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'MAD MEN' SERIES FINALE RECAP: DOWNWARD FACING DON

What It Took for Don Draper to Finally Create a Breakthrough Ad



By [Matthew Creamer](#). Published on May 18, 2015.



Don Draper (Jon Hamm) in the series finale of 'Mad Men.' Credit: AMC

Somewhere in the middle of the last episode of "Mad Men," Don offers some advice.

It is fall 1970 and he is talking to Stephanie, the only living link to Anna Draper. She has abandoned her son and broken down after being judged by her fellow seekers at a New Age compound at Big Sur.

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"You could put this behind you," he tells her. "It'll get easier as you move forward."

It's a vintage bit of Draper wisdom: Keep moving or the past will eat you up. He might as well have been talking to post-childbirth Peggy Olson in a New York hospital years before. Back in the day, Peggy took it to heart. She lived by it. But Stephanie won't have it.

"Oh, Dick," she says, using his given name. "I don't think you're right about that."

Time has run out for Don Draper -- both figuratively and literally. A seven-season quest for understanding and redemption has come to an end in a series finale that was at times funny, at times moving and, above all, exceedingly clever. Primarily on the strength of its final scene, "Person to Person" will give us something to remember and talk about for some time and, on the whole, it had the effect of making the seven seasons worth of careful detailing feel even more intentional, more carefully plotted than we could have ever known in the moment.

Just about every storyline in the finale and the episodes running up to it felt connected to somewhere else in the show's scripts. The opening scenes with Don in a Chevelle SS coursing through the salt flats in Utah? The roots of that were in season two's visit to Anna Draper, when Don pauses to admire some early hot rodders. Pete's new job at LearJet? Way back in season three, Duck Phillips mentions a marketing job in Wichita. The importance of Coke? Now we see that the threading of Coke throughout the life of the show -- remember when Betty tried out as model for Coke in season one? -- wasn't arbitrary but always building toward something.

It almost felt as though Weiner began with the end and worked backwards -- and, in a sense, the show ended where it began, with the fictionalized creation of a real ad line. We've gone from Lucky Strike's "It's Toasted" to an alternative origin for an even more iconic ad, Coca-Cola's "Hilltop." The real ad was made just months after the action of "Mad Men" wraps up by Bill Backer, a man with a very Don Draperesque name. "Hilltop" would go down as one of the most famous ads of all time and certainly better than anything else Don has made.

What's weird is that through all the psychic strife, through all the pain Don Draper the human suffered, Don Draper the ad man got better. What did it take for Don Draper to finally create a breakthrough ad? Well, to use his own words to Peggy: "broke all my vows, scandalized my child, took another man's name and made nothing of it."

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rebuilt human would be allowed to work on cars and other machines. An honest existence, for once.

Indeed, it's not until the final frames of the finale that we're finally and fully denied this. The Big Sur complex would seem the perfect setting for the definitive spiritual makeover that's been necessary for the better part of two seasons, even since Don first bottomed out and showed Sally his origin. The skin of Don Draper would finally be sloughed off and a new man would emerge. This feels like a possibility as Don wanders cliffside and gazes at the Pacific, as he interacts with the other attendees, even hugging the nerdy, forgotten Leonard, showing an empathy we've never glimpsed before. The end of Draper feels like a possibility, even right down to the final word of the script, the word that is not a word: "Om."

But in his final and perhaps greatest act of cleverness, Matthew Weiner blows all that up. Instead of just cutting to black, he gives us "Hilltop" and the suggestion that Don actually returns to New York and McCann and creates not just a famous ad but an ad that represents the merchandising of the 1960s and its perceived values, the appropriation of the peace movement, hippie culture and multiculturalism into a TV spot fit for mass consumption, selling sugar water.

The more charitable interpretation of the ad is that its creator felt something in the air and applied it to a brand, something Don has never been particularly good at doing. Don is waiting to be modern, as it's phrased in the Frank O'Hara poem that resonates with him in season two. The Coke ad is a be-here-now moment if there ever was one, a creative revelation that is culturally relevant and anything but the formalist nostalgia he's leaned on in the past. Rather, it takes the present, smoothes out its edges and turns it into commerce. By any creative evaluation, "Hilltop" is a major leap forward for a man who can't abide The Beatles, even as late as "Revolver."

As bitterly ironic as the ending might feel, there's an overall sunniness to the finale that I didn't see coming. I wouldn't have been wildly surprised for Weiner to go full Sartre or at least "Seinfeld" and have the characters, locked together in some eternal return, start yet another agency. I didn't expect them to go their own ways and I certainly didn't expect to see so much happiness. After all, "Mad Men" has always beaten the crap out of its characters -- there's typically a thin line between victory and defeat and they don't really learn from mistakes. But in the end, the Sterling Cooper folks by and large fare okay.

Left by her man, Joan is getting something much better: her name on the door of a new business where she's the boss. Peggy is both getting the guy -- the lovable Stan Rizzo -- and it seems like she'll figure out how to navigate McCann. Roger is getting a wife with a tongue at least as sharp as his and some French. And Pete, as promised in the penultimate episode, is headed to Wichita for a new start. Even the inter-character interaction is all sunshine and rainbows. Pete and Peggy's farewell is a total reversal of their initial meeting, his leering rudeness transformed over the years into mutual respect, that whole baby thing water under the bridge. A thing like that!

Betty, with her death sentence, is the obvious outlier to all the sunniness. We're spared seeing her death; instead we get the sallow complexion and coughing and the knowledge that her kids will be raised the way she wants them to be. Her last scene with Don, a phone call that's all the more devastating given that the actors aren't in the same room. Don's "Birdie..." and Betty's "I know." There's enough pathos in that exchange to fill a dozen finales and to make the happy endings a lot more palatable. What's wrong with seeing the characters you love get some themselves?

Even Don, in the end, has earned it, hasn't he? On the road, he has gone the way of the ascetic, been stripped down, given away everything, even the right to be with his children while their mother dies. He can reinvent once more, but

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As the sun salutation goes, "The new day brings new hope. Lives we've led, the lives we've yet to lead. New day, new ideas, new you."

Ironic or no, there are worse mantras to live by.

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Matthew Creamer

Matthew Creamer is a former Ad Age editor at large. He now works in creative and content at KBS+.

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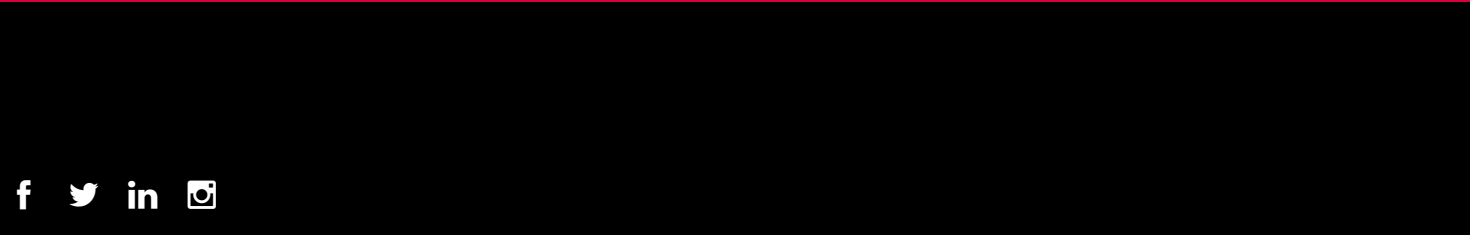
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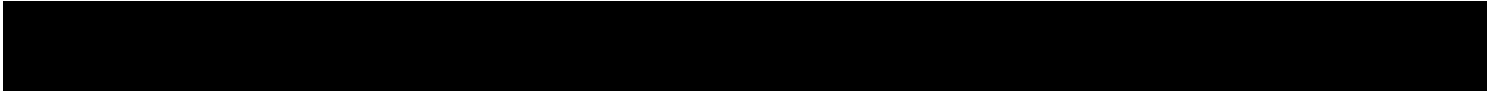


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