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# The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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# Altman & Genres

Robert Altman's early work was part of the transition from easily recognizable genres of Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s to riffs on those genres in the 1960s and 1970s. *The Long Goodbye* (1973) shattered the audience's expectations of the detective story while both *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976) did the same for westerns. Even when working closer to the norms of genres such as science fiction (*Quintet*, 1979), gangster film (*Thieves Like Us*, 1974), or the English manor house mystery (*Gosford Park*, 2001), Altman found ways to put his own stamp on the style and feel of each of his movies.

## Detective Story *The Long Goodbye* [1973]

Raymond Chandler's sixth and last mystery featuring private eye Philip Marlowe, *The Long Goodbye* (published in 1953), was surprisingly not made into a film until Robert Altman's treatment of it in 1973. Altman places the story in contemporary Los Angeles, while keeping the lead character true to Chandler's original. During filming Altman and the crew referred to the lead character as "Rip Van Marlowe," emphasizing the anachronism of this 1950s man living in 1970s Los Angeles.

While Detective Phillip Marlowe (Elliott Gould) tries to solve a murder, he stands apart from the rest of the characters in *The Long Goodbye*. Isolated by his dress and appearance, he is a throwback to the 1940s-50s, but the dark shadows and gritty scenes of earlier versions of Marlowe's world have been changed into sunny southern California beachfronts.



Photographs from the set of *The Long Goodbye*.



Dear Gian Luigi Rondi:

In reply to your question of why I chose Raymond Chandler's "The Long Goodbye" instead of one of his other novels about the famous private detective, Philip Marlowe, I think it appealed to me because it presented Marlowe in an uncharacteristically melancholy mood. Chandler was depressed over his wife's illness when he wrote the book, and his sadness made "The Long Goodbye's" Marlowe more interesting to me - the lackluster more humanistic portrayal rather than the usual "knight in shining armor" generally depicted by Chandler and other writers of that time.

I wasn't attracted by the story at all except that I wanted to make a movie the way Chandler made a detective novel. The story is very complicated, but it's really just a framework on which to suspend a hundred thumbnail sketches. Chandler used the character of Marlowe to explore life around him. He once wrote in a letter to a friend: "I didn't care whether the mystery was fairly obvious, but I cared about the people, about this strange corrupt world we live in, and how any man who tried to be honest looks in the end either sentimental or plain foolish."

What I like best about Chandler are his insights - little places where he stops and reflects on concepts larger than the action, and which aren't really pertinent to the situation at hand. His plots were not as interesting or important as the characters who were what created strong and lasting impressions, not only for the character of Marlowe but for the actor who portrayed him. In the reactions to our film, we were confronted by Humphrey Bogart's Marlowe as much as Chandler's.

You asked why present day Los Angeles was used instead of the time employed by Chandler. Well, I believe it has taken the 70's to show what an impossible character Marlowe always was. When Marlowe was

depicted by others in the 50's the character was essentially the same at the core, but was idealized, a hero, someone to emulate. At the least, he helped us to delude ourselves into thinking that not only could good guys finish first, but that there were indeed moral men who were clearly definable from the bad guys. In the 70's, although Marlowe has affected a more contemporary outer layer - dangling cigarette, rumpled careless dress and grooming - he remains the same. He's a man who cares, going up against the controlled tidiness and sheen of the surrounding chaos. A moralist in an immoral world, Marlowe is faithful to friendship and an ideal until that friend violates both.

It has been said that my depiction of "The Long Goodbye" has not been representative of Chandler's work, but I disagree. Chandler admitted that Marlowe was impossible to begin with, a myth, and not even a very good detective, because he based his work on emotion rather than reason. If Elliott Gould and the Marlowe of today seem funny, pathetic, and difficult to believe, it may be because we are living in a time of few men who function on a level of emotion or soul or strong moral conviction. Elliott Gould's Marlowe cares too much about right and wrong for his time, and in the end his best friend - his betrayer - tells him, "You'll never learn - you're a born loser" and Marlowe reacts as a righteous man of the 70's must. A controversial reaction, but in these times we've learned that anything can happen.

"The Long Goodbye" is the one we make each day to everyone we've ever known. Not that we're going in different directions, but that we're going in the same direction at a different pace. So ultimately, it's always goodbye.

Actually film is too explicit, literal and clear-cut, unlike life. Therefore, I've tried to leave some spaces for the audience to fill in. It's dangerous, I know to refuse to tie things up in a neat bundle. I fail a lot. But my own style is the very best I can do as a film-maker.

In this letter to Italian screenwriter and director Gian Luigi Rondi, Altman comments on Chandler's writing and the "moral man" character represented by Marlowe.

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"[In the 1950s] ... he [Marlowe] helped us to delude ourselves into thinking that not only could good guys finish first, but that there were indeed moral men who were clearly definable from the bad guys. In the 70's...he's a man who cares, going up against the controlled tidiness and sheen of the surrounding chaos. A moralist in an immoral world." - Robert Altman