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## With Emmy buzz and secrets galore, it's a 'Mad' world



Jon Hamm, a former St. Louisan, plays Don Draper in the AMC series "Mad Men."

(AMC)

By **Gail Pennington**

POST-DISPATCH TELEVISION CRITIC

07/20/2008

**LOS ANGELES** — Flat gray carpet; low, acoustic-tile ceiling. Desks topped with wood-grain Formica. And lots and lots of ashtrays, many filled with lipstick-smudged cigarette butts.

"Doesn't this feel like a real office?" asks Amy Wells. "Would you ever think you were on a TV set?"

Maybe not — until Don Draper, in a gray sharkskin suit and narrow, striped tie, walks in, accompanied by his wife, Betty, in a dotted chiffon dress. Then the clock turns back and the drab office is transformed into the headquarters of Sterling Cooper Advertising, circa 1962, and the set of TV phenomenon "Mad Men," beginning its second season July 27 on AMC.

Wells is set decorator for "Mad Men" and, like her boss, series creator Matthew Weiner, a fanatic for authenticity, down to minute details unlikely to be noticed on television.



"But we didn't go with the 1960s cliches,"

### THE KEY CHARACTERS

#### **Don Draper (Jon Hamm)**

The suave ad executive, newly promoted to partner, survived a blackmail attempt by ambitious underling Pete Campbell, who learned that as a young soldier Don swapped identities. He's really farm boy Dick Whitman.

#### **Peggy Olson (Elisabeth Moss)**

The young secretary with copywriting skills was advancing in the firm when her expanding waistline turned out to be a baby she hadn't admitted, even to herself, on the way.

#### **Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser)**

The junior account executive, whose loveless marriage is built on ambition, probably is the father of Peggy's baby. He's also on Don's bad side thanks to that blackmail thing.

#### **Joan Holloway (Christina Hendricks)**

The secretary with the va-va-voom figure has to rethink her plan for advancement in career and love now that her affair with Sterling Cooper senior partner Roger Sterling is over.

#### **Betty Draper (January Jones)**

The wife stuck in suburbia confides her crippling misery to a psychiatrist.

#### **Roger Sterling (John Slattery)**

The son of the Sterling Cooper co-founder may put his wild ways behind him after a second heart attack and stick with his wife, Mona (Talia Balsam), but he still likes to look.

#### **Salvatore Romano (Bryan Batt)**

The Sterling Cooper art director has a secret he must hide: He's gay.

#### **The Sterling Cooper gang also includes:**

Agency co-founder Bertram Cooper (Robert Morse); unorthodox head of accounts Herman "Duck" Phillips (Mark Moses); copywriter (and playwright) Paul Kinsey (Michael Gladis); account executive and aspiring author Ken Cosgrove (Aaron Staton); and media buyer Harry Crane (Rich Sommer).

**BY GAIL PENNINGTON**



Wells says while leading visiting TV critics on a tour of the set last week. "In almost every case, we opted for the look that would have been authentic at the time, not the more flamboyant mid-century look that's popular today."

The Drapers, played by Jon Hamm and January Jones, have dropped in from their home on another set, where shooting is in progress. Hamm, a 1989 graduate of John Burroughs High School, couldn't look more at ease in his slim suit and slicked-back hair, but says one advantage of playing a period character is that "I don't, in my real-life dress, look too much like Don (so) I'm able to blend into the background."

Equally transformed by a bouffant hairdo, Jones seems perfectly comfortable in her pretty dress, but underneath, torturous 1960s lingerie technology reigns — not just a strapless "bullet bra" but also a girdle, with garters for stockings. No pantyhose here; Weiner's passion for authenticity, it seems, extends to his stars' underwear.

"I am really a pain," Weiner says. "On other shows" — notably, "The Sopranos" — "I drove them crazy. 'Is he complaining about the gun again?' But I want it to be exactly right. I don't pick every single thing we use. But I approve almost everything."

In the case of "Mad Men," that meant insisting on dressing the Drapers' home in Colonial, with plenty of needlepoint, because that's what he believed Betty and her decorator would have selected. Only veering off tradition, and showing a hidden, sexier side of Betty, is the aqua velvet, button-tufted headboard on the double bed she and Don share.

Weiner is also intimately familiar with every glass and dish in the Draper's "very modern" kitchen, with knotty pine cabinets and blue Formica countertop with metal edge. He stands and talks so long about the breakfast nook and range top and salad set that AMC publicists eventually have to come and fetch the visitors away.

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Weiner isn't sure where the idea for "Mad Men" came from. "The creative process is mysterious,"

he says. But one attraction was a chance to explore "the dichotomy between the way we are on the outside and the way we're perceived."

With every character burdened by secrets, especially Don Draper, who years earlier assumed a false identity, "Mad Men" deliberately sets out (as its promotional material says) to "blur the lines of truth and lies, of perception and reality, of action and consequence."

"Mad Men" has been heaped with praise and inundated with awards. In its first season, now out on DVD, the AMC drama won Golden Globes, Writers and Directors Guild awards and a Peabody. The Television Critics Association hailed it as the outstanding new series and program of the year. On Thursday, the Television Academy piled on 16 Emmy nominations.

Hamm says, "I've been so proud of this thing from the beginning that to have it sort of validated and vindicated in the greater sort of world of television criticism and the

**'Mad Men' Season 2 premiere**

**When:** 9 p.m. July 27

**Where:** AMC cable

AMC is showing a "Mad Men" Season 1 marathon starting at 11 a.m. Sunday. All 13 episodes will air.

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culture is amazing."

Acclaim won't turn Weiner's head, however. Recently, he was pleased and embarrassed by a long New York Times article about him and "Mad Men." (His only reservation: "I don't want it to create the illusion that I do this alone.") But he says, "The truth is, it still hasn't sunk in. I'm one of those artists who can only hear bad things."

Fearlessly, however, Weiner makes changes for the second season of "Mad Men," advancing the story to Valentine's Day 1962 from Thanksgiving 1960, where viewers left it.

Skipping ahead lets him start the story fresh, he says, "and at the same time there will be all these events that happened in between that will provide an additional storytelling energy."

Those events include the aftermath of the surprise birth of a baby boy to aspiring copywriter Peggy (Elisabeth Moss), who hadn't admitted even to herself that she was expecting. But the new season picks up with Peggy at work and no mention of the baby.

To those disappointed at not learning immediately what happened, Weiner says, "Trust me. I will give you the information as you need it in the most entertaining fashion."

Fresh-faced and naive in Season 1, Peggy has more of an edge in Season 2, and close viewing will find other characters altered as well.

In the early 1960s, "The world was definitely in the process of changing," Weiner says. "When you watch the first episode of this year, you will immediately look back at last season and think that — as grimy and gritty as a lot of last season was — they were more innocent then."

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