

Interview: ‘The Sopranos’ Creator David Chase on ‘Not Fade Away’

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CHICAGO – It was one of the most famous endings in TV history. Tony Soprano, the patriarch of “The Sopranos,” waiting at a restaurant for his family while “Don’t Stop Believin’” was blaring on the soundtrack. It is that rock sensibility that permeates “Not Fade Away,” the new film by the creator of “The Sopranos,” David Chase.

“Not Fade Away” is the American journey of 1960s rock ‘n roll, influenced by the mid-decade British invasions, and is characterized through the persona of Douglas (John Magaro) as he tries to form a band during that time in New Jersey. Co-starring Chase’s old partner James Gandolfini as Douglas’s father Pat, and executive produced by Steven Van Zandt (Silvio in “The Sopranos”), the film celebrates the feeling that passionately brings back that unique era.



David Chase (right) Sets Up a Shot with James Gandolfini in ‘Not Fade Away’
Photo credit: Paramount Vantage

David Chase came from that time and place in New Jersey, but began writing after college for TV dramas during the 1970s in Los Angeles. He landed on the writing staff of “The Rockford Files,” and won his first Emmy for the show. After working on shows as diverse as “Northern Exposure” and “I’ll Fly Away” in subsequent years, he pitched HBO on “The Sopranos,” combining his love for gangster films like “Public Enemy” with touches of his own biography in developing the Soprano family. The series aired for six seasons between 1999 and 2007, becoming a cultural touchstone that culminated in the renown cut-to-black ending.

David Chase spoke to HollywoodChicago.com during the Chicago International Film Festival in October, as he premiered the film there. His love of rock ‘n roll and his passion for the film is evident in every frame of the experience – for both Chase and the audience. And yes, it has a great ending.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is such a beautiful tribute to one of the great moments in American cultural history, one that seems impossible to ever happen again. What did you want to get especially right about this film, to make sure that it had a truth and authenticity?

David Chase: I was out to capture what it was like to try to be an artist, in this case a musical artist, in this era. And that the music itself is intoxicating for those who play it. That’s what they’re there for, that’s why they play it. We’ve seen rock and roll biography pictures, but they never say anything about the music. The interaction between one musician to another, the feeding of licks, things like that. In ‘Not Fade Away,’ that’s the difference I wanted to show.

HollywoodChicago.com: Like the main character in ‘Not Fade Away,’ you lived on the East Coast during that period of rock renaissance. What did you want to communicate to actor John Magaro in his role as the main character Douglas, because he was essentially playing you during the era?

Chase: I don’t see the character as me, even though we were the same age during that time. What is true about him and me is his feelings about things, not necessarily about the events, but his feelings about music, his feelings about the girl – I remember those feelings. I didn’t approach it like it was me, and in fact I told John that, it was an acting job for him. Douglas was a character in and of himself, and John had to bring his part of that to the table.

HollywoodChicago.com: James Gandolfini is such an underrated actor, even after his spectacular run on your legendary series. What do think he brings to the role of Pat that other actors would have difficulty communicating, and what continues to astound you about his range?

Chase: Well, what continues to astound me is how much range he does have. His character Pat is hostile, but you see the love under all that hostility. He was great.



HollywoodChicago.com: The Rolling Stones, rather than The Beatles are the inspiration for Douglas in the film. How passionate was the Stones versus The Beatles debate back in the day, and now that all the time has gone by, which group do you think emerges most interestingly to the present day?

Chase: Friends of mine who weren’t musicians, who were alive back then, they tell me there was a Stones versus Beatles debate, but I observed that people liked them both. There was a difference in styles – for example, with my friends it was the attitude that was more of a Stones attitude than The Beatles, but even that has been discovered to be less true. The Stones were middle class kids, and The Beatles were more working class, tougher kids.

I made a joke once to somebody that I wanted to make this movie because the Stones never got the attention they deserve. That’s obviously ridiculous. They both created great compositions and unforgettable songs.

HollywoodChicago.com: This is as much an homage to the movies of the era as the music. How closely in your mind during your personal development back then did those two art forms merge, and how did it contribute to your own revolution evolution?

Chase: When the British invasion occurred, I could look at them and think ‘they’re in charge of their own future,’ because not only did they sing the music, but they write and play it. It was the first time that bell went off in my head, and alerted me to the meaning of ‘artist.’ In all the museums in New York City, where I would see the great painters and that was art, but that had nothing to do with me, because I could never do that. But when I heard the music, and as it matured to become more and more artful all the time, I began to think that maybe I could become some sort of artist.

I always loved movies. As a kid, I would go to the Saturday matinees and then act them out on the way home. And my father would

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occasionally take me to the movies during the week, on a school night. I always enjoyed that. And what happened with film during the same era is that it was going through it’s own transition. I went to see foreign films, that’s really what did it for me. Around 1966, I went to see Roman Polanski’s ‘Cul de Sac,’ and I remember coming out of the theater and thinking, ‘so that was made by one guy, not a factory like Warner’s Bros.’ I thought wouldn’t it be cool to be that guy who makes that movie. That was the first inkling I had that maybe I would do something like that.

HollywoodChicago.com: Why was it important to have the character of Douglas’s sister as the detached observer and narrator in this film, especially on how the other characters interact and journey around her?

Chase: Well, the movie is about the five musicians, and we get their point of view about rock and roll by hearing the Stones, The Beatles and The Kinks around them, but I wanted to get another view regarding the people who loved the music and wanted to dance to it. It’s the audience point of view, the casual listener. I wanted to have her in there.

HollywoodChicago.com: Going back to ‘The Rockford Files,’ what was your take on the character of Jim Rockford, how did you contribute to it when you joined the show?

Chase: They screened the show for me before I came onto the writing staff, and I thought that this character had a feeling of place and time, it took place in a Los Angeles that I recognized. There was something realistic about it, strangely enough, it had texture. I brought a bit of a counter-cultural tilt to it.

HollywoodChicago.com: In re-imagining and re-exploring the American civil rights movement during your writing stint on the series ‘I’ll Fly Away,’ what in your memory did you want to communicate regarding those difficult times, and the difficult relationship between 1960s white and black America?

Chase: My personal goal was that I had a kid then who was about ten years old, and the American school system being what it was and is, that there were probably a lot of kids who didn’t know how hard fought that movement was. That African Americans really had to fight just be at the level we see them now. Even African American kids might not know what their grandparents went through.



‘The Sopranos’ (James Gandolfini, Edie Falco and Robert Iler) Await Their Fate in the Final Episode
Photo credit: HBO Home Entertainment

HollywoodChicago.com: One question about “The Sopranos,’ Who thought up the idea for the famous ending, how was the structure realized and developed in how it played out, and WHAT was your initial reaction to the backlash?

Chase: I thought of the ending. It came about because every year ‘The Sopranos’ was on, it would come to the end of the season and HBO would never say to me, while the season was going on or even after the season folded, that they wanted us to come back for another year. I would wait and wait, and I think the reason they wouldn’t do it because they knew when they said they wanted to renew, that I would say ‘here’s what it’s going to cost.’ [laughs] We did it on a year by year, season by season basis.

At some point, Chris Albrecht [CEO of HBO at the time] came to me and told me that I should start thinking about how it was going to end. This was about two years out, and it was his idea to have it actually end. So I started thinking about it then, and setting it up.

As far as the backlash, I was just surprised about how long it went on. I thought Monday or Tuesday, maybe Wednesday, it would continue. But it went on for months and months. [laughs] One thing I got ticked off a bit, is that people just wanted to see Tony shot. If you loved the character, why would you want to see that?

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HollywoodChicago.com: How do think it has been accepted as part of show business culture in general?

Chase: I don’t know. I was in France when the final episode aired, and I didn’t have a wi-fi connection to the world. I came back to New York after five months, hooked in again, and I started seeing all the stuff, especially the unkind things that was being said. I was amazed by the depth of it, and how passionate people got about it. People loved the show, yes, but the internet is also a repository of hostility and anonymous sniping.

HollywoodChicago.com: You don’t direct that much, relative to the wealth of content that you create. What is your philosophy in taking your own written material and making it appear visually, and what past director’s visual style is your inspiration?

Chase: My influences are Hitchcock, and hopefully Kubrick, it doesn’t get any better than that. I write something, and in doing that process I know there is something that reality won’t allow me to do if I’m directing, but I just take the material and start blocking it, and then tell the story visually.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, and not to be morbid, but what rock song do you want to played at your funeral,?

Chase: I’d probably change this every five minutes, so I’ll list that I really like ‘She Belongs to Me’ and ‘Mr. Tambourine Man’ by Bob Dylan, and ‘Baba O’Reilly’ by The Who.

“Not Fade Away” continues its limited release in Chicago on December 28th. See local listings for show times and theaters. Featuring John Magaro, James Gandolfini, Brad Garrett, Christopher McDonald and Meg Guzulescu. Written and directed by David Chase. Rated “R”



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