

TV Monday

Catching up with Tony

By MICHAEL GILTZ

THE Sopranos has been so all over the media, that it's easy to forget one simple fact: 70 million homes don't get HBO.

For all those people, the real premiere happened in December when the first season of "The Sopranos" finally came out on DVD and video.

Suddenly, a whole new wave of fans who had previously heard friends and family gossiping about Tony and Carmella — but never seen them — have caught Soprano fever.

They are a year and half behind the wave — and complaining bitterly that they can't catch up. "We could tell looking at the numbers that a lot of people watching the third season hadn't seen the first," says Cynthia Rhea, the vice president of marketing for HBO. That's one reason why fans are clamoring for season two.

"People are already asking when the next set is coming out," says the manager of a Newark, N.J. Blockbuster video store. (He refused to give his name, leaving you to wonder if he's in the witness protection program.)

That's reflected online with pleading comments on Amazon.com like, "Please tell me that the second and third season will be coming out."

HBO hasn't made any official announcement yet, but it seems likely they'll repeat the pattern set with the first release.

So look for Season Two to come out in December, a few months

Newest mob opera fans stuck in Year One

before Season Four starts, giving HBO a chance to get a little more mileage out of its exclusivity.

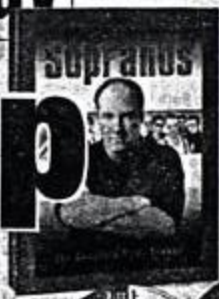
But some fans looking for Season Two on video don't like to take "no" for an answer.

"We get phone calls and email through HBO.com," says Rhea. "We had one guy that got through the switchboard. Right after Season One came out, he wanted to get Season Two. 'I'll pay anything,'" he said.

"We told him there was nothing to send even if we wanted to. 'But I'll pay anything,' he kept saying."

For sure, the new generation of fans appears as passionate as those who have followed since the first season in 1999.

Fan web sites and viewer comments on Amazon.com and elsewhere are filled with comments like this from Carol Irvin, who says, "I normally never watch anything on TV [but] I decided to watch the DVD set, and others who say they don't have HBO or just a caught an episode at a friend's house or in a hotel room.



With so much chatter about "The Sopranos," people without HBO had to go out and rent the tapes of the show. Now they're hooked — and hopelessly behind. A whole new wave of fans are refusing to watch this year's episodes until Season Two comes out on tape, too.

That pent-up demand from viewers intrigued by all the fuss is one reason the \$100 boxed set is still on the charts almost four months later. (That's also why the "Sex and the City" boxed set is still on the charts almost a year after it came out.)

You'd need a wiretap at HBO to find out how many copies it's sold — the network keeps the number secret — but Eileen Fitzpatrick, who covers the video industry for Billboard, has a good idea.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it had sold about 500,000 copies of video and DVD combined," says Fitzpatrick. As she has discovered: "Classic TV always does well on video."

But the rise of risqué cable shows are a special case.

Unlike "I Love Lucy" or "Friends" (which is also on the charts with a best-of compilation), "The Sopranos" hasn't spent years in reruns and syndication. And syndication — even on basic cable — won't really fulfill demand

since "The Sopranos" would have to be edited down to squeeze in commercials and squeeze out the f-word.

That makes it even more of a hot property on video than other smash hits like "Friends" or "Star Trek." And more profitable for HBO.

"It wasn't a factor when HBO decided to make the show," says Rhea, referring to the video windfall. "But it's certainly a factor now."