

Mobsters -- real and fictional -- captivate public

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(Photo: File photo by Anthony Nese, HBO)

What's with the fascination with mobsters?

This week, we've been served up a trifecta of oldie-but-goodie Mob memories that continue to dominate cable news, the Internet, late night comedy shows and social media.

Near Detroit, the legacy of Jimmy Hoffa resurfaced (but the body didn't) when the FBI, acting on a tip, spent several days digging up a Michigan field to find the remains of the former Teamsters boss with Mafia ties. Hoffa, declared legally dead in 1982, was last seen in 1975. Yet the tantalizingly popular "Where's Jimmy?" game lives on.

In South Boston, the racketeering trial of 83-year-old crime boss James "Whitey" Bulger continues to draw intense interest and media coverage, mostly on the testimony of hitman John Martorano, aka "the Executioner." The former Bulger associate — paroled after serving 12 years for 20 murders — has provided riveting testimony detailing Bulger's alleged involvement in sordid murders and other crimes. Bulger, the inspiration for 2006 mobster film *The Departed*, was arrested in 2011 after being on the lam for 16 years.

Mobster mania came to a nearly severed head Wednesday night, following the untimely death of James Gandolfini, most memorable for his role as New Jersey Mob boss Tony Soprano on HBO's *The Sopranos*. Six years after the series wrapped — HBO continues to air repeats — mourners are paying homage outside the Jersey Satin Dolls strip club that served as the show's infamous Bada Bing and the suburban mansion where the fictional Sopranos lived.

The collective grief seems almost as big over the finality of Tony the TV mobster as it is to Gandolfini, the previously under-the-radar, 51-year-old character actor who won fame and three Emmys portraying him. "Tony Soprano made the Mob relevant, mainstream and — dare I say — acceptable," says Lance Fensterman of pop culture and marketing firm ReedPop.

The public's perception between actor and their characters can be blurry. Gandolfini's bearish, volatile Tony Soprano was nothing like the sensitive, nice guy that friends and associates knew. "(The public) knows the character; they don't know the actor," Fensterman says. "And they feel a sense of ownership. It's the blurring of the lines between what's reality and what's fiction."

Moreover, "Americans often have a hard time separating the character from the actor," says Kathy Newman, a professor of popular culture at Carnegie Mellon University.

That may be especially true regarding mobster types. Syndicated columnist April Masini says real or fictional, mobsters hold wide appeal because they're "the ultimate bad boys."

"Nice guys finish last. Yes, it's a cliché, but it comes from real-life experience we all have where we see bad boys and mobsters doing all right for themselves and doing it in style. And that makes people want them — on their television screens, in their movie theaters, and even in their real lives," Masini says.

As news events, gangsters — real and imaginary — are prime TV fodder.

"If you can connect a news story with a particular movie or a movie genre, it goes a long way," says Andrew Tyndall of ADT Research, which analyzes newscasts. Producers are "always looking for a good visual to illustrate a story," he says. The use of gangster-movie clips with Hollywood production values provides a "very easy shorthand" that may lead them to devote more airtime to the subject than a more mundane trial or other event, Tyndall says.

The collective interest in Mob Week, for want of a better term, began in the 1920s.

Richard Mangan, a 25-year veteran with the Drug Enforcement Administration who teaches courses on organized crime at Florida Atlantic University, says the fascination with mobsters was launched with media coverage of gangsters such as Al Capone. Popular journalists such as Walter Winchell

frequently reported on the underworld in syndicated columns and on radio.

"Many people fantasize life as a gangster, regardless of whether it is the American Mafia or other organized crime groups," Mangan says. "Much of the fantasy, of course, is inaccurate and intentionally portrayed as glamorous in movies and television. But folks who believe that gangsters are rich, drive fancy cars, have beautiful women around them, never wait in line at a great restaurant and appear to be above the law will often aspire to live that life, knowing in reality, that event will never happen."

The early box office success of Mob-themed films was fueled by over-the-top performances such as James Cagney's grapefruit-in-your-face gangster in 1931's *The Public Enemy*. *The Godfather*, regarded by many film critics as one of the greatest films ever, endures 40 years after its release. Cable channel AMC acquired exclusive basic-cable rights to the film three years ago. It's a centerpiece of AMC's annual August Mob Week of gangster-themed films.

"They've done consistently well with our core audience," says AMC President Charlie Collier. AMC aired Mob-themed *Goodfellas* as a lead-in to the first-season premiere of *Mad Men*. AMC series *Breaking Bad* — which returns Aug. 11 — centers on a mild mannered chemistry teacher-turned-drug kingpin. Series creator Vince Gilligan pitched the series as "*Mr. Chips* turns into *Scarface*," Collier says.

HBO's current gang-theme series, the Prohibition-era *Boardwalk Empire*, may lack the long-term enduring popularity of *The Sopranos* and Mob-themed films, but it does feature one of the broadest demographic arrays of mobsters to date, with prominent backstories of African-American, Jewish, Irish and Italian gangsters.

Past or present mobsters "give the average person a chance to feel, even through fiction, that they are associated with something strong, powerful and connected," notes Scott Foulkrod, a law and forensics professor at Pennsylvania's Harrisburg University of Science and Technology. The Mafia "has the draw of high-power business yet the allure of being in the shadows."

The outpouring of shock over Gandolfini's death is an example of what's known as "media grief," said Paul Levinson, a professor of media studies at Fordham University. "Media grief is where we grieve over the deaths of people that we don't know personally but who we've come to know through the media," he said.

What makes Gandolfini's death even more significant is the the series' infamous finale, says Levinson, who organized the first academic conference about *The Sopranos* in 2008.

"In the finale you see this incredible ending where it just cuts to black. It's an enormously ambiguous ending; you could decide whether he died or not. That made such an indelible mark. And now when the actor dies it feeds into all the previous concern and feelings we had when that aired," Levinson said.

Gandolfini's death also killed any possibility of *The Sopranos'* return to film or TV. "There's always hope whenever there's an ambiguous ending. It cries out for more," Levinson says.

Show creator David Chase recently said he was contemplating a potential movie. With Gandolfini's death, "it can never happen," Levinson says.

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