

Tony vs. Al, by Dan Hershfield

SOPRANOS THEME (PLAYING UNDER, WITH A FADE OUT)

When Tony Soprano first burst onto the scene, he was far and away the scariest thing on TV. And not only was he scary, but he seemed to be real. Sometimes, a little too real. It was all the more terrifying to see Tony run down some deadbeat in his car, after having just seen him fawning over some baby ducks. And as the episodes accumulated, so did the body count, and Tony's position as the scariest man on TV seemed, dare I say...untouchable?

But then something happened.

DEADWOOD THEME (PLAYING UNDER, WITH A FADE OUT)

Deadwood. Even the name was scary. And the place, just as scary. It's 1876, and Deadwood is a frontier town sitting atop the richest gold strike in American history. The place is overrun with all kinds of vermin, and at the centre of it all is Al Swearngen. Technically, Al runs the Gem Saloon-slash-whorehouse, but really, he runs Deadwood. Really runs it. There's not a thing that goes on in town that he doesn't know about. And talk about vicious.

In the first episode, he savagely beats up one of his whores.

DEADWOOD 1.1, 19:24-49

He makes his contribution to genocide.

DEADWOOD 1.1, 47:11-25

And there was something else...

DEADWOOD 1.1, 49:31-33

Oh, that's right. And he ordered a murder. This was one bad dude.

And, if Tony Soprano was realistic, Al was beyond realistic. He was historic! There was in the real Deadwood a real Al Swearngen, and by all accounts, he was just as nasty a character as his TV counterpart. This was definitely a contender for Tony's title.

But as time has passed, the waters have muddied. They both have their own styles and both could easily lay claim to being the scarier, depending on your perspective. For instance, whose murders are scarier, the cold-blooded Al's or the hot-blooded Tony's? And which is the scarier world: the Mafia or the Old West? Arguments can be made either way.

And since no one else has stepped up, I'm here to make them. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the first official Scariest TV Character cage match.

FANFARE SOUND EFFECT (IF AVAILABLE)

First Challenge: The Reality Factor. Now, Tony Soprano is not real. I know this. But the point is, he could be. Whereas Al Swearengen was real. But now he's dead. And even if he was alive, he'd be pushing two hundred, so I could probably take him. Probably. And so, by sheer virtue of the fact that Tony Soprano lives in our timeline, he is more of a threat. Point to Tony.

Next, what I like to call the Freud Factor. Both these guys had really, really, really bad mothers. And if modern storytelling, from Greek drama to Hitchcock, has taught us nothing else, it's that the worse your mother was, the scarier you will be. So, let's compare.

Al, tell us about your mother.

DEADWOOD 1.11, 55:19-56:38

Yikes. That's going to be hard to beat. Tony?

SOPRANOS 1.13, 21:07-09

Yep. That's the topper. Al may have some serious abandonment issues, but Tony's mother tried to have him killed. That hurts. And if that wasn't enough, he tried to return the favor.

SOPRANOS 1.13, 53:22-53:33

Tony Soprano, owner of the most serious mother issues in the history of television. Another point to Tony.

Which leads us to our next category, the Therapy Factor. Clearly, these are two fellows with messed-up pasts. But they both have advisors they turn to for guidance. For Tony's "issues," he turns to his therapist, Dr. Melfi. And while a lot of what he says in therapy is scary-scary:

SOPRANOS 2.6, 4:59-5:02

A lot of what he says is, well, the other kind of scary:

SOPRANOS 1.1, 50:43-51:07

And what is Swearengen's solution? What is Al's Old West therapy technique?

DEADWOOD 2.8, 26:05-17

He talks to an Indian head in a box. Nuff said. Point, Al.

Next up, the Brushes with Death factor. This category occurred to me because both of these characters had injuries which had them hovering near death for several episodes, and there is nothing scarier than a guy who just won't die. So who survived the scarier injury? Well, Tony got shot in the gut, and Al just had kidney stones, so you would think this one would go to Tony, but not so fast. These weren't just any old kidney stones, these were Old West kidney stones, and I have never seen anyone look in more pain than backed-up Al. Also, though I'm remiss to count it against him, when Tony was laid up in a coma, he dreamed of a life where he was a well-mannered working-stiff salesman. That kind of soul-searching may be admirable, but it's not so scary. I'm giving this one to Al.

Which brings us to a tie, and to our ultimate tiebreaker, the What Would They Do to the Likes of Me factor. This is an important category for me, and it probably is for you too. Because as you watch these shows, scary as these guys are, they mostly go after people in their spheres, people who, in their logic, had it coming. Generally, the people who don't get in their way don't get hurt.

Al in particular is calculating. Even people who watch Deadwood religiously have a hard time following what he's saying, so intricate is his scheming. He may be quick to murder, but it's always got a reason to it. Tony, on the other hand, has some rage issues.

SOPRANOS 2.6, 6:00-16

In other words, he's mad at us. And lest you dismiss this as ranting to his shrink, here's a little slice of Tony in action.

SOPRANOS 4.1, 16:17-17:10

Tony Soprano, winner and still champion. (SOPRANOS THEME UNDER) I'm going to miss you, you crazy mobster, you. But to be honest, I just might sleep a little better too.

For DNTD, I'm Dan Hershfield.

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Intro: Dan Hershfield asks the question: "TV, TV, on the wall, who's the scariest man of all?"

Outro: Dan Hershfield, a forgotten victim of Tony Soprano's reign of terror.