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TV

Should Benson and Stabler date? A debate between 2 'SVU' experts

"SVU" fans have an important question on their minds.



— TODAY Illustration / NBC

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By Erin Clements, Randee Dawn and MC Suhocki

When Christopher Meloni made his much-anticipated return to the "Law & Order" universe last month, "SVU" fans had an important question on their minds: Would Benson and Stabler finally get together?

Meloni, who reprises his role as Elliot Stabler in the new spinoff "Organized Crime," addressed that very question shortly after its premiere, telling People magazine that he sees "a world of possibility" for the two characters, who first teamed up when "Law & Order: SVU" premiered back in September 1999.

And then in the April 22 episode of "Organized Crime," Stabler told Benson (Mariska Hargitay) three words that viewers have waited two decades to hear: "I love you."

Of course, when TODAY asked showrunner Ilene Chaiken if she knew that kind of statement would signal things to fans, she said simply, "I will not cop to that."

In other words, she's taking the Fifth.

But Chaiken does not put the idea of a Benson/Stabler intimate relationship on the shelf. "Their relationship has always been a thing," she said. "I don't know what's going to happen in that relationship. In ('OC') we have the creative space to explore that relationship, whatever it is. The show spends more time in character and relationships than the conventional 'L&O' shows, so we'll get to see who they are, and who they've become to one another.

"I can't say they're going to get married and live happily ever after, which some fans would like," she said. "But we're going to spend a lot of time in that relationship. I can't imagine that the relationship – whatever it might be – will ever go away."

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Meanwhile, since Benson and Stabler started showing up again on "SVU" and "OC," social media has been abuzz with questions about the pair's future. As we anxiously await the next new episodes of "SVU" and "Organized Crime" on May 13, two members of the TODAY team had a spirited debate over whether it's in the beloved duo's best interests to embark on a romance. Here, Randee Dawn maintains that it's a bad idea, while MC Suhocki argues that Benson and Stabler are meant to be.

Read each of their arguments, and then cast your vote in the poll below! To quickly jump to the argument you want to read, click the links below, or keep scrolling to see both.

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Con: No, they should not date.

Quick and dirty answer: No, no, no – Olivia Benson and Elliot Stabler should not become an item.

Not because Mariska Hargitay and Christopher Meloni don't ooze chemistry – they do! Theirs is a friendship and a colleague-ship that spans decades. They're talented, easy on the eyes and we love watching them be superheroes with flaws.

But they should not have a one-night stand. Or date. Or get engaged. Or marry. Or any of the above. And here's why:

1. It's not the mission statement.

"Law & Order: SVU" and "Law & Order: Organized Crime" may not be strictly "just the facts" the way most of the mothership show that spawned them was – but melodrama is not what we come here for. "SVU" takes us into horrendous violations and crimes on a weekly basis; "OC" is still getting its sea legs – mostly right now it's about Stabler, his dead wife and a seriously slimy gangster – but relationships between two lead characters is not what we come here for. It's awkward. It takes away from the crimes. It's ... for lack of a better word ... *weird*.



— Detectives Elliot Stabler and Olivia Benson during the show's first season in 1999. Jessica Burstein / NBC

2. It's the province of fan fiction.

All respect due to fan fiction and soap opera, but this area is best left to the armchair fans, who like to twist the pretzel around in every direction and throw salt on it while they're at it. There's loads of Stabler/Benson relationship stuff out there on the Internet. It doesn't need to be part of canon.

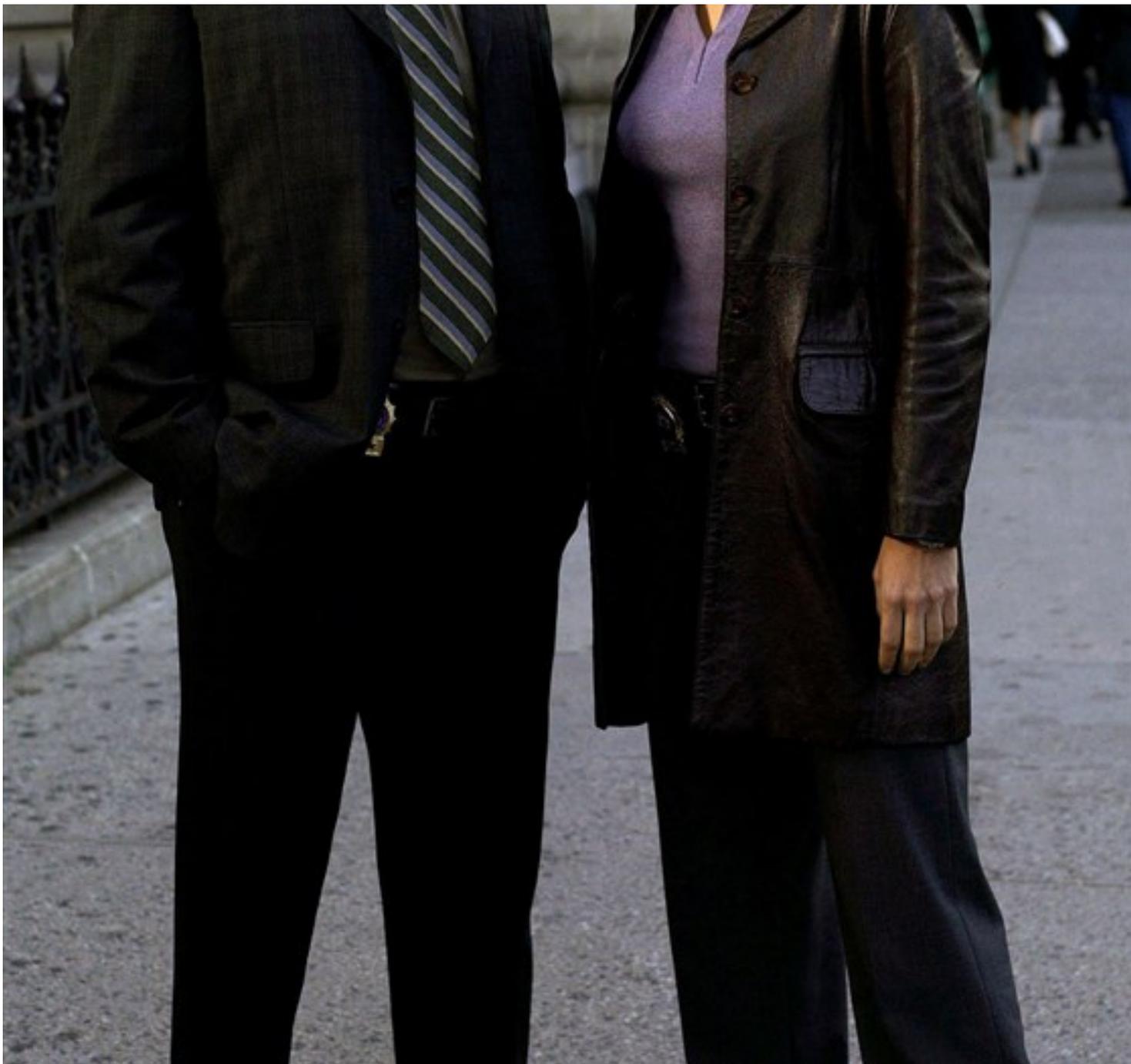
3. 'Law & Order' shows traditionally do not do this well.

"L&O" show writers are not at their best when trying to create relationships. They know crime. They know punishment. They know the law. They're a meat and potatoes eatery – and you do not go to a steak restaurant to order the cheese plate. This is not their forte. Wanna start a fight among "Law & Order" veteran fans? Just ask them to debate the merits (or lack thereof) of the Jack McCoy/Claire Kincaid affair.

4. They're practically co-workers.

Benson and Stabler may no longer work alongside each other, but their new degree-of-separation is still a terrible idea: a relationship with a co-worker is a recipe for disaster; two cops with seriously stressful jobs and one, at least, with a hair-trigger temper feels like mixing TNT and a lit fuse, and not in a good way. It's hard to ever imagine this being an idea we'd buy into in the real world. Also, hasn't Benson become a captain while Stabler remains a detective? It's a power imbalance the powers that be might frown upon.





— Benson and Stabler in season five. Alamy Stock Photo

5. Some things are better left alone.

See above on the obvious chemistry they have. But that doesn't mean it should go anywhere other than where it's been all these years – support, respect and a solid understanding of what makes the other tick. They're braided into each other's families. In a lot of ways, it's just more fun to speculate than it could ever be to see any kind of intimate, sexual relationship unfold. There's something pure about what Benson and Stabler have together, something that turning them into yet another TV romance would weaken. They're all good, folks. Let 'em be.

Mariska Hargitay and Chris Meloni reunite for new episode of 'SVU'



6. Let's face it, they're kind of related.

This may never stop the writers if they're bound and determined to make this happen – but let's not forget: Olivia and Elliot are named after franchise creator Dick Wolf's children. That alone may mean they are never, never gonna get together.

But I could be wrong.

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Benson and Stabler are back! See Mariska Hargitay, Chris Meloni pal around on 'SVU' set

Pro: They should absolutely own up to their feelings and date

As a journalist, I always do my best to see both sides of an argument. However, when it comes to Benson and Stabler, any and all journalistic morals of mine get thrown out the window because there is only one side that makes sense here; the heart wants what it wants, and Elliot Stabler and Olivia Benson's hearts have been set on each other since day one.

After 22 long years, the door finally opened for these two to be more than just partners on the force after Stabler's return to the "SVU"-niverse. Stabler's wife, Kathy, died during his first episode back. In the older seasons, any time someone would ask Benson and Stabler if they were more than friends, they always defaulted to his marriage as the reason for why they weren't. Before diving into everything happening in the present (a lot!), let's rewind for a hot second because Benson and Stabler have a history more complex than most real couples.

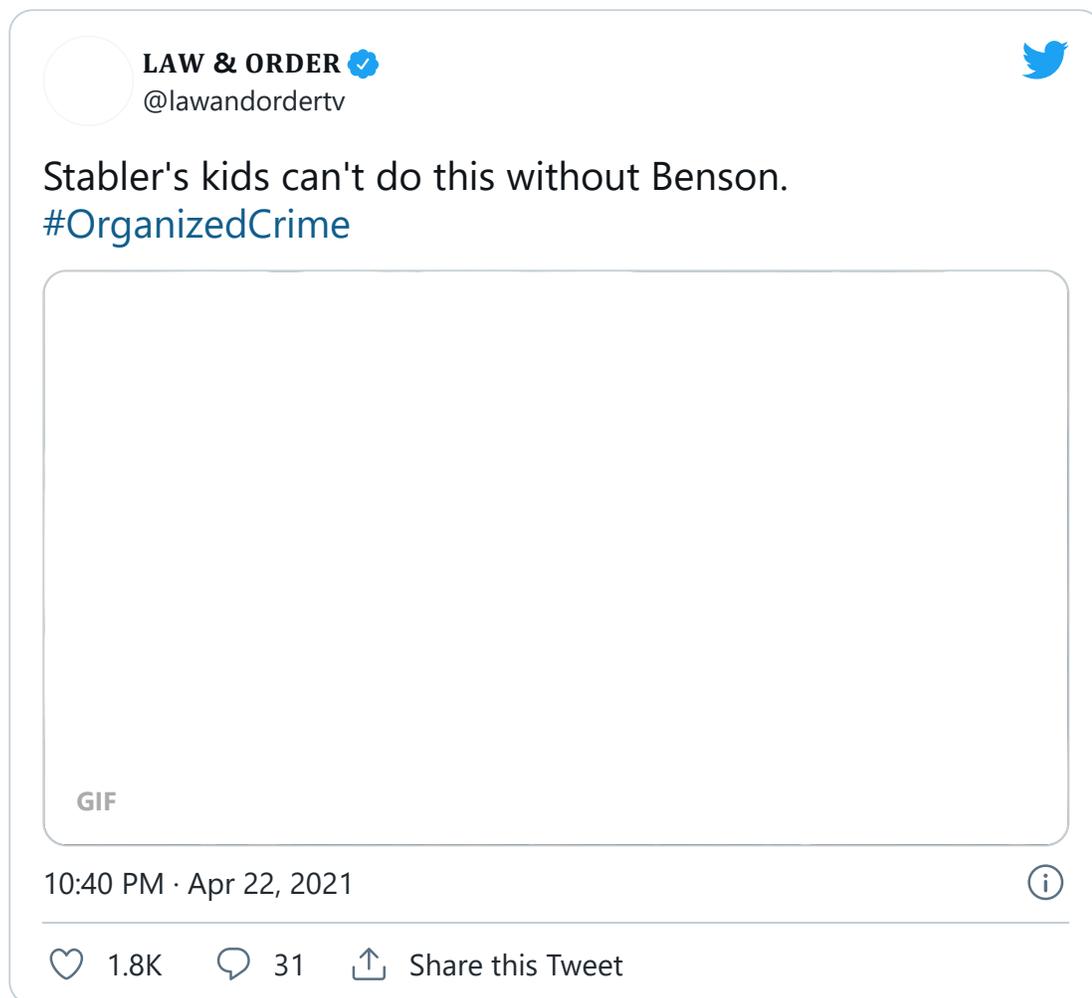
Six Times Benson and Stabler Were the Best Duo Ever - Law & Order: SVU



1. Stabler's wife asked Olivia for help getting through to him during their divorce

"You're the longest relationship that I've ever had with a man. Who else would put up with me?" Benson parrots back this point Stabler previously made to her during an intimate scene during season eight on the front steps of her building following a tough case. She had texted him in the middle of the night (casual) to meet her there, and also during that conversation, Stabler said he had signed papers to divorce his wife.

Earlier in the episode, Kathy Stabler met up with Benson alone to persuade her to talk to her husband about signing the papers since Benson “knows things about him” she will never understand *and* offers him “stability.” (On “Organized Crime,” Stabler’s daughter has a similar solo chat with Benson asking for her help.)



Some fans thought that the divorce, which eventually ended up not happening, could’ve been Stabler’s chance to be with Benson. At the time, the two were still partners and anything more between them would’ve further complicated their already self-proclaimed “complicated” relationship. (That's not the case now, though!)

Benson Tells Stabler It's Complicated - Law & Order: SVU



2. They chose each other over the job

Arguably, the most intense episode that shows Benson and Stabler's true feelings at work is season seven's "Fault." Stabler chooses to save an injured Benson instead of chasing down a suspect, which resulted in a child's death, and later, Benson chooses to prioritize Stabler's life over the job during an intense standoff.





— Other notable examples of how close these two really are. In season 10, Benson told Stabler: "You know everything about me, even the parts that I'd rather forget," and in season eight Benson kept mumbling "Elliot" in her sleep while undercover. Justin Stephens / NBC

In the next season, an evaluator concluded Benson and Stabler were "too close" after they had to undergo independent psychological investigations. Benson had found her half-brother, who was being watched by another team of police, and Stabler stuck by his partner's side every step of the way during that personal matter, which led to disciplinary action from their boss before their required psychological investigations. Choosing each other over the job, a reference back to "Fault," was also mentioned during these sessions.

3. He told her about the news of his wife's death before his own kids

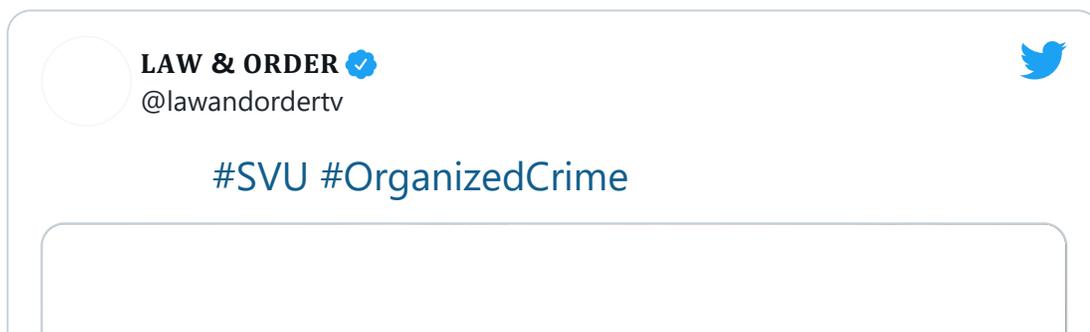
In Stabler's return to "SVU" in season 22, he and Benson finally have *that* conversation about why he left not just the job, but her ... without even delivering the news of his departure to her himself. While many fans rightfully highlight Stabler saying, "I was afraid if I heard your voice, I

wouldn't have been able to leave." It's important to back up to something he says right before that: "I think I thought if I talked to you about how –"



Unfortunately, Benson cuts him off at that point, but the question remains: What was Stabler going to say?! If he talked to her about how *he really felt about her*?

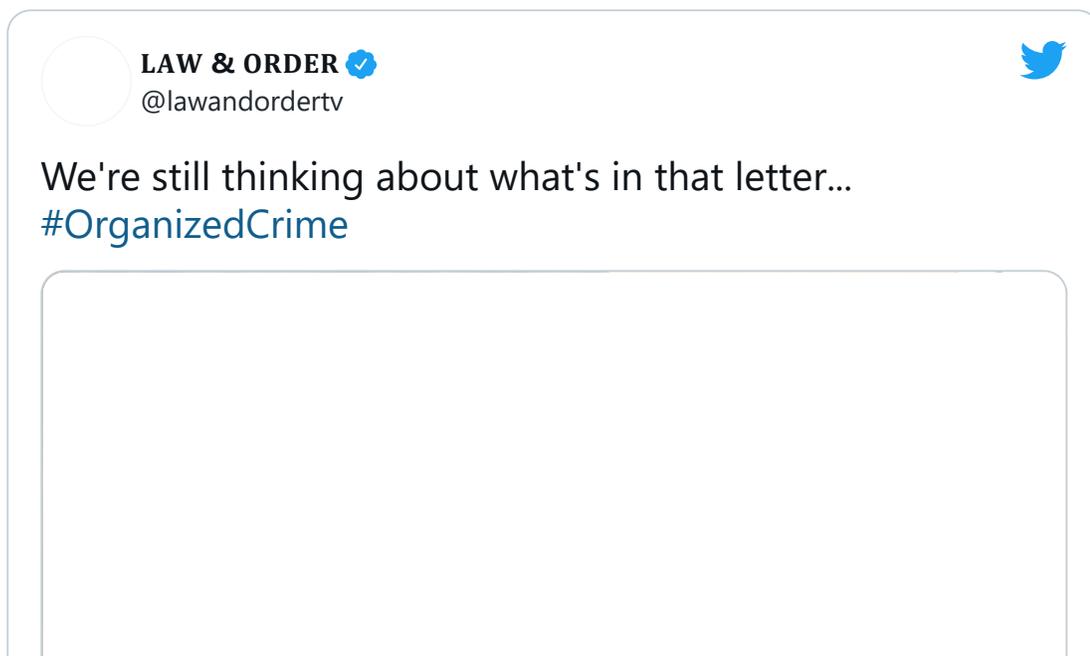
Later in the episode, Stabler calls Benson before his own kids to share the news of his wife's death. The two then share an emotional hug in the hospital – a big moment as it was only the third time on screen the two shared an embrace.

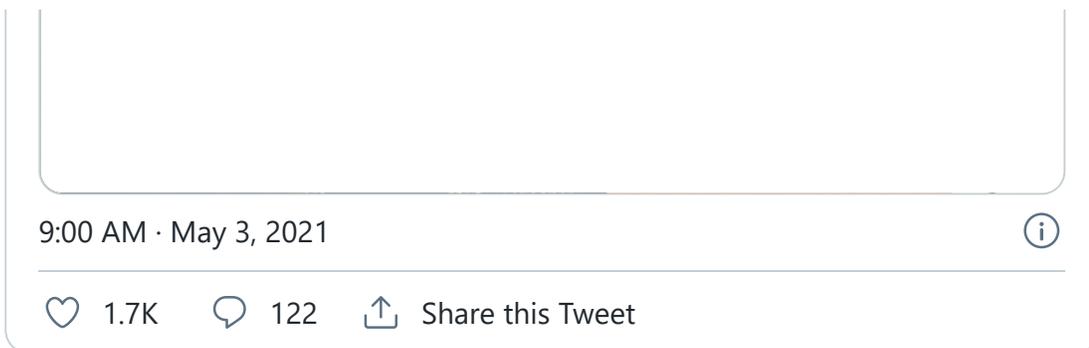




4. Elliot *doesn't like talking about his emotions* Stabler wrote Olivia a letter

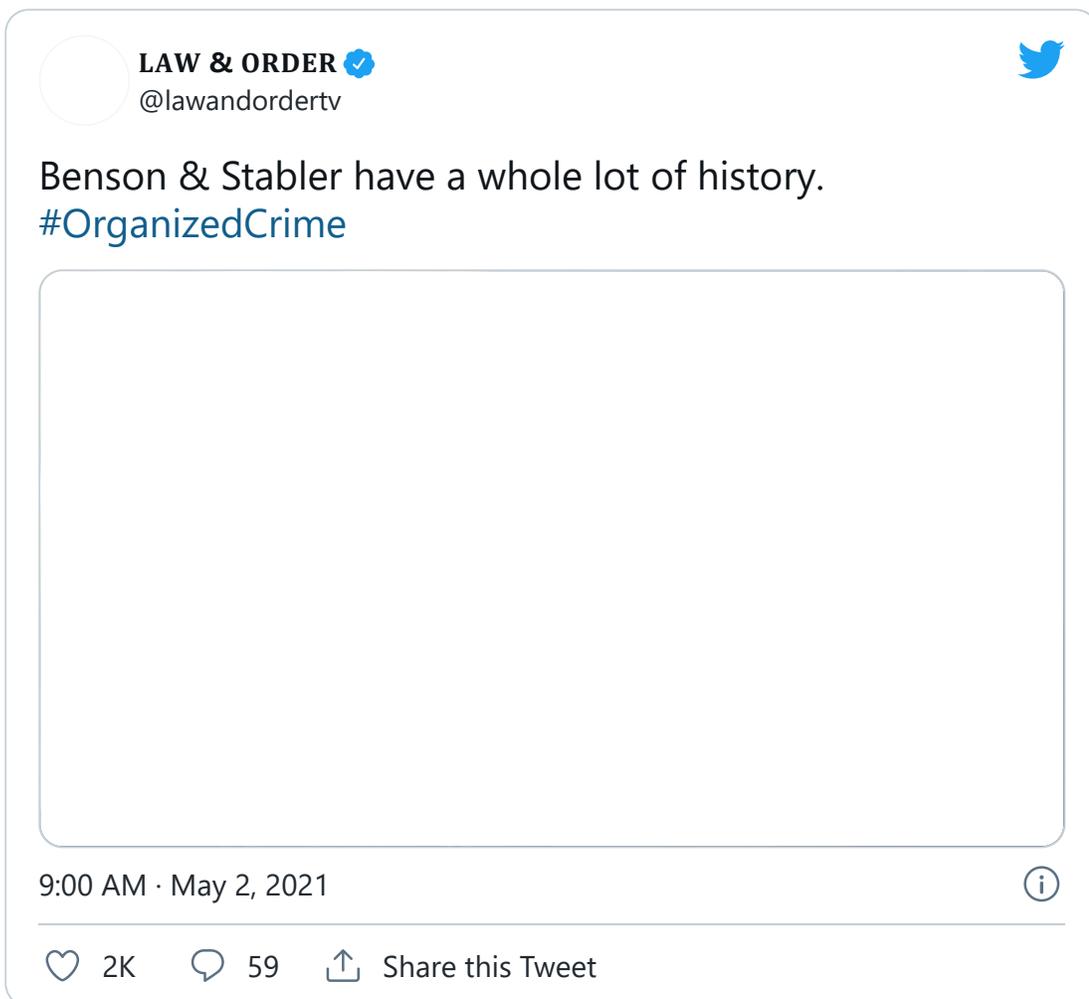
If that's not enough, viewers later learned Stabler had written Benson a letter he intended to give her on the night she was to receive an award. In the first episode of Stabler's "Organized Crime" spinoff, he tells Benson about that note he penned for her. Yes, Elliot "poster boy for rage" Stabler WROTE A LETTER for Benson. Before he gives it to her, he reflects on living in Rome and tells Benson, "You'd have loved it." To which Benson shakes her head and replies, "You know Elliot, I – I can't." The look on Stabler's face in that moment, imagining Benson being there in Italy with him quickly followed by Benson not being able to even emotionally go there, speaks for itself.





5. She called him the 'single most important person' in her life

“You were the most, single most, important person in my life. And you just – disappeared.” Another huge acknowledgment from Benson to Stabler during his return in 2021. Also, in the following week’s episode of “Organized Crime,” the two shared a nostalgic scene together sitting in Benson’s car, where Stabler told her that she “means the world” to him after she said she was worried about him following his reckless behavior after his wife’s death.



6. Their chemistry is unmatched – and oh yeah, he said 'I love you' in front of his kids

As if that wasn't enough to take in, Stabler most recently told Benson "I love you." After all these two have been through, despite their faults, it makes no sense whatsoever for them to end up with anyone but each other. The chemistry between Hargitay and Meloni is unmatched, and they know it. They also know, better than anyone, what's best for their characters.

Related:

Mariska Hargitay, Christopher Meloni talk Benson and Stabler's 'SVU' reunion



Now that Benson and Stabler work in different units and are both single, there's no excuse to hold the feelings in anymore. Yes, it will take some time (and therapy!), but hopefully not too much since it's been over 20 years already! If you want to be on the right side of TV history, you'll support the romantic pairing of TV's longest and most magnetic slow burn.

Erin Clements



Erin Clements is senior pop culture/lifestyle editor at TODAY Digital, where she edits and writes trending news and features and produces videos. She enjoys TV nostalgia and created TODAY's "Flashback" video series. Some of her favorite projects have included anniversary packages for "Friends," "Seinfeld" and "The Office."

Randee Dawn



Randee Dawn (she/her) is a veteran entertainment journalist and author based in Brooklyn. In addition to writing for outlets including TODAY.com, Variety and The Los Angeles Times, she's the co-author of "The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion" and co-editor of "Across the Universe: Tales of Alternative Beatles." When not interviewing the stars or dabbling in speculative fiction, she nurses her sourdough starter and dreams of the day she can travel again.

MC Suhocki

MC Suhocki is a New York City-based news and trending editor for TODAY Digital who joined the team in 2014. She will put on her writing cap for important royal and pop culture moments, like Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet reuniting on the red carpet. She also loves the USWNT and is a "Real Housewives" stan.

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