

APRIL 17, 2007 (XIV:13)
 (1975) 159 minutes

Directed & produced by Robert Altman
 Written by Joan Tewkesbury
 Original music by Arlene Barnett, Jonnie Barnett, Karen Black, Ronee Blakley, Gary Busey, Keith Carradine, Juan Grizzle, Allan F. Nicholls, Dave Peel, Joe Raposo
 Cinematography by Paul Lohmann
 Film Editors Dennis M. Hill and Sidney Levin
 Sound recorded by Chris McLaughlin
 Sound editor William A. Sawyer
 Original lyrics Robert Altman, Henry Gibson, Ben Raleigh, Richard Reich, Lily Tomlin
 Political campaign designer....Thomas HalPhillips

David Arkin...Norman
 Barbara Baxley...Lady Pearl
 Ned Beatty...Delbert Reese
 Karen Black...Connie White
 Ronee Blakley...Barbara Jean
 Timothy Brown ...Tommy Brown
 Keith Carradine...Tom Frank
 Geraldine Chaplin...Opal
 Robert DoQui...Wade Cooley
 Shelley Duvall...L. A. Joan
 Allen Garfield...Barnett
 Henry Gibson...Haven Hamilton
 Scott Glenn...Private First Class Glenn Kelly
 Jeff Goldblum...Tricycle Man
 Barbara Harris...Albuquerque
 David Hayward ...Kenny Fraiser
 Michael Murphy...John Triplette
 Allan F. Nicholls...Bill
 Dave Peel...Bud Hamilton
 Cristina Raines...Mary
 Bert Remsen...Star
 Lily Tomlin...Linnea Reese
 Gwen Welles ... Sueleen Gay
 Keenan Wynn...Mr. Green
 James Dan Calvert...Jimmy Reese
 Donna Denton...Donna Reese
 Merle Kilgore....Trout
 Carol McGinnis...Jewel
 Sheila Bailey...Smokey Mountain Laurel



Patti Bryant...Smokey Mountain Laurel
 Richard Baskin...Frog
 Jonnie Barnett...Himself
 Vassar Clements...Himself
 Sue Barton...Herself
 Elliott Gould...Himself
 Julie Christie...Herself
 Robert L. DeWeese Jr....Mr. Green
 Gailard Sartain...Man at Lunch Counter
 Howard K. Smith...Himself
 Academy Award for Best Song: Keith Carradine, "I'm Easy"
 Selected for the National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board

ROBERT ALTMAN (20 February 1925, Kansas City, Missouri—20 November 2006, Los Angeles), has developed the form of interlocked narrative to a level that is frequently copied (e.g. Quentin Tarrantino) but never matched. **His bio from Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia:** "Irreverent, iconoclastic director whose films have won kudos from critics and film buffs for decades, though his box-office hits have been few and far between. His career has had more than its share of ups and downs, but Altman has never "sold out," remaining a maverick at every turn. After serving in World



War 2 as a pilot, Altman wrote magazine stories and radio scripts (and even had one story turned into a movie, 1948's *Bodyguard*) before signing on with a small Kansas City company that made industrial films. He spent nearly a decade there before entering the theatrical arena with a

lowbudget epic called *The Delinquents* (1957, which he produced and wrote as well as directed). He followed it with a documentary, *The James Dean Story* that same year, which gave him an entree to television, where he became a prolific director of series episodes. Over the next decade he helmed installments of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," "Combat," and "Bonanza," among others. Altman's next feature films, *Countdown* (1968) and *That Cold Day in the Park* (1969), elicited some raised-eyebrow comments from critics, but it was *M*A*S*H* (1970), a black comedy about a Korean War medical unit, that cemented his reputation. An irreverent and original film, it solidified techniques he'd experimented with in his earlier work, and also solidified his relationship with a handful of actors who became part of his unofficial stock company. The film earned him an Oscar nomination, and made him bankable in Hollywood, at least temporarily. His revisionist genre pieces *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (a 1971 Western) and *The Long Goodbye* (a 1973 Philip Marlowe whodunit) added to Altman's rapidly expanding prestige, and the underrated *Images* (1972), *Thieves Like Us* and *California Split* (both 1974) reaffirmed his individualistic approach to narrative filmmaking. *Nashville* (1975), a brilliant mosaic of American life set in the country music capital, brought Altman another Academy Award nomination and showed him at the peak of his powers. (Plans to show a much longer version of the film in miniseries form on TV sadly never came to fruition.) It proved a tough act to follow. His subsequent films became increasingly odd and remote. *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), the fascinating *3 Women* (1977), *A Wedding* (1978), the charming *A Perfect Couple*, *Quintet* and *H.E.A.L.T.H* (all 1979) had flashes of brilliance but seemed to reflect an artist who'd gone astray. Altman's attempt to return to the commercial mainstream resulted in the spectacularly awful *Popeye* (1980). The director retreated and retrenched, directing for the stage and returning to film with an occasional offbeat project: *Come Back to the Five and Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean* (1982), *Streamers* (1983), *Secret*

Honor (1984), *Fool for Love*, *O.C. and Stiggs* (both 1985), *Beyond Therapy* (1987, stupefyingly bad), *Aria* (1988, an omnibus film in which he directed one segment), and *Vincent & Theo* (1990). Television proved a more fruitful medium for him during the 1980s. Altman directed a handful of plays and small-scale films, as well as the highly praised cinema-verité election campaign parody, "Tanner" (a 1988 cable series that won him an Emmy) on which he collaborated with cartoonist Garry Trudeau. He also directed a first-rate TV production of "The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial" (1988). Then, in 1992, Altman brought Michael Tolkin's sardonic satire of Hollywood deal-making to life for the big screen. *The Player* (1992) restored the director to favor and earned him another Oscar nomination. More important, it reminded longtime fans of the Altman of yore: a challenging and creative filmmaker in full command of his craft. He took time off from films to direct an opera production of "McTeague" before persuading another all-star cast of actors to appear in his three-hour mosaic of Raymond Carver stories, *Short Cuts* (1993), which earned him an Oscar nomination. He then relocated to Paris to film the dismal fashion world satire *Ready to Wear/Prêt-à-Porter* (1994). Altman has influenced many filmmakers, especially his former assistant and protégé Alan Rudolph, for whom he produced *Welcome to L.A* (1977) and *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994)."



Some of Altman's other films are *Voltage* (2002), *Gosford Park* (2001), *Dr. T & the Women* (2000), *Cookie's Fortune* (1999), *The Gingerbread Man* (1998), *Kansas City* (1996) and *Brewster McCloud* (1970). In 2002, the American Film Institute named him director of the year for *Gosford Park* and in 2006 he was given an Honorary Academy Award. He has been

nominated for seven Academy Awards: *Gosford Park* (best director and best picture), *Short Cuts* (director), *The Player* (director), *Nashville* (director and picture), *M*A*S*H* (director). He has twice won the Golden Palm for best picture at Cannes –for *The Player* and *M*A*S*H* – and he's been nominated for *Kansas City*, *Aria*, *Fool for Love*, *3 Women*, and *Images*.

JOAN TEWKESBURY wrote one other Altman film *Thieves like Us*. Most of her other writing credits are for television films and series. Most of **PAUL LOHMANN's** cinematography has been on made-for-tv films, the last of them "Secrets" in 1992. He also did several feature films, among them *Looker*

(1981), *Mommie Dearest* (1981), *Hide in Plain Sight* (1980), *North Dallas Forty* (1979), *Meteor* (1979), *Time After Time* (1979), *High Anxiety* (1977), *The White Buffalo* (1977), *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson* (1976), *Silent Movie* (1976), and *California Split* (1974).

DENNIS M. HILL most recently edited National Lampoon's *Van Wilder* (2002). He also edited Altman's *H.E.A.L.T.H.*, *Quintet*, *3 Women*, and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson*. Some of the other films edited by **SIDNEY LEVIN** are *Scenes of the Crime* (2001), *Guarding Tess* (1994), *Stanley & Iris* (1990), *The River* (1984), *Cross Creek* (1983), *Norma Rae* (1979), *The Cheap Detective* (1978), *The Front* (1976), *Hit Lady* (1974) (TV), *Mean Streets* (1973), and *Sounder* (1972).

from Altman on Altman. Ed. David Thompson. Faber & Faber NY 2006

Throughout the 1970s, now so often lauded as that great decade when American cinema had brains, sensitivity and an adult attitude, Altman seemed unstoppable, exploding myths and genres and creating the all-encompassing ensemble film *par excellence* in *Nashville*. These were films that revealed a truer American history, suggested life did not have happy endings and defied all expectations. Even while working with the major studios, Altman held to his independence and went his way no matter what....

Although Altman has rarely talked about the inheritance of cinema with the passion of, say, Martin Scorsese, two directors to whom he has often paid tribute are Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman. And something of the polar extremes found in the work of these esteemed European *auteurs* is reflected in Altman's own swing between the broad canvas of multi-character, multi-narrative extravaganzas (*M*A*S*H**, *Nashville*, *Gosford Park*) and intimate, troubled, metaphysical dramas, especially those focused on the female experience (*Images*, *3 Women*).

David Thompson: *I believe Brief Encounter was a revelation to you?*

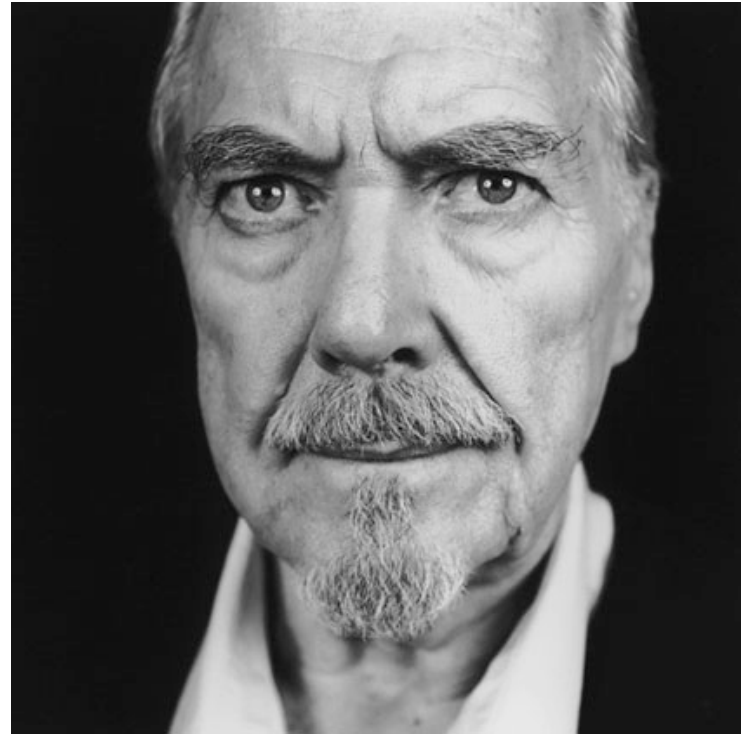
Robert Altman: That was right after the war. I was in Los Angeles, and for some unknown reason I went into the Fairfax district by myself in the afternoon to see the movie. I thought, 'Here's Celia Johnson, an older woman with sensible shoes'—and she certainly wasn't a babe. And then suddenly I was in love with her. And when I walked out of that movie, it was a whole new thing in films for me—I'd never had a film affect me in any way, previously I always felt I'd been in my seat with a lot of other people just seeing something. I remember being very emotionally moved by it. It wasn't all tits and ass! I think that picture, that and *The treasure of the Sierra Madre*, really impressed me most of all.

Later, films by Fellini and Bergman affected me very strongly. Bergman gave me the confidence to focus on a person's face and allow the character to have dignity. Fellini told me that anything's possible. And I know I've taken shots from Kurosawa's films and used them in mine....

Nashville

If your previous films had broken away from their genres—a war movie, a Western, a thriller, and so on—Nashville really was a film like no other. What was its genesis?

First off I wanted to do *Thieves Like Us*, but United Artists weren't interested. They'd just bought a company who published country-and-western songs, and instead they gave me a vehicle for *Tome Jones*. I read it and said, 'I won't do this, but I'll do my own country-and-western story if you'll let me do *Thieves* next.' Now I had never been to Nashville in my life, and country music to me was what we call 'hillbilly'



music.

I was down in Mississippi with Joan Tewkesbury, who had written *Thieves*, and I said to her, 'OK, Joan, get on a plane and go to Nashville, and just keep a diary of what happens to you. And from that we'll write some Nashville movie...' She arrived at the airport, got in a hired car, and there was a traffic jam caused by a boat falling off a pickup-truck, so she was stuck on the freeway for three hours. That made a great scene to introduce many of the characters. And everything that was in the eventual script was like that, something that had occurred to her. That's pretty much the same way Barbara Turner put *The Company* together. So we wrote that script and gave it to David Picker at UA, who hated it.

Then Jerry Weintraub, who was in the music business and was managing singers at the time, came to see me at my office and said he wanted to get into the movie business, how could he do it? I said, 'Well, here's a script about Nashville and country-and-western music. Get me the money to make that and you can produce it and you're in the business.' He came back in a day or two and he said, 'I got Marty Starger at ABC interested.' They came over to my house and I played him two of the songs that Keith Carradine had done, 'I'm Easy' and 'It Don't Worry Me.' And they said, 'OK.'

How would you describe the subject of the film?

It was about the incredible ambition of those guys getting off the bus with a guitar every day, and like in Hollywood, trying to make it. Nashville was where you went to make it in country-and-western music. I just wanted to take the literature of country music, which is very, very simple, basic stuff—‘For the sake of the children, we must say goodbye’—and put it into a panorama which reflected America and its politics.

Nashville was not an expensive film—you’re on record as saying all the actors were paid either \$1,000 or \$750 a week, and they all knew the deal before going in.

Nashville was the first film I really had total control over. It cost, I believe, \$1.9 million. But I didn’t have anybody standing over me, I didn’t have any studio. I went and did it the way I felt it should be done. We shot over seven weeks. I gathered a group of actors together, twenty-four of them, and I had them write their own material. Everything was done on the spot, changed on the spot; it was indigenous to what was going on. We’d create events and document them. And we weren’t paying the extras—if anyone turned up in a red dress, I couldn’t change that. So it was very like a documentary, with a small crew moving fast. Today it would be so complicated; you’d need all the permissions. The scenes with Geraldine Chaplin wandering in the junk yard and among the yellow buses—I’d driven past those places every day and thought, ‘We’ve really got to shoot there.’ So we just stopped



on the highway, threw Geraldine into it, and she improvised her rap.

Chaplin’s Opal is the one character who interacts with all the others. Her slip of the tongue that she’s working for ‘The British Broadcasting Company’ is the clue that she’s a complete fraud, though.

Opal was our tour guide, the connecting tissue. She was based on a lot of people I’ve met at the Cannes Film Festival, who you never know if they’re really who they say they are. I had to have some connection in my head why I was doing all these disparate scenes, so as a reporter with this ruse she was working for the BBC, she was able to go through this world and became the voice who could ask questions the audience wanted answering. She was wonderful at improvising her scenes. I’m crazy about Geraldine.

Lily Tomlin, in her first screen role, also does some brilliant improvisations in the film, like her description of the exploding eyeball at the Hamilton party.

Originally the part was going to be played by Louise Fletcher, whose parents were deaf, so she knew sign language and that was the reason it was in the picture. Just as we were ready to go, she backed out, but the deaf kids stayed in. I think Lily gave a spectacular performance.

The father in the family couldn’t deal with that situation. Ned Beatty had been in my mind for a while, as I’d thought about him for a part in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. I’d given Jeff Goldblum one short scene in *California Split*, and his character came from a grip on *Thieves Like Us*, who was always riding around on his bike. Henry Gibson had been in *The Long Goodbye*, and he convinced me he could do Haven Hamilton, which I had originally offered to Robert Duvall. And Timothy Brown had been in *M*A*S*H*. He was a great football player but not a great singer.

Gwen Welles, whom you’d previously cast in California Split, gave an unforgettable performance as the hopeless Sueleen Gay.

As Ned Beatty says in the film, Gwen Welles ‘couldn’t sing a lick’. But I had Gwen taking singing lessons from Richard Baskin, saying, ‘You’ve got to be the best you can.’ And she really worked at it!

You got some criticism for letting your actors write and perform their songs.

Richard Baskin was the musical director, and he helped some of those people write their songs. He arranged all the music in the film, and it was all shot live. I thought ‘Why should I go out and buy a lot of songs that were tried and tested?’ And also, this wasn’t about hit songs; most of the songs were not meant to be hits. Actually, one of them was a hit, ‘I’m Easy’, though Keith wrote that five years before we did the picture. But I wanted a cross-section of songs, good and bad. The country-and-western people in Nashville all said, ‘Oh, the music’s terrible, it’s no good,’ to which I would reply, ‘Well, I don’t think your music is that good either...’ They felt I

should have used their stuff. But I was satirizing them. Their stuff would have been too on the nose.

All that said, Ronee Blakley's songs really do stand out.

Yes, they're excellent. How's it go? 'He's got a tape-deck in his tractor and he's ploughing up his daddy's land.' At first we bought some songs from Ronee, and then when we got to Nashville she was there singing backup. Susan Ansbach was going to play Barbara Jean, but as the picture developed we couldn't afford her. She wouldn't drop her price, so we lost her. Then I saw Ronee after her gig and asked if she could stay around for a few days. So she hung out with us, and I was wondering if she could do the role, as she'd never acted before. Finally, we gave it to her, and she was as good as anyone in the film. I guess she got her inspiration from Loretta Lynn. I remember the scene where she has her breakdown, she came to me in the morning and said, 'I've got some ideas for the scene.' I was really wound up then and said, 'Ronee, I can't talk about this, just go ahead and do it.' We were running two cameras, we shot it four times, and I saw it just as she did it, and it was just great.

Nashville introduced your first foray into mixing reality and fiction, with some actors playing themselves.

Elliott Gould, Julie Christie and George Segal all came through Nashville while we were shooting, so I decided to give them those cameos. George didn't make the final cut. Sue Barton, who accompanied Elliott and Julie, was our actual PR person. Julie was really valuable for the scene where Karen doesn't recognize her.

How did you devise your invented political candidate, Hal Philip Walker and the Replacement Party?

Thomas Hal Phillips was a Mississippi novelist and writer I'd become friends with when I was shooting *Thieves Like Us*. His brothers are all politicians from Mississippi. They're an incredibly wealthy family that owns trucking businesses and stuff, and he was the odd one out. So I asked him to create a candidate for me whom he would like to see elected as President of the USA and write his inaugural speech. So he did, a thirty-minute piece, and that's his voice you hear in the film. Then I hired a guy from Denver called Ron Hecht, who worked in the media, and told them both to put together a campaign, which they did with a truck which they painted up, using the name of the 'Replacement Party'. And this was all before Jimmy Carter, who had the same grass-roots kind of basis to his campaign. This was the stuff politicians don't say, so we might actually be interested in it. Then Nixon's resignation happened when we were shooting in the Grand Ole Opry.

I used this candidate figure throughout the picture, though you never saw him. He said all these great things, like 'Get the lawyers out of Congress,' and it worked really well, quite independently of me. I said, 'You can find my shooting schedule every day. You'll know where we're going to be, and if we're somewhere, bring along the girls dressed in their short skirts carrying their posters and signs, stick them up and get in our frame.' So, for instance, we're in the hospital with Barbara Jean, and through the window you would see their truck going by. So they were invading our shots just as they would if they were doing it for real, to get people's attention. Of course, I had more control over this than I care to say, but the idea was that this was something going on while I was shooting in the streets.

The most controversial element in the film must still be the assassination.

Of course, everything was set up for a political assassination, only I didn't assassinate a politician, I assassinated an entertainer. I called Joan in one day and said, 'Listen, there's something missing in this script. I think there's got to be a political umbrella on this, otherwise it's just gossip.' I wanted an assassination and I said I thought Barbara Jean ought to be shot, and we'd build backward from that.

Polly Platt, the art director was so outraged she quit the film because of that. She thought it was dumb and silly and irresponsible. But I insisted this was the way I saw it. Then, when John Lennon got assassinated a few years later, the *Washington Post* called me up and said, 'Don't you feel responsible for creating that situation, since you predicted an entertainer would be assassinated rather than a politician?' I said, 'I think it applies to all celebrities. Don't you think that instead of taking me to task on this you should look at yourselves and ask, "How come we didn't pay any attention to his warning?"'



The assassination is prepared in the film in the scene in the Exit/In where Lady Pearl, played by Barbara Baxley, talks about the Kennedys to Opal.

That's an example of how improvisation can really work. Barbara Baxley was a stage-trained actress, and she never said a word in a film or play that she hadn't rehearsed, studied, practised, analysed. But I knew in advance from talking with her about her sentimental fanaticism over the Kennedy assassinations. I told her that in this scene I wanted her to go into her whole sense of her feelings about them. At the same time, she's carrying a gun in her purse! So she went off and wrote this thing, and then said she'd like to read it out to me so we could make any changes if I didn't like it. I said, 'Well, why don't we just film it, and I'll hear it as we're shooting?' I put the camera on her in a two-shot and we ran for ten minutes, a whole reel of film. I asked her to stop a minute, and then we ran another reel. I said, 'Fine, we're through,' because I knew I had what I needed, and I could always cut to other people in the club. She was very impassioned and gave a great performance in those twenty minutes.

Do you have any thoughts on why assassinations happen the way they do? I think that in a political assassination you know that someone out there is going to support you. I don't believe an assassin kills someone unless he believes there are other people on his side. It's the difference between assassination and murder. People have told you, 'This guy ought to be shot, he's terrible, he's ruining our country.' So the assassin feels he has at least a minor mandate, that what he's really assassinating is an idea, a public figure, and saying, 'I did that. I'm as important as the person I erased.'

I don't feel responsible for anybody's assassination. It defies logic. We have four or five people who have committed political assassinations still incarcerated, like Sirhan Sirhan, who shot Robert Kennedy, Hinckley, who failed to kill Reagan, and James Earl Ray, who may or may not have killed Martin Luther King. And nobody can tell you why they did what they did. We just don't know, and we accept that—it's because they're crazy or they're looking for attention through that act. It's a symbol for them—'I shot so-and-so.' In *Nashville* everyone assumed it would be the political candidate who is assassinated, because that's something we can accept, we buy that. But he shot the entertainer, and we don't know why.

At the end, everyone just joins in singing 'It Don't Worry Me!'

Shit happens, and life goes on...I think that's what happens. We don't take any kind of lesson from these events. We accept whatever has occurred because it has occurred.



The power of the film was that it was a political picture, and the fact it was country-and-western music didn't have a lot to do with anything other than as metaphor. Now, if this had been a film for Paramount—who eventually distributed it—they wouldn't have run for that in a second!

Albert Lindauer in *World Film Directors VII*. Ed. John Wideman. The H.W. Wilson Co. NY 1988.

"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," Altman told Aljean Harmetz. "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, Altman 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.

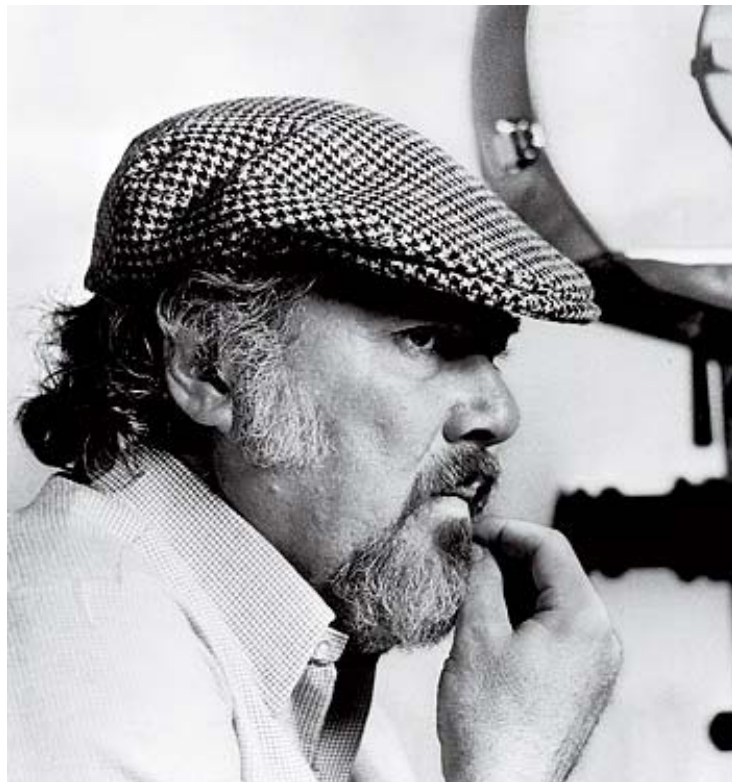
Altman says that he first got into film because "I failed at everything else. I think I was originally attracted by the glamor and the adulation, and I thought I would be able to date Gloria De Haven." With a friend named George W. George, he wrote and sold to RKO the script for Richard Fleischer's *The 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 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

concluded. 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 rehearsal, and to contribute dialogue and even plot points to the scenario....

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 disenchanting 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 lastly 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 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 Durnat 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 artifices 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 biting, 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.”

Charles Derry in *The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia*. Ed. Andrew Sarris. Visible Ink, 1998.

. . . 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*.

Just ONE more film in the Spring 2007 Buffalo Film Seminars (redux) XIV:
April 24 Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, *Singin' in the Rain* 1952

Next Monday, April 23, at the Amherst Theater, 7:00 p.m.:
Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, *A Matter of Life and Death/Stairway to Heaven* 1946

PRELIMINARY FALL 2007 SCREENING SCHEDULE (WE'RE STILL CHECKING ON PRINT AVAILABILITY):

August 28 Charlie Chaplin **City Lights** 1931
Sept 4 Jean Vigo **L'Atalante** 1934
Sept 11 William Wyler, **The Letter** 1940
Sept 18 Preston Sturges, **The Miracle of Morgan's Creek** 1944
Sept 25 Tay Garnett, **The Postman Always Rings Twice** 1946
Oct 2 Jean-Pierre Melville, **Army of Shadows/L'Armée des ombres** 1969

Oct 9 Akira Kurosawa **Ikiru** 1952
Oct 16 Jiří Menzel **Closely Watched Trains** 1966
Oct 23 Costa-Gavras **Z** 1969
Oct 30 Werner Herzog, **Aguirre: the Wrath of God** 1972
Nov 6 Hal Ashby **Being There** 1979
Nov 13 Stanley Kubrick **Full Metal Jacket** 1987
Nov 20 Woody Allen **Crimes and Misdemeanors** 1989
Nov 27 Fengliang Yang and Yimou Zhang, **Ju Dou** 1990
Dec 4 Ang Lee **Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon** 1992

Contacts:

...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu

...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu

...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>

...for the weekly email informational notes, send an email to either of us

...for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/search.html>

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