The Real Sopri
Long before there even was an HBO, 
Sopranos creator David Chase followed the 
travails of Jersey's own 
"Tony Boy" Boiardo, 
Richie "the Boot," and 
"Big Pussy" Russo. 
Come on, you didn't think he just made it all up? 
Richard Linnett goes to the 
real source of the greatest mob drama of our time.
I am in the heart—no, in the very bosom—of Soprano-land, searching for an exquisite corpse.

"Will Tony Soprano sleep with the fishes?" I ask Vanessa, a go-go dancer who just moments ago was coiled around a brass pole like a soft pretzel.

"He's gonna get whacked by the New York mob," she snaps above the ear-splitting din of Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher" in Satin Dolls, the Lodi, New Jersey, club that is the real Bada Bing.

The final season of The Sopranos is coming, and David Chase, the man was a family man, the father of two daughters and a son who wanted a career in law or medicine, just like Meadow Soprano. Tony Soprano was an electrical contractor in Newark; Tony Soprano was a waste-management contractor in the same town. Both men were born in Newark's Italian First Ward and moved up Bloomfield Avenue (the "guinea gulch," as locals and Soprano himself called it) to the suburbs, conspicuously consuming the material trappings of prosperous model citizens and melding uneasily into their WASP municipal projects. The rampant corruption eventually provoked a backlash among the group hardest hit by the plunder of the city, impoverished blacks, who reacted by rioting in 1967. Twenty-six people were killed in the streets. Journalists at the time blamed the mob for lopping over the dome, precipitating the financial and social collapse of the city—which to this day has yet to fully recover.

Like Tony Soprano, Tony Boy Boiardo struggled to cope with the pressures of raising a conventional middle-class family in a profession that was unconventional and violent. He was once caught on FBI tapes explaining how he and his dad took turns killing a "little Jew"—Tony allegedly delivered eight crowbar blows to his head, and the Boot finished him off with a hammer. Little Pussy was later overheard, also on FBI tapes, telling mobster Angelo "Gyp" DeCaro that Tony Boy was ironing about the murder. Little Pussy proudly boasted that he and his brother Big Pussy (the two earned their colorful names from early careers as cat burglars) killed the "little Jew" with a crowbar and then burned him in a furnace. It was "a good hot fire," said Little Pussy proudly. DeCaro replied, "He must have burned like a bastard."

Immersed in a psychotic work environment, Tony Boy got depressed, and decided to get help. The only other Cosa Nostra boss known for taking to the couch was the dapper Frank Costello, powerful head of the Genovese family, who admitted to seeing a socially connected Park Avenue shrink. Although known to be as much of a

Tony Boy didn't command respect like his father. "As soon as Boiardo dies," an informant told the FBI, "his son will have a long to live."

From left: The 1967 Newark riots were precipitated by mob corruption; a Newark cop inspects bullet punctures after an attempted 1530 hit on the Boot; Tony Boy leaving the hospital in 1970.
ladies' man as Tony Soprano, Tony Boy took his treatment seriously. He did not hire a shrink like Montclair's Dr. Jennifer Melfi, whose legs would be a distraction. He went with Dr. William Furst of West Orange, a decorated war hero and a combat doctor who saw action in the Battle of the Bulge. Dr. Furst's experience with shell-shocked soldiers on the bloody battlefields of Europe made him eminently qualified to handle the traumas of this new kind of soldier of the suburbs that was Tony Boy.

Far from the silky fleshspots of Satin Dolls, in the freshly scrubbed corridors of St. Mary Hospital in Hackensack, a man with some inside knowledge of Tony Boy is the chief orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Richard Boccardo, an honors graduate of Georgetown University. He's charismatic and handsome, a family man with four children, a socially prominent Essex County citizen who was once feted as the man of the year at an Italian Tribune-sponsored Columbus Day parade in which Joe Pesci was the grand marshal. "I grew up Gotti before it was fashionable, when it was very much a negative." "The Doc" Boccardo tells me. "I was the heir apparent. I just decided to go in a different direction."

The Doc's father was Tony Boy and his grandfather was the Boot, who is considered by many to be one of the Jersey Mafia's founding fathers. Ruggiero was called the Boot because he started out as a bootlegger—maybe because he was always running to a phone booth—pronounced boot in Newark's immigrant First Ward—to take calls from girlfriends.

Over the course of almost five decades, the Boot built a criminal network in Newark that spread into the surrounding Essex County suburbs, with a few long tentacles extending...
down south to Florida, across the water to Cuba and Antigua, and as far west as Las Vegas.

I grew up in the shadow of the Boot's old palazzo, which still sits like a wedding cake atop Pike Hill in Livingston, New Jersey. At the height of his powers and influence, the Boot retreated to the suburbs, creating a sprawling Don Corleone-like compound with towers and creepy statues of his family and himself on a white steed. In the suburbs, the Boot became an avid horseman. He often trotted through our neighborhood small-fry lieutenants. Many of the 'boys' resisted desires to put Tony Boy in his place. Before and after his marriage, when he moved to exclusive Essex Fells, Tony Boy was described as a wild young man behind the wheels of fast sports cars and at night spots.

According to an FBI "Top Hoodlum" report, the Boot began to turn over his rackets to his son around 1956. It was not a smooth transfer, as Tony Boy was unable to command respect like his father. As soon as Biaardo dies, his son Tony Boy will not have long to live.

But maybe it should be some media types who get whacked for hastily concluding that the HBO drama was based on the New Jersey DeCavalcante crime family after recent FBI wiretaps caught DeCavalcante goons boasting about similarities between themselves and the Sopranos.

"Chase obviously took material from the DeCavalcantes and other New Jersey and New York families for the show," the Doc says. "But it all started with my family. DeCavalcantes were based in Union; my family was

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From left: the Soprano gang; statues of the Biaardo family on the Boot, larger than the others, is in the middle on horseback; the Biaardo gang in October 1990, as the Boot toasts an alliance with the boss of Newark's Third Ward.

with his "soldiers," also on horseback, like a feudal Mafia don checking on his vassals. In 1967, the estate was featured in a Life magazine exposé: "Macabre Home of a 'Capo': Monument to Mob Murder." The Life article described furnaces on the property in which the Boot disposed of his enemies, reporting that "the number of victims incinerated" on the estate was considerable: "A lot of Mr. Biaardo's fellow gangsters are mortally afraid of going up that driveway. Some who did never returned."

Tony Boy, who briefly lived on the estate before moving out on his own, was a Mafia fortunate son. He was well-educated and well-bred, and favored wealthy gentlemen's threads to his father's gaudy diamond buckles, gold stopwatches, and iridescent suits.

As a young man Tony Boy was one of the most disliked residents of the old First Ward; the Newark Evening News reported: "Pampered by his doting father, Tony Boy lorded it over leaders of his father's organization as well as its an informant told the FBI. DeCaro and Little Pussy were taped by the FBI in 1969 complaining that Tony Boy was reckless; that he whacked without seeking approval from mob bosses.

"Ya never know what the kid is doing," DeCaro said.

"Something bad," Pussy concurred.

"A hit is coming, something,"

When I first meet the Doc, I confess that I am familiar with his family history. He closes the door to his office, sits down, and complains that the family estate has become a freak-show tourist destination after appearing in the book Weird N.J.

The Doc goes on to tell me that The Sopranos is fundamentally based on his family's story. There are many parallels, but the producers refused to cop to it. (Chase declined an invitation to be interviewed for this story.)

"Maybe they don't want to get sued?" I suggest.

"Or whacked," says the Doc with a grin.

Essex County. That's a big difference. You could say we were the true O.G.'s, the original gangsters. Of course, we weren't as sexy as what you find now on TV and in the movies. The glamour was tempered with real heartache.

Although the Doc refuses to discuss his family history in depth when I suggest that the power of his true story trumps the HBO drama, he agrees.

"This is an American story," he says.

"That's why The Sopranos is so successful. It's a real Gangland story in north Newark. In this country you can do anything. You can come here from Italy without a dime in your pocket and three generations later your grandson is giving lectures on the same day as the chief of orthopedics at Oxford. That's the beauty of America."

In his family, the Doc—like Meadow Soprano—represents the first generation not in "this thing of ours." Biaardo has a flourishing practice; he has famous clients; he publishes papers on orthopedics; he travels around
world making speeches to academics, students, and fellow surgeons.

But the young Boiardo knew, despite insisting that “my life was the same as anyone else’s,” that it really was not. “I went places and saw people who were in the know; I was treated differently,” he says. “I was treated like the son of Tony Boy... I understood then, you have to be a tough guy. Maybe at that point I would’ve gotten involved. But then I realized it was not the right thing. My father said, ‘The jig is up.’ What he meant by that was that it was the end of that particular lifestyle. This was around 1969. People like him, people with brains, courage, balls—people with those qualities today usually don’t follow that kind of life.”

When he was a small boy, the Doc harbored suspicions that his father was guy was to me. I wasn’t bullied into it, but he clearly planted a seed. You see, my father and my grandfather spoke in parables. They spoke in allegories, like Jesus did, and you had to figure out what the hell they were talking about. That was part of the training. Everything was training, everything was a test. I always did well in science, so I went to visit the family doctor, a good friend of the family’s. I went to the operating room and realized that I liked this. So I changed my major, turned the whole thing around, and got into medicine.”

On July 6, 1970, Tony Boy Boiardo, 56 years old, suffered a heart attack and his case was separated from the Addonizio corruption trial. He was sent home to Essex County to recuperate. While Tony Boy was being treated, Addonizio and his associates were convicted of 64 counts of extortion and bribery. The mayor was sentenced to ten years in prison. Prosecutors tried to get Tony Boy back into court, but doctors successfully argued that he was too ill to stand trial. He suffered another heart attack and passed away in 1978.

Although devastated by the death of his son, the Boot soldiered on. His old cronies had passed away, most of them violently, but he continued to run rackets and lotteries from the estate with a new generation of gangsters.

Little Pussy was whacked one year after Tony Boy died. The Boot allegedly had him gunned down in retaliation for trash-talking Tony Boy some 15 years earlier in the taped DeCarlo conversations, which were made public in 1970. Little Pussy was reportedly popped by Anthony DeVingo, a hit man who was pegged by the New York Post as the “fearsome but incredibly likable” real-life doppelgänger of The Sopranos’ Richard Linnett is a journalist and co-author of The Eagle Mutiny (published by the Naval Institute Press). His next book, In the Godfather’s Garden, is a history of the Boiardo family.