It’s All Good Man: A Review of Six Remarkable Seasons of Better Call Saul
By Steve Sternberg

There are more great series on television today than any time in history. Sitting at the top of the mountain, if not alone then with precious few peers, is Better Call Saul, a show whose very reason for being I questioned before its premiere seven years ago.

Having been a big fan of Breaking Bad, I was extremely skeptical, and didn’t get why anyone would want to develop a series around Saul Goodman, the unlikeable, crooked strip-mall lawyer, who represented Walter White and Jesse Pinkman. It didn’t seem like there was that much to work with or that the Saul Goodman character was strong enough to carry a show by himself. I expected it to be cliched, pointless, and quickly canceled. Man, was I wrong. As it turns out, the remarkable Bob Odenkirk didn’t have to carry the show by himself – he was helped by an equally remarkable supporting cast (and brilliant writing).

Here is my review of the entire series, including the great final season. There are some spoilers ahead, but I try not to reveal too many key plot points.
Better Call Saul (AMC 2015-2022): This prequel to Breaking Bad (2008-2013) starts out six years before the events in that series begin. Former con artist Jimmy McGill is a financially struggling attorney who lives in the back room of a nail salon, which doubles as his office. The series chronicles his long slide down the slippery slope that culminates with him re-inventing himself as sleazy mob lawyer, Saul Goodman. Several parallel storylines gradually converge as the series gets closer to, and eventually overlaps, the Breaking Bad universe.

Better Call Saul is every bit as great as the show that spawned it (maybe better). Bob Odenkirk’s performance is so good that viewers familiar with Breaking Bad, who know what he eventually becomes, can still be unsure of his motives and moral compass. Rhea Seehorn is equally compelling as his colleague / girlfriend, Kim, who goes back and forth between her straight-laced corporate attorney life and the more exciting seat-of-your-pants (and fun) lawyering she gets to do with Jimmy. Two major Breaking Bad characters, mob fixer Mike Ehrmantraut (Jonathan Banks) and drug kingpin Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) are excellent here, as both are fleshed out and given more in-depth backstories. In fact, the series is almost as much Mike’s story as it is Jimmy’s / Saul’s.

Here are the main players and major recurring characters:

Bob Odenkirk is simply brilliant as Jimmy McGill / Saul Goodman, a former scam artist who is trying to become a respectable lawyer. After he loses his license and eventually gets it reinstated, he starts working for himself, quickly building a reputation for doing whatever it takes to help his low-rent clients get justice. In the process, he gets drawn into the world of criminals and drug kingpins, as his moral compass gets murkier and murkier. He uses his street smarts and con-artist
skills to win case after case, and to get out of one jam after another, often with the help of his fellow attorney and girlfriend Kim and occasional client, criminal fixer and sometime ally, Mike.

Rhea Seehorn gives a superb performance as Jimmy’s girlfriend Kim Wexler, who worked her way up from the mailroom to become a successful attorney at the high-powered law firm, Hamlin, Hamlin, and McGill (HHM), which was co-founded by Jimmy’s older brother Chuck (Michael McKean). While Kim thrives in her corporate attorney world, she finds it boring and is thrilled by Jimmy’s con-man side (even though she sometimes thinks he’s conning her as well). She eventually starts working for herself, and occasionally joins Jimmy in scamming unsavory characters just for fun. She is almost always the smartest person in the room. But the fun she has with Jimmy / Saul leads her to become increasingly reckless.

Jonathan Banks is great in another of his gangster-style roles as Mike Ehrmantraut, whom we know as a criminal fixer from Breaking Bad. He’s gruff, quietly assured, and intimidating, yet surprisingly kind-hearted to those he doesn’t consider a threat. When we first meet Mike, he is a parking lot attendant at the Albuquerque courthouse frequented by both Jimmy and Kim. He’s a retired Philadelphia cop who, to help support his widowed daughter and granddaughter, starts working as a fixer and bodyguard for a drug cartel, eventually coming under the wing of drug distributor, Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito). His streets smarts, preparation, and sniper skills saves the day and protects Jimmy on numerous occasions. But it bothers him when innocent people get hurt, which he knows is an inevitable part of the business he’s in. In one revealing scene, he tells Jimmy if he had a time machine he would go back to the day he accepted his first bribe and presumably change the direction his life took from that day forward.
Jimmy, Kim, and Mike each justify their growing moral ambiguity because being good hasn’t gotten them where they want to be, and the people they are facing off with are really bad people (a lot worse than they are).

The always good Giancarlo Esposito shows up in season 3, reprising his Breaking Bad role as the ruthless Gus Fring. He handles the Southwestern U.S. cocaine distribution for the Juarez Mexican drug cartel using his fast-food restaurant (Los Pollos Hermanos) as a front. He’s known derisively as “chicken man” by several of the cartel members. But he makes a lot of money for the cartel, and their leaders know how effective he is at selling their product. He wants to get into the even more profitable methamphetamine business, work for himself, and be free of the cartel and the constant danger it puts him in.

Gus has an ongoing vendetta with the notorious Salamanca family (part of the Juarez Mexican drug cartel), headed up by Hector Salamanca (Mark Margolis) and his nephew Lalo (Tony Dalton). Raymond Cruz also reprises his role from Breaking Bad as the psychopathic and violent Tuco Salamanca, another of Hector’s nephews.

Michael Mando is riveting as Nacho Varga, a clever and ambitious drug dealer and reluctant member of the Salamanca drug ring. Hector Salamanca wants to use Nacho’s father’s legitimate business as a front for trafficking drugs. When his father refuses and is threatened by the Salamanca’s, Nacho starts planning to take out Hector Salamanca. Nacho is instrumental in getting both Mike and Jimmy involved with the cartel.
Michael McKean is solid as Jimmy’s brilliant and insufferably arrogant older brother, Chuck McGill, who was a founding member of the HHM law firm. He is a semi-recluse, who seldom leaves home because of what he claims is an allergy to electricity. Despite Jimmy taking care of him, he has nothing but disdain for Jimmy’s legal career, and tries to get him disbarred. Their final confrontation leads to a shocking conclusion.

Patrick Fabian gives an under-rated, nuanced performance as HHM’s managing partner, Howard Hamlin, who becomes Jimmy and Kim’s nemesis. Jimmy once worked in the law firm’s mailroom, but when he got his law degree, Howard refused to hire him (we later find out he was following Chuck’s orders). Howard also has a number of conflicts with Kim. He tries to be a decent person, but makes a number of unfortunate decisions, and doesn’t understand what he did to get Jimmy and Kim to hate him so much. Jimmy and Kim devise a scheme to ruin his career, and get a windfall from a class-action lawsuit he is involved in.

Tony Dalton is scary as the vicious and murderous Lalo Salamanca, who takes over his family’s operation of the Juarez drug cartel after his uncle Hector has a stroke. After Gus unsuccessfully tries to have him killed, he goes underground to plan his revenge – Saul, Kim, Mike, and Gus are all in danger because they have no idea where he is or when he will resurface. Lalo will kill anyone who gets in his way without regard to whether they are real threats or just innocent bystanders who happen to see his face.
Each of the first five seasons starts out with a flash-forward to the present, and Saul’s post-*Breaking Bad* persona, Gene Takavic, who manages a Cinnabon at a mall in Omaha, Nebraska. This identity was set up at the end of *Breaking Bad*, to keep him safe. As Saul said to Walter White at the time, “From here on out I’m Mr. Low Profile; just another douchebag with a job and three pairs of dockers. If I’m lucky, a month from now, best case scenario, I’m managing a Cinnabon in Omaha.” But now it seems a relocated cab driver might recognize him from his days in Albuquerque. This comes to a head in the sixth and final season.

Much of the first two seasons center around Jimmy trying to convince his brother Chuck that he’s a good lawyer, Kim’s politicking as she moves up the ladder at HHM, Jimmy and Kim’s clashes with Chuck and HHM as their romantic relationship evolves, and Mike’s growing association with the criminal world.

Season 3 ramps up the chaos as Jimmy’s conflict with his brother reaches a shocking conclusion. Jimmy adopts the name Saul Goodman for the first time when he turns to making commercials after his law license is suspended (the name derives from the phrase, “it’s all good man”). Nacho makes his move against Hector. Mike meets Gus Fring for the first time, and together they scheme to topple the Salamanca crime family. Kim becomes more and more enamored with Jimmy’s care-free, bend-the-rules, scam-artist lifestyle.

The fourth season starts to get darker as Jimmy’s transformation to Saul Goodman starts to take shape. He manages to persuade the bar association to reinstate his law license (with a passionate plea that even fools Kim into thinking he’s sincere). Here is also when he starts to become more involved in the criminal world. At the same time, Gus Fring is preparing to build the enormous underground meth lab used by Walter White and Jesse Pinkman in *Breaking Bad*.
Everyone is in peril during season 5. Gus tries to solidify his power, which leads to a violent conflict with Lalo Salamanca. Jimmy embarks on a dangerous foray into the desert to retrieve $7 million the cartel buried there to bail a drug lord out of jail. Jimmy’s influence on Kim becomes more apparent, as she crosses ethical lines she wouldn’t have considered a few years ago. After a major conflict with HHM, Kim quits the law firm and devises a plan to destroy the reputation of its managing partner, Howard Hamlin.

Season 6 is brilliant on every level, including the first meeting between Kim and Mike. When word gets out that Jimmy managed to get a drug lord out of jail, Saul Goodman’s reputation sinks among his legal peers, but soars among the criminal element, and his client base grows dramatically. The war between Lalo Salamanca and Gus Fring heats up, and tension mounts, first with Nacho being trapped in a deadly situation and then as Jimmy and Kim get caught in the middle.

Kim realizes she’s being followed by dangerous looking men, and in her first face-to-face meeting with Mike, he tells her they are his guys, who are looking out for Lalo Salamanca in case he comes after Jimmy and her. When she asks Mike why he’s telling her instead of Jimmy, he replies, “You’re made of sterner stuff.” Almost every scene in the first half of the season is fraught with danger – one shocking event forever changes both Saul and Kim.

Since Kim does not appear in or is even mentioned in *Breaking Bad*, fans had been anxiously wondering about what happens to her in the sixth and final season. I hesitate to use the word “perfect,” but a decision she makes and her ultimate fate are as close to perfect as writing and acting on a television series can be. It’s also the last piece in Jimmy McGill’s final transformation into the Saul Goodman we know from *Breaking Bad*. 
And then there are the episodes devoted to Saul's new life as Gene Takavic, as he has to deal with a cab driver named Jeff (Pat Healy) who recognizes him from his Better Call Saul commercials in Albuquerque. He meets Jeff by getting close to his mom, played by the incomparable Carol Burnett, who isn’t quite as gullible as she seems. He obviously misses the excitement of his previous life, and channels his inner Saul Goodman, coming up with an elaborate scheme to have Jeff and a friend rob luxury-brand items from the mall he works in after it closes for the night. He blackmails them into keeping quiet about his identity. But something goes wrong, and he has to make a quick escape.

When he is finally caught by the police, the FBI, the DEA and the Department of Justice, he has one last card to play. In typical Saul fashion, it drives everyone crazy as he may once again escape harsh justice. But unbeknownst to him, Kim has played a card of her own. What happens next leads to an nearly perfect ending to a nearly perfect series.

If you haven’t yet seen Breaking Bad but plan to, I suggest watching the first five seasons of Better Call Saul, first, then switch to all five seasons of Breaking Bad, then come back for the sixth and final season of Better Call Saul.