Directed by Robert Altman
Screenplay by Leigh Brackett
Based on the novel by Raymond Chandler
Produced by Jerry Bick
Original Music by John Williams
Cinematography by Vilmos Zsigmond
Film Editing by Lou Lombardo
Film dedicated to Dan Blocker


Nina Van Pallandt (July 15, 1932, Copenhagen, Denmark) has 25 acting credits. According to Wikipedia, she "married Frederik, Baron van Pallandt in 1960. They formed a singing duo, Nina & Frederik, and achieved worldwide popularity with their calypso-style songs....They parted in 1969, and divorced in 1975. Frederik van Pallandt settled in the Philippines in the 1990s. He joined a major Australian crime syndicate, for which he provided transportation for drug trafficking, and was shot dead with his second wife in 1994. In the early 1970s, Nina van Pallandt was romantically linked to fellow Ibiza resident Clifford Irving. In the 2007 film, The Hoax, about Irving's fake autobiography of Howard Hughes, Nina van Pallandt is portrayed by Julie Delpy. The film starred Richard Gere, who appeared with the real van Pallandt in one of his earliest films, American Gigolo. She appeared in two other Altman films, Quintet (1970) and A Wedding (1978). Some of her other films were Time Out (1988), O.C. and Stiggs (1985), Cutter's Way (1981), American Gigolo (1980), Assault on Agathon (1975), The Long Goodbye (1973), Mandolinen und Mondschein (1959), Kärlikheden melodii (1959), Verdens rigeste pige (1958), and Nina & Frederik Western (1958).

Sterling Hayden (March 26, 1916, Upper Montclair, New Jersey—May 23, 1986, Sausalito, California, prostate cancer) has 72 acting credits, including "The Blue and the Gray" (1982), Venom (1981), Gas (1981), Nine to Five (1980), The Outsider (1980), Winter Kills (1979), King of the Gypsies (1978), Novecento (1976), The Long Goodbye (1973), The Godfather (1972), Loving (1970), Hard Contract (1969), Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964), Gun Battle at Monterey (1957), The Iron Sheriff (1957), The Killing (1956), The Last Command (1955), Suddenly (1954), Johnny Guitar (1954), Prince Valiant (1954), So Big (1953), Kansas Pacific (1953), Flat Top (1952), The Golden Hawk (1952), The Asphalt Jungle (1950), El Paso (1949), and Virginia (1941). John Huston wrote this of Hayden: "To this day you sense shame in those people who knuckled under to the witch-hunters. Sterling Hayden was one of the few among them who didn’t try to excuse himself, or to justify his actions. At one time he had been an actual card-carrying Communist but, under the pressure of the Red Scare he changed his mind and decided that Communism was a danger to this country. He proceeded to name names—including that of his best friend. As a result, this man went to prison and later died. Knowing Sterling, I’m sure he believed he was doing the right thing at the time. But when the full significance of his act was brought home to him, he was stricken with remorse. He openly declared that he was ashamed of himself for what he had done, wrote a book which told about the episode, and dedicated it to his friend. Sterling is one of the few actors I know who continued to grow over the years. I always felt great sympathy with him for this failure to live up to his own idea of himself. But even from this experience he learned and grew. There is a kingliness about Sterling now." (An Open Book, 1980, p. 137)


David Carradine (December 8, 1936, Hollywood) has 216, including Night of the Templar (2009, in post-production), The


“When my grandfather opened a jewelry store in Kansas City, he dropped one N from Altmann because they told him the sign would be cheaper.” His father, a successful life insurance broker, was an inveterate gambler. “I learned a lot about losing from him,” Altmann told Aljean Hartmetz. “That losing is an identity, that you can be a good loser and a bad winner; that none of it—gambling, money, winning or losing—has any real value...that it’s simply a way of killing time, like crossword puzzles.” The director’s own proclivity for gambling is well-known.

A lapsed Roman Catholic now, Altmann was educated in Jesuit schools before joining the army at eighteen. During World War II he flew about 50 bombing missions over Borneo and the Dutch East Indies.
He and a friend, Jim Rickard, set up as press agents for a time and then invented a tattooing machine and a system for identifying dogs. Before they went broke, they had tattooed President Truman’s dog in Washington.

Altman says that he first got into film because “I failed at everything else. I think I was originally attracted by the glamour and the adulation, and I thought I would be able to date Gloria De Haven.” With a friend named George W. George, he wrote and sold to RKO the script for Richard Fleischer’s *The Bodyguard* (1948) and buoyed by this success, moved to New York, where he attempted to make a living writing stories and screenplays. After an unproductive trip to the West Coast, he returned to Kansas City to work on industrial films for the Calvin Company, where as set decorator, cameraman, producer, writer, director, and film editor he learned to make movies himself. He also produced a series of short technical films for International Harvester, and at some point during this period made a second unsuccessful attempt to break into Hollywood.

In the summer of 1955, Altman decided to make a commercial film on his own. He found a local backer who was willing to put up $63,000 for a film about juvenile delinquency, wrote the script in five days, cast it, picked the location, drove the generator truck, got the people together and took no money for himself... The film was completed in 1955 and two years later released through United Artists, which had acquired it for $150,000... *The Delinquents* grossed nearly $1 million.

With this promising debut in feature film production, plus some sixty-five industrial films and documentaries to his credit, Altman was hired by Warner Brothers to coproduce (with George W. George) and direct *The James Dean Story* (1957), the studio’s attempt to cash in on the burgeoning cult surrounding the dead star.

The film failed at the box office, but Alfred Hitchcock saw it and hired Altman to direct episodes for his CBS-TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Altman completed two half-hour programs—*The Young One* (1957) and “Together” (1958)—before being fired, and then went on to develop a very successful television career in Los Angeles, working primarily as a director, but also as a writer and producer. Over the next six years, he directed about twenty different shows for such series as *Bonanza*, *Bus Stop*, *Combat*, *The Whirlybirds*, and *The Kraft Suspense Theatre*. He learned to work quickly and efficiently with limited budgets and tight shooting schedules, but he chaffed at the restrictive conventions of commercial broadcasting. Since it was impossible to vary the treatment of the hero in a series like *Combat*, Altman would sometimes concentrate on secondary characters instead, building them up over several episodes and then allowing their deaths to be casually reported in a later installment. He also began to introduce “adult,” political, and antiwar material into his shows, and to experiment with overlapping dialogue. He was regularly fired, but the industry was so desperate for experienced directors that he had no trouble getting further assignments. By 1963 he was making $125,000 a year. At that point, mindful of “those hundreds of creative people who have just died in television,” Altman formed his own TV and film production company, which would be known as Lion’s Gate Films, in partnership with Ray Wagner. They had difficulty attracting backers, and Altman did little but run up gambling debts for the next few years....

In a final break with television, Altman accepted an offer from Warner Brothers in 1966 to direct a low-budget space-flight film, *Countdown* (1968). James Caan, Michael Murphy, and Robert Duvall, astronauts preparing for the moon shot, seem to be permanently grounded by marital problems, alcoholism, rivalrous jealousies, and petty politics. With just a few days of shooting left, Jack Warner asked to see the footage Altman had assembled. He was appalled by its length and the overlapping dialogue, and fired the director....

Ingo Preminger of 20th Century-Fox offered Altman a script for an armed services comedy, adapted by Ring Lardner Jr. From a novel by “Richard Hooker,” a battlefield surgeon. More than a dozen directors had turned this project down, but the 45-year-old Altman took it on and proceeded with the filming in such an unorthodox manner that at one point the alarmed male leads—Donald Sutherland and Elliott Gould—tried to get him taken off the job.

*M*A*S*H* (1970), set during the Korean War but with obvious references to Vietnam, follows the exploits of Hawkeye Pierce (Sutherland) and Trapper John (Gould), two wisecracking young surgeons assigned to a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital unit not far from the front lines. They work round the clock to salvage the wounded who are flown in by helicopter from the front, and resort to liquor, sex, and a series of ingenious and subversive pranks to keep from cracking under the strain. Their natural enemies are not the North Koreans but a pair of humorless inflexibles in their own camp—Major Frank Burns (Robert Duvall), an incompetent surgeon with a direct line to the Almighty, and Major Margaret Houlihan (Sally Kellerman), a highly competent nurse from a gung-ho regular Army background. In the brutal practical joke at the film’s center, the heroes bug the bed the two Majors are using and broadcast their lovemaking over the PA system, sending Burns round the bend (and out of the war) and branding Houlihan with the name “Hot-Lips.”

It is quickly apparent in *M*A*S*H* that we are not dealing with the innocuous highjinks and patriotic resolution of the standard service comedy—both the humor and the vision of war are too raw and too real. Altman creates a sense of battle fatigue by filling the wide Panavision screen with people and objects drained of any bright colors, except for the spurting blood in the operating room. To this visual denseness is added a bust soundtrack, filled with overlapping dialogue, music, and PA announcements, often in broad contrast to what is happening on screen. The structure is episodic and the film rather tails off toward the end, but for most of its length it sustains an astonishing
level of energy and invention.

Pauline Kael called *M*A*S*H* “the best American war comedy since sound came in,” and most critics concurred. Not all at once, however. Some were sickened by the gruesome realism of the surgery scenes that “stitch down” the picture, or put off by the apparent sexism and cruelty of some of the humor. “Hot Lips is a good deal more vulnerable than the men who torment her,” Vincent Canby wrote, “but the odd and disturbing suspicions that *M*A*S*H*’s good guys are essentially bastards are dropped (unfortunately, I feel) in favor of conventional; sentiment.” Richard Schickel, however, thought that the film’s heroes might best be understood “as Robin Hoods of rationalism, robbing from the rich stockpiles of madness controlled by the people who make (and manage) wars and doling it out in inoculating life-saving doses to the little guys caught up in the mess.”

The film won the Golden Palm at Cannes and was nominated for six Academy Awards, receiving one (for Best Screenplay). It earned $30 million for Twentieth Century-Fox in its first year alone, and went on to become one of the all-time top-grossing pictures and, in a softened, sweeter form, the basis of a very successful television series. For directing the picture Altman received a flat fee of $75,000. His son Michael, who wrote the lyrics for the film’s theme song at the age of fourteen, is still collecting royalties.

With the success of *M*A*S*H, Altman was recognized as a major talent. He received many offers to do big-budget studio productions, but opted instead to experiment with a small production at his own Lion’s Gate Films. *Brewster McCloud* (1970) is about an alienated young man who wants to fly... The film was a failure at the box office, with critical reactions mixed... It has since become a cult item and has been described by Altman as his own favorite: I wouldn’t say it’s my best film. . . “It’s my favorite because I took more chances then. It was my boldest work, by far my most ambitious.”

His next project harked back to his *Bonanza* days. For a long time Altman had “wanted to take a very standard Western story with a classic line and do it real, or what I felt was real, and destroy all the myths of heroism.” With the ideas from an Edmund Naughton novel and a script based on it by Brian McKay, he set to work on *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971). Altman has always preferred a loose, freewheeling method of filmmaking in which actors are encouraged to flesh out their roles through improvisation. During rehearsals, and to contribute dialogue and even plot points to the scenario. Not all the material so developed will appear in the completed film, but the process can subtly modify the events on the screen, suggesting that they spring from a context of ongoing, abundant life. And of course it is a style of filmmaking that appeals strongly to many performers. Altman had carried over cast and crew members from *M*A*S*H* to *Brewster McCloud*, assembling a sort of repertory company, and now he moved those people and his stars to a mountain near Vancouver, where they helped build and at times virtually lived in the set for a frontier town of 1902. Warren Beatty plays the braggart McCabe, who prospers by setting up a bordello with the help of an opium-smoking whore named Mrs. Miller, played by Julie Christie. Indeed, McCabe does so well that a large mining corporation decides to buy up his business, and when he cockily refuses to sell, hires three killers to gun him down. As he dodges and stalks these men in the snow, Mr. Miller withdraws into an opium dream.

Altman had said that he wanted “to illustrate a heroic ballad. Yes, these events took place, but not in the way you’ve been told. I wanted to look at it through a different window, you might say, but I still wanted to keep the poetry of the ballad.” The film is a richly-textured mood piece, and although the story suggests that life was cheap on the frontier and that big money (rather than individual enterprise) called the shots, elements of the production impose a distance on these ugly facts....

*The Long Goodbye* (1973) drew fire from critics who thought it a travesty of Raymond Chandler’s classic thriller. It is set not in the 1940s but in the slick world of contemporary Los Angeles, and a played by Elliott Gould, the heroic detective Philip Marlowe is an unheroic and faintly anachronistic figure. He lives in a rundown apartment, drives a ’48 Lincoln, and wears a rumpled dark suit, and he is further set apart by a code of behavior that requires him to deliver tough, stylish one-liners (met, as a rule, with a vacant stare or a quizzical shrug). His code also requires that he function as a moral agent in a corrupt world and this he does, sticking to his bewildering case until he discovers a primal act of treachery. Then, outraged at his own naivete and at unforgivably casual tone of the confession, he simply draws his gun and blows the bad guy (Jim Bouton) away. In exploring the implications of a 1940s style on the loose in a 1970s world, Altman made a conscious decision to emphasize atmosphere and characterization over plot, and the case is allowed to be as confusing to us as it is to Marlowe. Many references to old movies—underscored by the playing of “Hooray for Hollywood”—point up the fantasy-element in Marlowe’s persona.

An integral part of the emphasis on atmosphere is provided by the camera movement. Altman and Zsigmond decided to experiment with unmotivated, constantly moving shots, hoping the audience would accept this as a style and that it would create an interesting three-dimensional feeling all through the film. Zsigmond ultimately received an award (from the National Society of Film Critics) for his cinematography on this picture. Michael Tarantino’s analysis of the camerawork shows how the moving camera establishes Marlowe’s relationship to the world around him and affects the audience’s relationship to the film. Jonathan Rosenbaum’s complementary analysis does the same thing for the musical soundtrack.

*California Split* is the first film of Altman’s to credit “Lion’s Gate 8-Track Sound,” though the director had used multiple tracks and overlapping voices in many of his earlier pictures. With the 8-track system, Altman could record sound live from microphones planted on set or on location, eliminating a lot of cumbersome equipment as well as the necessity of postdubbing. He could also mix and unmix the sound at will. This advanced technology was exploited to the full in his next film, *Nashville* (1975), to create a virtual sound collage; in addition to the eight tracks for dialogue, sixteen more were used for musical numbers and background.

*Nashville* is Altman’s triumph. The high point of his film career. Innovative techniques are used with dazzling success to relate the stories of twenty-four major characters who are involved in a Nashville music festival and political rally. The film interweaves its characters in a complex, discursive manner, without special emphasis on any single story, cutting from character to character as the viewer gradually discerns the connections—family, business, romantic—between these people. Altman has explained that each character can be broken down to an archetype. “We carefully picked those archetypes to represent a cross-section of the whole culture, heightened by the country music scene and extreme nationalism or regionalism of a city like Nashville” -- a city with an image of great wealth and instant
popular success, like Hollywood forty years ago. “Another thing Nashville signifies is that we don’t listen to words any more. The words of a country song are as predictable as the words of a politician’s speech.” There are plenty of both in Nashville; the similarities between show business and politics are at the heart of the film’s disenchanted view of contemporary life.

Asked to develop a script that would deal with the country music scene (and end with a death), Joan Tewkesbury had provided an “open” screenplay, leaving situations for Altman to fill out, then for the actors to fill out, and finally for the audience, as the twenty-fifth character, to interpret. (“I try to allow each individual to actually see and experience a different film,” the director once said.) A fair amount of the dialogue was developed in rehearsal, and most of the original songs were written by the performers themselves, with the help of music director Richard Baskin. Despite the size of the cast and the improvisational aspects of the project, the location work proceeded smoothly, in the relaxed atmosphere of a summer-camp. A favored-nations contract clause among the stars had them each receive the same amount of money. Nashville was shot for about $2 million in less than 45 days.

Altman described the experience as almost like making a documentary. “What we did was sort of set up events and then just press the button and photograph them.” As he usually does, he shot the scenes basically in sequence, from first to last; he ended up with 300,000 feet of film (about twice the amount normally needed for a feature). For a brief time he entertained the notion of making two movies instead of one, but then began to edit the footage down to a single feature, cutting progressively shorter versions, from 8 to 6 to 3 ½ hours in length.

Before the final version was assembled, Pauline Kael saw and ecstatically reviewed for The New Yorker a three-hour rough cut. She called it “an orgy without excess” for movie-lovers. “It’s a pure emotional high and you don’t come down when the picture is over.” She urged Paramount Pictures to release this version, but Altman himself determined the final length—159 minutes.

Some reviewers called Nashville the movie of the seventies that all others would be measured against. Others saw it as an unfocused, inaccurate mess, without even the consolation of genuine Nashville stars.

The subject of Three Women (1977) reputedly came to Altman in a dream that he had when his wife was faced with surgery—a movie-like dream complete with title, scenery, and actresses Shelley Duvall and Sissy Spacek already cast.

Altman insists, “I love Quintet—it’s exactly the movie I wanted to make, and it turned out exactly the way I wanted it to turn out.” Pauline Kael said, “Altman has reached the point of wearing his failures like medals. He’s creating a mystique of heroism out of emptied theaters.”

While a visiting professor at the University of Michigan, Altman financed and filmed Secret Honor (1984) in a residence hall with student assistants.

As Robin Wood points out, the relationship of a film like McCabe and Mrs. Miller or The Long Goodbye to its genre is “more complex and constructive” than simple satire; Raymond Durgnat has argued that in films like these the director “systematically reopened the questions and off-key possibilities which genres may tend to close.” Altman’s principal weapon against the neat artifacts of conventional storytelling has always been the busy confusion of real life, which he has suggested in his films by a profusion of sounds and images, by huge casts or crazy characters, multiple plots or no plots at all; and which he has invited into his filmmaking by his reliance on improvisation. It does not particularly worry him that audiences may miss something on screen or on the soundtrack; it would worry him if they didn’t, for he believes that viewers ought to be able to look at a movie several times and still find something new.

In an essay in Richard Roud’s Cinema: A Critical Dictionary (1980), Wood credits Altman with making “artistic sense out of the dominant technical devices of modern cinema, the telephoto and zoom lenses,” devices that tend to create a sense of “dreamlike uncertainty, of instability and loss of control. . . . Altman’s films reveal a consistent, recurring pattern to which these stylistic strategies are peculiarly appropriate. The protagonist, initially confident of his ability to cope with what he undertakes, gradually discovers that his control is an illusion; he has involved himself in a process of which his understanding is far from complete and which will probably end in his own destruction.” Wood thinks that Altman himself “often seems only partly in control of the effects he creates”—the result perhaps, of a gambler’s approach to filmmaking. It is generally agreed that his films constitute an uneven body of work, and most have not been commercially successful. Pauline Kael described his method as “exploratory”—“an intuitive, quixotic, essentially impractical approach to moviemaking.”

In 1976 Bruce Williamson described Altman as “convivial, erratic, difficult, generous, funny, vulnerable and incredibly, sometimes bitingly, perceptive about people. In physical appearance, he has been compared to Santa Claus, Mephistopheles and a benevolent Captain Bligh, and he fits all three descriptions.”


. . . The older Robert Altman, perhaps that decade’s [70s] most consistent chronicler of human behavior, could be characterized as the artistic rebel most committed to an unswerving personal vision. If the generation of whiz kids tends to admire the American cinema as well as its structures of production, Altman tends to regard the American cinema critically and to view the production establishment more as an adversary to be cunningly exploited on the way to almost European ambiguity. Like Bergman, Altman has worked often with a stock company of performers who appear in one role after another, among them Elliott Gould, Sally Kellerman, Rene Auberjonois, Keith Carradine, Shelley Duvall, Michael Murphy, Bert Remsen, and
Henry Gibson.

Altman’s distinctive style transforms whatever subject he approaches. He often takes advantage of widescreen compositions in which the frame is filled with a number of subjects and details that complete for the spectator’s attention. Working with cinematographer Vilmos Zsigmond, he has achieved films that are visually distinguished and tend toward the atmospheric.

Especially notable are the use of the zoom lens in the smoky cinematography of McCabe and Mrs. Miller; the reds, whites and blues of Nashville; the constantly mobile camera, specially mounted, of The Long Goodbye, which so effortlessly reflects the hazy moral center of the world the film presents; and the pastel prettiness of A Wedding, particularly the first appearance of that icon of the American cinema, Lillian Gish, whose subsequent film death propels the narrative.

As a postscript on Altman, one should add that he, more than any other director, should never be counted out as an important force in American film culture. If his work is sometimes uneven, the fact that he continues to work on projects which are political, ideological, and personal—refusing to compromise his own artistic vision—is a sign that he remains, even in his seventies, the United States’ single most ambitious auteur.


Whenever Robert Altman is asked about his philosophy of film-making, his answer is usually along these lines: “It’s the doing that’s the important thing. I equate film-making with making sandcastles. You get a bunch of mates together and go down to the beach and build a great sandcastle. You sit back and have a beer, the tide comes in, and in twenty minutes it’s just smooth sand. That structure that you made is in everybody’s memories, and that’s it. You all start walking home, and somebody says, ‘Are you going to come back next Saturday and build another one?’ And another guy says, ‘well, OK, but I’ll do moats this time, not turrets!’ But that, for me, is the real joy of it all, that it’s just fun, and nothing else.”

Altman’s sandcastle analogy—which has provided the name of his production company and office—has remained consistent throughout his career, one of the most extensive and adventurous to be found in the history of American cinema. He didn’t begin as a studio tea boy or a precocious student but learned his craft by making what would now be called corporate films in a wholly commercial world that explained the rules and techniques of a sport or the need for better road safety. From this, he graduated to television; not to the brow-fisting socially conscious live drama that spawned Sidney Lumet and John Frankenheimer, but, rather, to inside the factory, churning out popular series based around simple concepts, likeable character actors and solid genre situations. Little of this prepared the world for the battered visuals, explosive humor and ‘fuck ‘em’ attitude of M*A*S*H which shocked the industry above all for being made not by a bearded ‘movie brat’ but a seasoned player of forty-five years of age.

Putting aside the sheer volume of his work, it is Altman’s turning upside down of movie conventions—the constant throwing out of the rule book—that has made him such a commanding presence. Surviving the constraints of little time and money in delivering hours and hours of generic television series clearly showed him exactly what needed to be done, just so that he could later undo it. Once liberated from the standard demands of master shot and close-ups to be handed over to an unseen editor, Altman began to allow himself to roam free, drifting around a scene like a bloodhound following the scent, zooming almost casually on to significant details or simply making surprise connections. By putting separate microphones on his actors, he found that not only could the camera be distant from the action, removing the performer’s need to be aware of its position, but that he could also mix the sound to catch one conversation while filtering out another. All this contributed to Altman’s determination to convey the fleeting nature of life as we experience it, with all the frustration of its lack of precision and the pleasure of happy accidents.

And what of Altman’s actual preoccupations? These have always been harder to pin down, since by his own account so many of his projects have seemingly come about through serendipity. But often he has revealed his keen eye for the essence of the American character and has brilliantly undermined empty myths, be they of the glory of the Old West, the earnest homilies of country-and-western music or the splendour of wealth.

Foreword By Paul Thomas Anderson

It feels home-grown and handmade. There have been a hundred who have tried to be Altman—or Altmanesque—but they miss that certain ingredient: they aren’t him. There’s no-one like him. He can be imitated and he can influence, but he’s impossible to catch up with or cage—he’s unpredictable, and the river he follows is his own. He’s stubborn and giving and petulant and comforting, and he has the best smile a movie director has ever had. A man from Kansas City who fought in wars, who tattooed dogs, who wrote songs and punched producers. He puffed out his chest and had a formula for chicken-shit plastered on his motorcycle helmet.

You can’t call too many film directors artists. But Bob is. … watching his films as a fan, then later as an observer on his sets, one thing holds true: it’s impossible to see where the conversation ends and the scene begins. It all feels like a dress rehearsal, and before there’s too much time to think or second-guess, he’s moved on. Say something once, why say it again? As he likes to say, ‘Lets get to the verb.’...
“The Long Goodbye”

The Long Goodbye, based on Raymond Chandler’s novel featuring his private detective Philip Marlowe investigating the aftermath of a friend’s supposed suicide, was originally going to be directed by Peter Bogdanovich, and a screenplay had been commissioned from Leigh Brackett, who’d written the 1946 version of The Big Sleep, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall and directed by Howard Hawks.

Wasn’t this an instance when you actually felt enthused by the script? Originally I didn’t want to do the picture. I’d enjoyed reading Chandler, though I never did finish The Long Goodbye, and I’d liked those 1940s movies, but I just didn’t want to play around with them. I was in Ireland shooting Images, and Elliott Kastner and Jerry Bick sent me the script. At first I said, ‘I don’t want to do Raymond Chandler. If you say “Philip Marlowe”, people just think of Humphrey Bogart.’ Robert Mitchum was being proposed for it. But I just didn’t want to do another Philip Marlowe film and have it wrap up the same way all the other films did. I think it was David Picker, the production chief at United Artists, who suggested Elliott Gould for Marlowe—and then I was interested. So I read Leigh Brackett’s script, and in her version, in the last scene, Marlowe pulled out his gun and killed his best friend, Terry Lennox. It was so out of character for Marlowe, I said, ‘I’ll do the picture, but you cannot change that ending! It must be in the contract.’ They all agreed, which was very surprising. If she hadn’t written that ending, I guarantee I wouldn’t have done it. It said, ‘This is just a movie.’ After that, we had him do his funny little dance down the road and you hear ‘Hooray for Hollywood’. It even looked like a road made in a Hollywood studio. And with Eileen Wade driving past, it’s The Third Man!

I remember at the première I had a publicist named Regina Gruss, and she had an older sister, probably in her fifties. When the film was over and everybody was saying they loved everybody, I was going down the aisle, and she came up to me and said, ‘Mr. Altman, isn’t he going to get into trouble for that…?’ She just couldn’t believe that we could have such an ending.

Was the idea of Marlowe’s cat in the original script? No, that came from a story a friend told me about his cat only eating one type of cat food. It serves as a comment on friendship, and it tied in with the ending, because Marlowe thought Terry Lennox was his great friend, and he had gone missing. His cat was around only when he got fed, and when he didn’t, the cat was gone too…

The film makes amusing play between this character from a novel written in 1953 and the Los Angeles of 1973. I decided we were going to call him Rip Van Marlowe, as if he’d been asleep for twenty years, had woken up and was wandering through this landscape of the early 1970s but trying to evoke the morals of a previous era. I put him in that dark suit, white shirt and tie, while everyone else was smelling incense and smoking pot and going topless; everything was health food and exercise and cool. So we just satirized that whole time. And that’s why that line of Elliott’s—“It’s OK with me”—became his key line throughout the film.

Many years later I got a letter from a guy who had been in prison in Ecuador for about twelve years, and he was getting out. He had written a book while there, a faux Chandler story. So he wrote about Marlowe at a later date. And he had seen The Long Goodbye in prison, where they’d run it a number of times. He said to me that since he had no way of knowing of what Los Angeles was like, he hoped I would forgive him that in his book he’d taken the film and described all the places that Marlowe went to as if that was it. So he used my conceit to create his own conceit.

We never leave Marlowe’s side throughout the film. Marlowe was in every scene in the film, because it was his viewpoint. And when he was at the beach house, where Nina Van Pallandt and Sterling Hayden had some scenes on their own, I didn’t know what to do. So I had Sterling say, ‘Marlowe, go down and count the waves, my wife and I are going to talk.’ And they sent him down to the beach, but I kept his reflection in the window so that he was always present in a way.

How did the extraordinary way you used the camera, as if it was another character constantly stalking the action, evolve? I decided that the camera should never stop moving. It was arbitrary. We would just put the camera on a dolly and everything would move or pan, but it didn’t match the action; usually it was counter to it. It gave me that feeling that when the audience see the film, they’re a kind of voyeur. You’re looking at something you shouldn’t be looking at. Not that what you’re seeing is off limits; just that you’re not supposed to be there. You had to see over someone’s shoulder or peer round someone’s back. I think that in so many films everything’s so beautiful, the lighting is gorgeous and with each shot everything is relit. My method also means you don’t have to light for closeups; you only have to accommodate what may happen, so you just light the scene and it saves a lot of time. The rougher it looked, the better it served my purpose.

I was worried about the harsh light of southern California and I wanted to give the film the soft, pastel look you see on old postcards from the 1940s. So we post-flashed the film even further than we did on McCabe, almost 100 per cent, I believe.

Did these artistic choices worry anybody? No one gave me any trouble, but then nobody knew what I was talking about… The people I had to be responsible to, they didn’t know what I was doing. If I had made the film ten years earlier under the studio system, the head of the camera department would have come to me and complained. In fact, the head of editing at Fox said to me about M*A*S*H, ‘We can’t show the film. It’s out of focus, it’s soft.’ They were shooting Patton at the same time, and after a period of time seeing the dailies from that film and our dailies, they were sending messages to the director Frank Schaffner in Spain, saying, ‘This doesn’t look dirty or real enough!’
How were your relations with Elliott Gould after M*A*S*H? I actually offered him the lead in McCabe & Mrs. Miller, but he turned it down. After M*A*S*H he came to me and said that at first Donald and he didn’t think I knew what I was doing, but now he realized that he’d made a dreadful mistake.

Casting Nina Van Pallandt, who was best known as one half of that Scandinavian singing duo Nina and Frederick, must have caused a few jaws to drop. United Artists didn’t want me to use her. I’d only seen her on The Johnny Carson Show, when she was mixed up with the Clifford Irving scandal, and I thought she was just Chandler’s blonde. But they let me do a test. Laszlo Kovacs shot it with her and Elliott, and then they saw it and said, ‘Great, go ahead.’ But later David Picker told me they were going to say I couldn’t use her. Other than that, I had control of all the casting.

Sterling Hayden, who many thought was washed up and in decline after his naming names to HUAC, was also quite a risk. I originally wanted Dan Blocker for the role, but he died just before shooting began, and I was persuaded to meet Sterling, who was just perfect. He improvised a lot of his dialogue, and he was pretty well whacked out all the time. He was an alcoholic, and when he smoked grass and had the booze in him he was something else. But he was wonderful. I loved him.

In the Chandler novel, Roger Wade is actually murdered, but you changed that into a suicide. I gave everyone on the film a copy of Raymond Chandler Speaking to read, because I wanted them to know about his fascination with suicide. For me, Wade was Chandler, someone who didn’t want to struggle any more. He’s also like Irwin Shaw, James Jones or Ernest Hemingway—very macho, a heavy drinker, out of his time.

The director Mark Rydell made a great impression as Marty Augustine, especially in the scene where he threatens Marlowe by callously smashing a Coke bottle in the face of his pretty girlfriend.

He had done The Cowboys with John Wayne, and we were all in London together at the same time with Johnny Williams, working on Images. When I got back to Los Angeles I asked him if he wanted to play Marty Augustine.

I was living at that same house in Malibu that we shot as the Wades’ house. Elliott, Mark, me, my wife and four or five others were in that house all day and we were drunk, ripped and stoned. We planned to go for dinner, but before we left, I came up with this scene with the Coke bottle, and we thought that was great. Then we went up to a beach restaurant, four of us, and there was this waitress who was looking after us. I said, ‘Look at her face, that’s the kind of girl who should be Marty Augustine’s girl, the one he should hit with the Coke bottle.’ So I talked to her and said, ‘I know this sounds silly, but you know who these guys are, Elliott Gould and so on, and we think you’d be perfect for our movie.’ Then, when we were about to leave not one of us had any money or credit cards at all, so I said, ‘You’ll have to trust us with this cheque. I’ll come back tonight with a credit card.’ And she went, ‘Oh God, don’t try that one!’

Anyway, we shot the bottle scene, and in the next scene she had her jaw wired up and her nose bandaged up. After the movie was over she got an agent, went to MGM and had a couple of small roles. She played a nurse in the Dr. Kildare series or something. Then that pattered out and she ended up back on the bar circuit, living down in Malibu. Seven years later, she’s living in a house with four other girls, and she comes home about two-thirty in the morning and these people were all crazy on drugs. She went into her bedroom, closed the door, and one of these guys at the party suddenly opened the door and jumped on her. She started screaming, and he literally bit her nose off. Then he jumped out of the window and killed himself on the rocks below. So seven years later she ended up looking exactly like she had as Marty Augustine’s girlfriend. Now that’s spooky…. For an audience today, the strangest member of the cast has to be one Arnold Schwarzenegger. His name was Arnold Strong at the time.

David Arkin, who was playing one of the sidekicks said to me, ‘I’ve got a friend, he’s just terrific, he’s got the damnedest muscles you’ve ever seen.’ I said, ‘Fine, bring him along, we’ll use him as one of our guys.’ Arnold doesn’t talk about it now though—he doesn’t remember the film.

The use of music is very witty and original, with the same theme turning up in different styles and orchestrations appropriate to the scene.

I went to Johnny Williams, and he wrote this song with Johnny Mercer, ‘The Long Goodbye’, and I came up with the idea of using it everywhere. And Johnny started paraphrasing it in all these different versions, even down to a doorknob and the band in Mexico. I’ve always said that at the beginning of conceiving a film, ‘I’d love music to be indigenous, so that there’s not going to be any violins that you can’t see, that it won’t come from nowhere.’ I’ve never completely achieved that, though in The Long Goodbye the music became a character in itself.

The reason we have to have music in films is to put a cocoon around it, so the audience doesn’t become conscious of other people or embarrassed by being there. The music is a kind of tunnel to help keep your focus. I don’t understand music, but it’s something that can be so visceral and inside you, and I try not to lead what the action is going to be—I mean, we don’t hit those chords so you think, ‘Oh, I’m going to get scared.’ One day I’ll do a film without any music. I almost did it with The Gingerbread Man, but then …

How was the movie received? When the picture opened, it was a big, big flop. It opened in Los Angeles and Chicago and a few other cities, and the ad campaign was Elliott with a cat on his shoulder, a smoking .45 and a cigarette in his mouth, with Nina as a slick blonde beside him. And it just failed. I went to David Picker and said, ‘You can’t do
this. No wonder the fucking picture is failing. It’s giving the wrong impression. You make it look like a thriller and it’s not, it’s a satire.’ So they pulled the film, and we got Jack Davis from Mad magazine to do a new poster with all the characters, and we opened it in New York and it was a smash hit. By the time that happened, it was too late for Los Angeles and those other cities. If New York had been our first opening, we would have had successful film. But the film has stood up over the years, in a strange way. Some British critics didn’t like Elliott Gould playing Philip Marlowe, and I was confused about that, because I had read a lot of the books, and what Chandler wrote was really a bunch of thumbnail sketches or thematic essays, all about Los Angeles, and Marlowe was just a device to unite them, and I felt we were very close to that. Everyone said Elliott’s not Philip Marlowe and I wasn’t being true to the author, but what they were really saying was that Elliott Gould wasn’t Humphrey Bogart. In fact, I believe we were closer to Chandler’s character than any of the other renditions, where they made him a kind of movie superhero.

From Terrence Rafferty, “Robert Altman’s Long Goodbye,” NY Times, 19 February 2006:

Like King Vidor, who had to hang in for 85 years to cop a thanks-for-the-memories statuette, Mr. Altman has five best-director nominations and zero Oscars to show for a long and prolific career, so he pretty emphatically qualifies as overdue. He has been overdue for 30 years.

Hollywood has in fact never known quite what to make of Mr. Altman, who seemed to come out of nowhere with "M*A*S*H" in 1970 and, despite the industry's best efforts to send him back where he didn't belong, woul...