Pembroke Pines, Fla., was disappointed. "They left us with a cliffhanger that won't be back."

But "Sopranos" fans shouldn't get hysterical, said Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University of Buffalo in New York. The gut reaction of fans is an indication of how much the audience loved the show and rightly so, said the author of "Law and Justice as Seen on TV."

"The finale was shocking and it was kind of a letdown," she said. "Without a doubt, it's one of the most amazingly important events in television history."

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Times staff writer Miller reported from Los Angeles; freelance writer Gentile reported from Hollywood, Fla.



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