A life after the ending

Sopranos creator David Chase says goodbye to the medium—and the show—that made him famous

by Jason Hollander / GAL ’07

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though, there will be no goons named Paulie Walnuts or Big Pussy. Chase is deciding between two ideas for his film: one set in the Jersey suburbs familiar to his audience, the other a departure into somewhere he’s never been before. In either case, the goal remains to entertain, most likely by way of his penchant for things “myopic, mushy, sad, and strange.”

Astute observers might even recognize some familiar preoccupations: “I think there will be elements that will seem similar because it’s the same person,” Chase explains. “I mean, every time you pick up a book, you know, Kurt Vonnegut is Kurt Vonnegut.”

One mainstay throughout Chase’s more than 30-year television career has been a proclivity to cast many roles. His first major gig was penning Kojak: The Night Stalker, followed by writing and producing jobs on The Ranch Files, Almost Genus, I’ll Fly Away, and Northern Exposure. That body of work, along with The Sopranos, garnered seven Emmy’s, a Golden Globe, and two Peabodys, as well as awards from the writers, director, and producers guilds of America. The bang-it-out, boot-camp pace of network TV forced Chase to stay focused and, more important, has kept the concept of the time when you pick up a book, you know, Kurt Vonnegut is Kurt Vonnegut.”

he says. “Since I’ve got some heat off the show, people are more interested in what I have to say.”

Die-hard Sopranos fans should keep their expectations in check, as good as television has been to him, Chase never faked any瘦身。TV journalists constructed elaborate theories based on bits of characters, who knew guys who were on the show. “That was the proper ending for that story,” he says. “I had no interest in seeing Tony Soprano go to prison. It would’ve been easy as hell to have him killed. Plenty of people could’ve killed him, maybe some of the fans. The Sopranos is about money. ‘Still, he did pour his heart into some shows and went out with a series as critically acclaimed as any in TV history. Even if his cinematic career someday eclipses his film, which promises to be 85,” he laughs, “I’m gonna be talking about The Sopranos every minute.”

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The Sopranos creator David Chase says goodbye to the medium—and the show—that made him famous

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A re you over it? It’s been nearly 16 months since your TV cut to black— with Meadow hustling toward the diner and Tony sipping on Jersey’s best onion rings. And then there was silence, and an obligatory roll of credits. And we were left, mouths agape, to sit with existential thoughts on mood more typically inspired by ticking seconds of our lives—a television. Then again, as The New Yorker once wrote, “Aristotelian conventions.”

But David Chase (WSC ’68), creator and executive producer of HBO’s eight-year-long, 86-episode cultural phenomenon, has moved on. At the ripe age of 63, he just signed his first contract to write, direct, and produce his own film. Though he has yet to set an official premiere date, the movie is entitled Kisko: The Night Stalker.

So, really, are you over it? It’s okay if you’re not.

Chase never faked any affinity for TV, saying he finds it “divisive” and “isolating.” He admits: “I did it for the money.”

Though there will be no goons named Paulie Walnuts or Big Pussy. Chase is deciding between two ideas for his film: one set in the Jersey suburbs familiar to his audiences, the other a departure he’s sure would “surprise” them. In either case, the goal remains to entertain, most likely by way of his penchant for things “mysterious, murky, sad, and strange.”

The Sopranos was the journey to the big screen, most likely by way of entertainment, mos likely by way of the major gig was penning Northern Exposure, followed by writing/directing The Night Stalker, followed by writing and producing jobs on The Rockford Files, Almost Gun, I’ll Fly Away, and Northern Exposure. That body of work, along with The Sopranos, garnered seven Emmys, a Golden Globe, and two Peabodys, as well as awards from the writers, directors, and producers guilds of America. The bang-it-out, boot- camp pace of network TV forced the bang-it-out, boot-camp pace of network TV forced.

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Die-hard Sopranos fans should now— I’ve ever thought about,” he says. “You just had to get the stuff out there because they were already as easy as hell to have him prano go to prison. It would’ve been easy as hell to have him killed, and maybe some body,murky,sad,and strange.”

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Ira Glass now has a distinctive face to match his distinctive voice. He may want to thank (or curse) Christopher Wilcha (CAS ’93), the documentary film director who helped bring Glass’s popular Chicago Public Radio show, *This American Life*, to television. Debuting on Showtime in 2007, the series marries intimate storytelling with grand shots in widescreen, and avoids that familiar shaky style of so many documentaries and reality shows. The result feels more like individual short films, which have gained favorable reviews, along with eight Emmy nominations in two seasons—including two for best director.

Success for the small screen’s *This American Life* has come about by a process of trial and error. In 2005 when Showtime asked Wilcha to direct the pilot, he knew he had to expect some difficulty in translating the acclaimed 10-year-old radio show into a visual medium because a series of earlier attempts by Glass and his colleagues had ended in failure. The philosophy graduate was then developing documentaries (and, to pay the bills, doing promotional spots) for MTV and PBS, having already won awards for his debut film, *The Target Shoots First*, which followed his experience working at a mail order music club. “There was always the risk that this thing was never going to see the light of day, that I would literally have this as a DVD coaster on my coffee table,” he says.

Part of the challenge was that the radio show often featured people talking about past events, which painted an interesting verbal picture. But this approach doesn’t yield particularly compelling visuals, and so Glass and Wilcha decided to tell stories that unfolded in real time, in front of the camera. Thus, each episode, hosted by the inimitable Glass in a style Wilcha describes as “cliché-averse” and “obsessed with surprise,” presents stories that relate to a central theme, such as “Underdogs” or “Scenes From a Marriage.” “As distinctive as the radio show is, we also wanted the visual version of it to have that kind of deliberateness and discipline and rigor,” Wilcha explains.

One standout episode from the first season follows a Utah artist who stages live, elaborate religious tableaus, which he then photographs and paints. Already a bit unusual, the story further unfolds to reveal that the man standing in for Jesus is a Marxist and graduate student whose longtime girlfriend, a lapsed Mormon, has complicated feelings about his starring role in the crucifixion. “There’s virtue in just looking and listening,” rather than relying on the radio convention of voice-over narration. The second season’s hour-long finale, titled “John Smith,” told the story of a single life through different men who happen to share the same name and who range in age from mere weeks to 79 years. In a style typical of the audio-only version of *This American Life*, these narratives touch on the connections and complications found in relationships, family, faith, and art.

While the first season playfully embraced some TV clichés—sitting itshost behind a classic-looking news desk positioned on the side of a road, in front of nuclear cooling towers, and atop the Utah salt flats—the second shed some of that quirkiness as it has grown into its own. “We felt a little less of a need for the host moments to be conceptually distinct,” Wilcha explains, adding that the team also discovered that “there’s virtue in just looking and watching and listening” rather than relying so much on the radio convention of voice-over narration. “I still sometimes cannot get over the immediacy and intimacy of radio,” Wilcha admits. “But I love the things that light can do, and the images you can make, the way that you can tell a story just using images and sound.”

Media

A Voice Made for TV

A Film Director Turns a Favorite Radio Show into Compelling Television

by Eryn Loeb / GSAS ’07
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Success for the small screen’s This American Life was anything but a given. In 2005 when Showtime asked Wilcha to direct the pilot, he knew he expected some difficulty in translating the acclaimed 10-year-old radio show into a visual medium because a series of earlier attempts by Glass and his colleagues had ended in failure. The philosophy graduate was then developing documentaries (and, to pay the bills, doing promotional spots) for MTV and PBS, having already won awards for his debut film, The Target Shoots First, which followed his experience working at a mail order music club. “There was always the risk that this thing was never going to see the light of day, that I would literally have this as a DVD coaster on my coffee table,” he says.

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Classical Music Midori in Motion
A Former Child Prodigy Expands Her Roles As Performer, Teacher, Ambassador, and Philanthropist by Janet Allon

MIDORI HAS RETURNED TO NEW YORK CITY. HER FORMER HOME. FOR SEVERAL CONCERTS DURING HER SILVER-ANNIVERSARY PERFORMANCE YEAR. Her former home is Tokyo, but both took Bach as inspiration.

"Classical music is sometimes regarded as either irrelevant or rarified, but both are institutions," Midori exerts to provide great insight and social commentary for her audiences. "But she never stopped recording—her long black dress with flaps of silver, it’s hard to look elsewhere. Her face is a mask of intensity, and her violin seems an extension of her, each note as sure and expressive as if it were her own voice. At 36, the world-famous violinist celebrated her 25th anniversary year in a concert career that began when she debuted at age 11 as a surprise soloist with the New York Philharmonic..."
FASHION FORWARD

YOUNG DESIGNERS STAKE A NEW CLAIM ON THE CATWALK

by Megan Doli / GSAS ’08

Fashion maven Sonia Huang (CAS ’99) bubbles over with excitement. Flitting about Suite Orchard in an emerald-hued disco romper from the fashion line Soni & Cindy, which she co-designs with her sister, Huang makes final preparations for the boutique’s one-year anniversary party. “I’m so nervous!” she exclaims. “I feel like it’s my wedding day!” The frothy, fluid garments that normally fill the Lower East Side boutique—with its pink, white, and gray-striped walls—have been spotted away to the basement to make space. And with the host’s impossibly stylish clothes, vertigo-inducing shoes, and candy-colored cocktail, it’s like stepping into a chapter of chick lit. “Our line is girly, edgy, and flirty,” Huang explains. “We like things with hearts and bows and stars on them.”

When she opened Suite Orchard, Huang joined the growing number of young designers who are foregoing the classical formation once expected of modistes. With a combination of on-the-job training and intuition, the former psychology student with no formal education represents a new wave of design talent. Spurred on by television shows such as Project Runway, featuring contestants with diverse backgrounds (and which was at least partly responsible for doubling the enrollment in the fashion department at Parsons the New School for Design), and helped in no small part by the Internet revolution, they are redefining the field.

Melissa Coker (STERN ’00), the Renaissance woman behind Wren Clothing, is the embodiment of the new interdisciplinary designer. “I know a lot of designers who have a variety of backgrounds, from the more traditional—who need more content, just by definition of how the Internet operates,” says Coker, who exhibited media acumen at L.A.’s Fashion Week last spring, collaborating with a filmmaker friend on videos to accompany the runway presentation of her “tarnished opulence” fall collection. “We had a great article on DailyCandy.com, and we’ve noticed that we’re coming up on blogs now,” says O’Neill, whose two-year-old line of classic pieces fused with contemporary details has already received an enviable amount of attention from new and traditional media alike. Other designers are actively exploiting the horizons opened up by the Web, advertising their talents on MySpace and Facebook. But with television and the Internet galvanizing a generation of sartorial aspirants, the field has become saturated with would-be Lagriffelis. Julie Chaiken (STERN ’93), a seasoned fashion veteran, considers differentiation the greatest challenge facing young designers today. “The consumer is overwhelmed with choices, so it’s harder in today’s world to stand out,” Chaiken notes, speaking from 14 years of experience as the head of Chaiken Clothing. Her own designs—created in an aesthetic termed “New American Luxury” by the couturiers—have caught the eyes of celebrity A-listers such as Angelina Jolie and Oprah Winfrey.

So what is a fledging fashionista to do? One way for designers to survive in a market saturated by domestic designers is to ventures outside of traditional markets. While big labels have always done that, it’s increasingly necessary for small start-ups to broaden their appeal as well. “We will be exporting more internationally. Up-and-coming menswear designer Adam Kimmel (CAS ’01) brought his bohemian catwalk-and-model-eschewing pantry last winter to Florence’s Pitti Uomo, a prestigious world fashion preview, coming rave reviews from the International Herald Tribune. O’Neill’s Porter Grey, already represented by one store in Ireland, debuts in seven stores in Japan this fall. And the Huang sisters’ pieces can be found on racks in Canada, Australia, and even Dubai. “I’ve always wanted to go to Dubai,” Sonia Huang declares, heaving at the prospect of a business trip.

LAUNCHED A MEN’S WEAR LINE; SONIA HUANG CO-DESIGNS WITH HER SISTER CINDY; AND MELISSA COKER ALSO LAUNCHED HER LINE, MELISSA COKER, A YEAR AGO.

Below from left: Alexandra O’Neill (right) co-founded the clothing line Porter Grey with her sister Kristen two years ago; Julie Chaiken has run her line, Chaiken Clothing, for 14 years; Adam Kimmel, recently launched a men’s wear line; Sonia Huang co-designs with her sister Cindy; and Melissa Coker also launched her line, Melissa Coker, a year ago.

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When she opened Suite Orchard, Huang joined the growing number of young designers who are forgoing the classical formation once expected of modistes. With a combination of on-the-job training and intuition, the former psychology student with no formal education in the industry, Huang started her line, Project Runway, three years ago—following Damu Lang, before landing her first job out of college at Vogue. After several years in the magazine industry, Coker accepted a job at Abercrombie & Fitch as a trend-forecaster, thus launching her career in apparel. Founding her line can translate into a cacophony of chatter in the blogosphere. Alexandra O’Neill (CAS ’98)—a dewy, young designer who co-founded Porter Grey with her older sister, Kristen—can attest to the Internet’s echo-chamber effect. “We had a great article on DailyCandy.com, and we’ve noticed that we’re coming up on blogs now,” says O’Neill, whose two-year-old line of classic pieces fused with contemporary details has already received an enviable amount of attention from new and traditional media alike. Other designers are actively exploiting the horizons opened up by the Internet, merging public recognition often lies fused with traditional media alike. Other designers are actively exploiting the horizons opened up by the Internet, merging public recognition often lies.

“Realistic anymore.” Christine notes, speaking from 14 years of experience as the head of Chaiken Clothing. Her own designs—created in an aesthetic termed “New American Luxury” by the couturiers—have caught the eyes of celebrity A-listers such as Angelina Jolie and Oprah Winfrey.

So what is a fledgling fashionista to do? One way for designers to survive in a market saturated by domestic designers is to venture over international borders. While big labels have always done that, it’s increasingly necessary for small start-ups to broaden their appeal as well. “We will be exporting more product and becoming more global,” Chaiken says, because focusing on the American market isn’t “realistic anymore.”

And many burgeoning designers have already braved out internationally. Up-and-coming men’swear designer Adam Kimmel (CAS ’91) brought his bohemian catwalk-and-model-esculapage last winter to Florence’s Pitti Uomo, a prestigious world fashion preview, earning rave reviews from the International Herald Tribune. O’Neill’s Porter Grey, already represented by one store in Ireland, debuts in seven stores in Japan this fall. And the Huang sisters’ pieces can be found on racks in Canada, Australia, and even Dubai. “I’ve always wanted to go to Dubai,” Sonia Huang declares, beaming at the prospect of a business trip.