



**KINGS OF
MADISON AVENUE**
THE UNOFFICIAL GUIDE TO
MAD MEN
BY JESSE MCLEAN




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ECW Press

MAD MEN

A term coined in the late 1950s to describe the advertising executives of Madison Avenue.

They coined it.

— *Mad Men* pilot “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”

Smoking, Drinking, Selling:

It’s Don Draper’s World and We Just Live in It



On July 19, 2007, at 10 p.m, AMC aired the inaugural episode of their first original drama, *Mad Men*. This debut airing garnered a 1.4 share in the Nielsen ratings (approximately 1.5 million viewers), an increase of 75 percent in viewership for AMC in that time slot. Viewership increased with each successive episode along with a groundswell of critical appreciation, a cultural impact unlike any television program in recent history, including two Golden Globe wins (for Best Drama and lead actor Jon Hamm), the prestigious Peabody Award, and six Emmys for the first season.

Drawing inspiration from many cinematic predecessors (*A Guide for the Married Man*, *The Apartment*) as well as literary (the collected fiction of John Cheever, J. D. Salinger, Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, and Helen Gurley Brown’s *Sex and the Single Girl*), *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner crafted a show that fulfills an audience’s hunger for intelligent drama about complex characters, all delivered with an irresistibly slick layer of dramatic irony.

In theory, this show should have filmed once Weiner typed the final Fade Out on the pilot script. Why, then, did it take five years from the initial writing before *Mad Men* aired to such a receptive audience? How could a show with this high-quality pedigree not find a home on original programming standard-bearer Home Box Office (HBO), particularly one created by a writer/producer on their signature hit *The Sopranos*?

Whether a result of myopia or laziness, this stumble from the once



and long-thought future home of peerless television drama missed a chance to harness one of this century's first breakout hits. And when it comes to that kind of top-drawer original cable programming, they should have known better.

They invented it.

Matthew Weiner

Portrait of the Writer/Producer as a Young Man

The reverence for New York's 1960s heyday is an important element to the success of *Mad Men*. All the more interesting in that Matthew Weiner was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland.

The love of all things Manhattan came, indirectly, from Weiner's parents. His mother grew up in the Bronx, while his father spent his formative years in Manhattan proper. Julia Weiner studied law but never practiced, and Leslie Weiner forged a career for himself as an eminent neuroscientist. But once they made the decision to start a family, they left the guys and dolls of Forty-second Street for the safety of Maryland.

"Once my parents left New York, they had nothing nice to say about



The cast gathers for a Golden Globe win. From left to right: Jon Hamm, January Jones, John Slattery, Matthew Weiner, Elisabeth Moss, Christina Hendricks, and Vincent Kartheiser. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

it,” Weiner said in an interview for the *New York Times*. “But I loved going to visit my grandparents, going past the Empire State Building and trying to crane your head out the window.”

The third of four children, Weiner grew up in a household that placed a premium on debate.

“My family is made out of argument. There is argument, there is discourse, you better stick up for yourself. My sister is a journalist, my other sister is a physician, my little brother is a physician, my mother is an attorney. There is direct conversation of the deepest, most profound, intellectual sort.”

This appetite for rigorous intellectual discourse has served Weiner well. After his family moved to southern California, Weiner began an educational path that led him to a combined program of philosophy, history, and literature at Wesleyan University. It was an invaluable education that directly affected the influences on *Mad Men*, which are as literary as they are cinematic.

Weiner not only flourished under the deft touch of Wesleyan film and television department head Jeanine Basinger, he also discovered a kindred spirit in fellow student and Basinger acolyte Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*, *Dollhouse*). Word has it that while at Wesleyan, Weiner and Whedon often engaged in a friendly academic rivalry, where one’s highly regarded project countered with another’s even farther reaching entry. And even though their professional lives have never crossed, there is an unmistakable correlation between their arcs: talented writers who toiled on other people’s shows before launching their own, medium-changing efforts.

While Wesleyan is one of the highest ranked colleges in the United States, success in the program Weiner attended was not gauged by a traditional grading system. As a result, Weiner could only pursue his MFA in Film Studies at University of Southern California after strong lobbying on his behalf by his father — a task more easily completed due to Dr. Weiner’s esteem in the academic community (culminating in the dedication of a neurological research center at the University of Southern California in his name).

Weiner hit his academic stride in the Film Studies program. His personal life also took flight when, after graduating from University of Southern California, he married architect Linda Brettler. This union with



an established professional provided the financial support Weiner required during his early attempts to find employment as a screenwriter — other than winnings from a stint on *Jeopardy!*, those first years saw Weiner contributing little income to the marriage.

During this process, Weiner made an independent film at his wife's urging, and while the final product never saw a commercial release, private screenings did land him work as an uncredited joke writer for the short-lived 1996 FOX sitcom *Party Girl*. This, in turn, resulted in work as a writer/producer on subsequent sitcoms *The Naked Truth* and *Andy Richter Controls the Universe*. While neither of these shows had a long shelf life, Weiner did parlay his experience into a staff position on the long-running if critically dismissed sitcom *Becker*.

Finally making a living as a writer, Weiner encountered a career crisis when he realized that penning formulaic plots and lock-step setup/punch line japes failed to fulfill his artistic yen. And while the dismal prospects of such a career may have darkened his days, it ultimately inspired him. He tried to write his way out of the professional doldrums when he spent his off hours working on a story, a character, and a moment in time that had always intrigued him.

“There's too much smoking,” was the response Weiner received when he pitched his show idea to a select few. Those who heard Weiner explain his intentions for the show felt the era too remote, the protagonist inscrutable, the environment toxic and bereft of empathy. Undaunted, Weiner proceeded to write his pilot. Already a veteran of the television game, Weiner no doubt realized that an audience hungry for intelligent drama would vault past their distaste of any profession. Nobody likes lawyers, but how many hit shows have detailed their exploits?

David Chase, creator of HBO juggernaut *The Sopranos*, read Weiner's pilot script as a piece of sample writing and responded immediately. The distinct voice, point-of-view, and respect for the audience dovetailed with his own sensibilities. Chase offered Weiner the opportunity to join his show as a writer/producer.

Weiner wrote or co-wrote twelve episodes over the following five years, won a Writer's Guild of America award and two Emmys for his work as producer. All the while, his pilot script for *Mad Men* sat in the desk drawer and waited.

Once *The Sopranos* concluded and relinquished its stranglehold on

the critical and cultural imagination, Weiner dusted off his beloved script. After his years at HBO, Weiner understandably felt that he would find a welcome home at the network for his whip-smart take on a pivotal moment in American history.

This would prove an equally pivotal moment in Weiner's history.

From Made Men to Mad Men

In 1965, a man named Charles Dolan won the rights to create a cable system in lower Manhattan. He knew that the key to success in this tough market was as much a matter of geography as programming; while the crowded Manhattan skyline impressed, the tall buildings hampered television reception. Mr. Dolan conquered this obstacle with a new system that snaked miles of cable beneath the streets of New York, the first urban underground cable system in America. He called the system Sterling Manhattan Cable.

Dolan received investment from Time Life Inc. and by 1972 launched the cable channel Home Box Office. Initially a pay-TV service offering uncut motion pictures and top-line sports events, HBO soon expanded its mandate and began producing original programming in 1977. Movies and series produced under the HBO banner took advantage of the loosened standards of basic cable and created programming that brimmed with adult themes, violence, and profanity that could never find a home on network television. For a number of years, HBO became synonymous with the R-rated nature of its content rather than a standard-bearer of quality.

All that changed on January 10, 1999, when HBO aired the first episode of *The Sopranos*. An unlikely critical and commercial hit about a New Jersey mob boss who struggles with violent usurpers, a controlling mother, and anxiety attacks, *The Sopranos* became the yardstick by which all other television dramas were measured. Creator David Chase's passion project became the first cable series to win the Emmy for Outstanding Drama, garnered a number more for acting, citations from every major entertainment guild, as well as the prestigious George Foster Peabody Award.

When *The Sopranos* came to an end on June 10, 2007, HBO found itself in a curious position. After building an empire through original programming that won over audiences and critics alike, they faced the prospect of a pale schedule that had once been robust. Not only had *The*



Sopranos finished its run, audience favorite *Sex and the City* had concluded in 2004, the award-winner *Six Feet Under* expired in 2005, and epic Western odyssey *Deadwood* shuttered to a stop in 2006. Other highly touted shows like *The Wire* and *Rome* exhibited a complexity and overwhelming narrative scope comparable to *The Sopranos*, but they never wooed a sizable audience despite bouquets of lavish critical notices. And while ratings performer *Entourage* continued to build momentum and win over initial skeptics, David Milch's *Deadwood* follow-up *John from Cincinnati* stalled out of the gate. *Big Love* was framed as the heir apparent to Tony Soprano's HBO throne (signaled by the series opener following *The Sopranos*' season 6 premiere in March 2006), and while it has since evolved into a critical and audience favorite, it started slowly and left many wondering if the patriarchal polygamist did not have the frame required to fill Tony's seat at the head of the HBO table.

Fresh off his successful writing/producing stint on *The Sopranos*, Matthew Weiner saw an excellent opportunity to jump-start his gestating pilot for *Mad Men*. David Chase delivered Weiner's script to HBO executives with enthusiasm and approval. "It was what you were hoping to see," Chase remarked about Weiner's pilot script. "[It] was lively and had something new to say. Here was someone who had written a story about advertising in the 1960s and was looking at recent American history through that prism."

What better place for the exploits of advertising house Sterling Cooper than at the cable company founded on the Sterling Manhattan Cable system?

Unfortunately, HBO executives did not seem to appreciate the symmetry. More accurately, it is difficult to know *what* they thought; despite early rumors of a rejection from HBO, they did not pass on the project. They simply did not respond.

On October 10, 2007, *Variety* TV critic Brian Lowry moderated a Q & A at the Paley Center for Media with *Mad Men* cast and creator Matthew Weiner. During the discussion, Weiner confirmed that HBO did not respond to his pilot script, or his phone calls. A baffling response from such a seasoned player in the high-quality original programming game it invented.

Even stranger is the disregard for personal relationships. "All I can tell you is that it was very disappointing to me," Weiner said of the situation. "Because I was part of the family."



Mad Men rakes in Emmy awards in 2008. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

When Charlie Collier assumed stewardship of the cable network AMC (formerly standing for American Movie Classics) in 2006, his intention was to dramatically alter its course. Primarily known for airing movies from the 1950s and earlier, Collier hoped to change the stuffy image of the network by providing audacious, original programming. After the success of Robert Duvall's miniseries *Broken Trail*, Collier knew that the time had come to plunge into a continuing series. He read a pilot script from a former writer of *The Sopranos*, liked what he saw, and jumped on the chance for a daring first series.

"When the creative community sees a *Mad Men*," Collier said later, "They know we're willing to take risks."

A notorious perfectionist, Matthew Weiner found the perfect home for his pet project. "They completely trusted me . . . With the exception of three lines, the pilot was the script I had written five years before that."

While HBO might have seemed the natural place for *Mad Men* to flourish, further inspection suggests otherwise. HBO's original programming not only takes full advantage of the creative freedom their cable status provides, it also exploits this independence from the strict censorship of the public airwaves. Marketing for *The Sopranos* relied almost as heavily



on its violence and language as it did its quality. *Mad Men*, while a supremely adult show, features no violence and only PG 13-level language (the kind often heard in FX series such as *The Shield* or *Nip/Tuck*). True, there is a long history of quality original programming on HBO, but there isn't the same kind of connection to history shared by AMC and *Mad Men*. What better home for a series with allusions to the 1947 film *Gentleman's Agreement*, 1956's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, 1960's *The Apartment* and 1967's *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* than a network founded on airing those kinds of films?

And while HBO may be home to critical acclaim, *Mad Men* has already surpassed any expectations for a successor of *The Sopranos*. In the show's short run it has already eclipsed Emmy nominations for any single season of *The Sopranos*, and, in fact, any other drama in television history.

The cultural impact of Weiner's series is already more profound than the mafia series he worked on. Advertising agencies have harkened back to the glory days depicted in *Mad Men*, with Philadelphia-based agency Red Tettemer redesigning their website in honor of the series, and dressing their entire staff in era-appropriate pomade-laden hair and conical bras.

Speaking of fashion, Weiner's mania for accuracy in 1960 period details affected the runways in 2008. Celebrated designer Michael Kors launched a *Mad Men*-inspired clothing line in February of that year, complete with wool cardigans and short-brimmed fedoras. And while *The Sopranos* can lay claim to a strong influence on the cultural zeitgeist, nobody wore nylon track suits or loud short-sleeved Burma Bibas shirts in deference to the show.

The Soprano crime family may have cast a long shadow during its six season run, but Don Draper and the men and women of Sterling Cooper stepped into the limelight before the end of the first season. Some might say they cast an even longer shadow.

The Road Behind and the Road Ahead

Matthew Weiner has charted a long, crooked road to success with his pet project. Through the prism of self-made man Don Draper's adventures in the advertising world of 1960s New York, Weiner allows the audience to view the many facets of American culture that experienced overwhelming metamorphoses in that exhilarating time, from gender politics and the first cracks in the glass ceiling, to presidential politics during the

Kennedy/Nixon campaigns. There also emerged a mainstream acceptance of psychoanalysis, and a revolutionary change in notions of race via the Civil Rights movement. As well, a growing social consciousness changed the role of American youth in society, and, along with the culture, advertising itself underwent a seismic change.

Mad Men provides a fizzy cocktail of crackerjack writing, intoxicating costume and set design, along with a splash of sweet irony that provides as much insight into the distant past as it does into our current world.

Please click here to view "Kings of Madison Avenue" on Amazon.ca.



CAST BIOGRAPHIES

I was forced to grow up very early . . . that tends to take a lot of childhood out of the equation and you become very aware of adult things.

— Jon Hamm

JON HAMM – “DON DRAPER”

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 10, 1971, Jon Hamm was to know the solitude of an only child. He also came to know heartache at a very young age, with his parents’ divorce when he was only two years old. He lived with his mother, only seeing his father every other weekend. He struggled to find happiness in this lonely and fractured existence, and in some measure succeeded.

“I do have very good memories of being a kid running around, but that all pretty much got lost.”

When he was ten, Hamm’s mother developed a stomach ache that would not subside. What she first thought an inconvenient malady turned out to be advanced cancer that spread quickly to her internal organs. A radical surgical procedure removed two-thirds of her colon and along with it, doctors hoped, the cancer that ravaged her body. She did not survive the surgery.

Hamm moved in with his father who also lived in St. Louis, and while this saved him a geographical upheaval he still had to grapple with an emotional one.

“I loved my dad and [until then] would see him every other weekend,” Hamm noted in an interview with *The Observer*. “It wasn’t like he was this guy I didn’t know.”

Hamm’s father had two other children from a previous marriage, one





**"I appreciate alcohol. I love the place that alcohol holds in our society, but I'd never attempt to drink as much as Draper."
(AP Photo/Matt Sayles)**

of whom he lived with at the time. Also at the house was Hamm's eighty-year-old grandmother. Despite the surrounding blood relations, one can only imagine the isolation a ten-year-old Jon Hamm endured in such a situation.

The time spent with his father did help inform the character that would bring Hamm to the spotlight. A successful businessman in the 1960s, Hamm's father bears much surface resemblance to a certain Madison Avenue ad man.

"My dad would have been twenty-seven or twenty-eight in 1960 . . . he would have had a Don Draper-type sway over things."

Early exposure to theater (Hamm starred as Winnie the

Pooh in a grade school production of the bear's adventures) led to a life-long interest in acting, which resulted in his attendance at the University of Missouri to study theater on a full scholarship. Hamm's desire to immerse himself in another person may well have sprung from his truncated formative years.

"Acting is sort of an extension of childhood," Hamm has said. "You get to play all of these roles and have so much fun . . . I wouldn't turn down any of that."

While a theater major, Hamm eked out a living in unrelated fields like so many of his fellow actors. Instead of making his way exclusively as a waiter or bartender however, Hamm opted for a role as educator. Immersed in his studies, Hamm worked at a daycare center where he led his students in "after-school stuff." And for a short while after graduating, Hamm returned to his high school alma mater, John Burroughs School in