

2013-04-22

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

Daub, Peggy; Gomis, Melissa; Hallman, Phil

<https://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/110220>

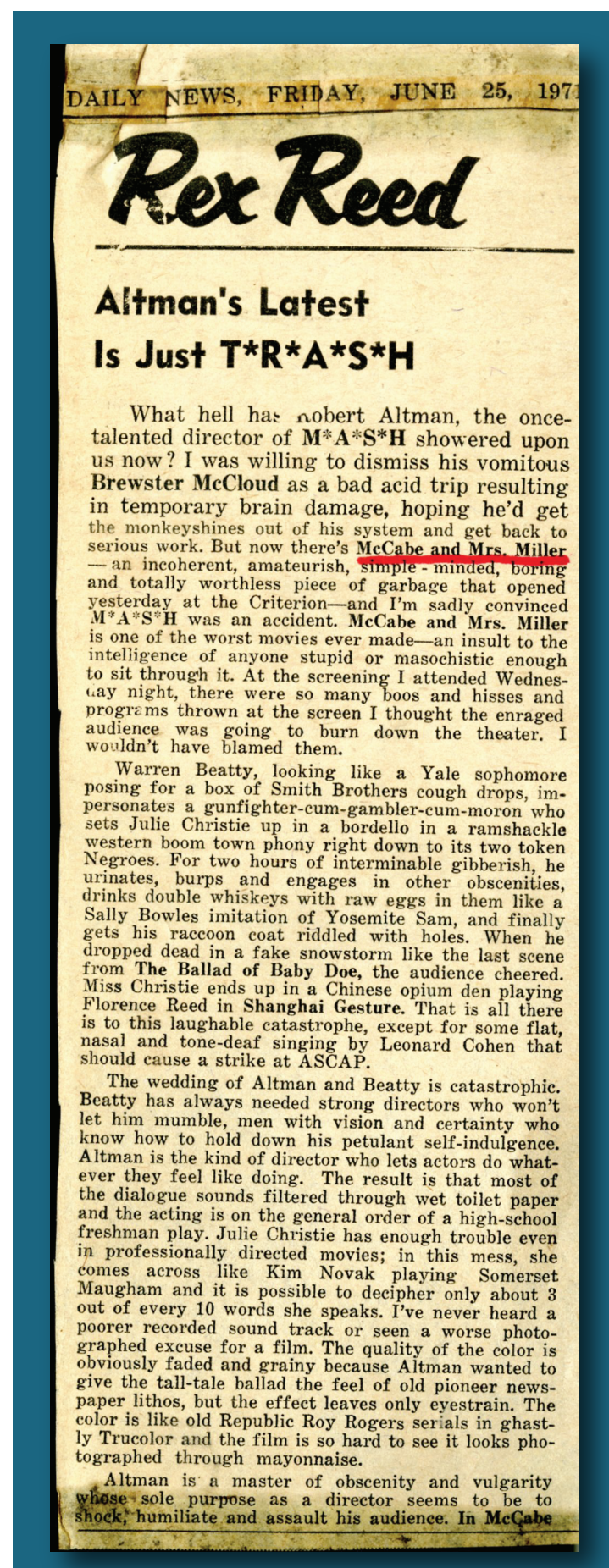
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

---

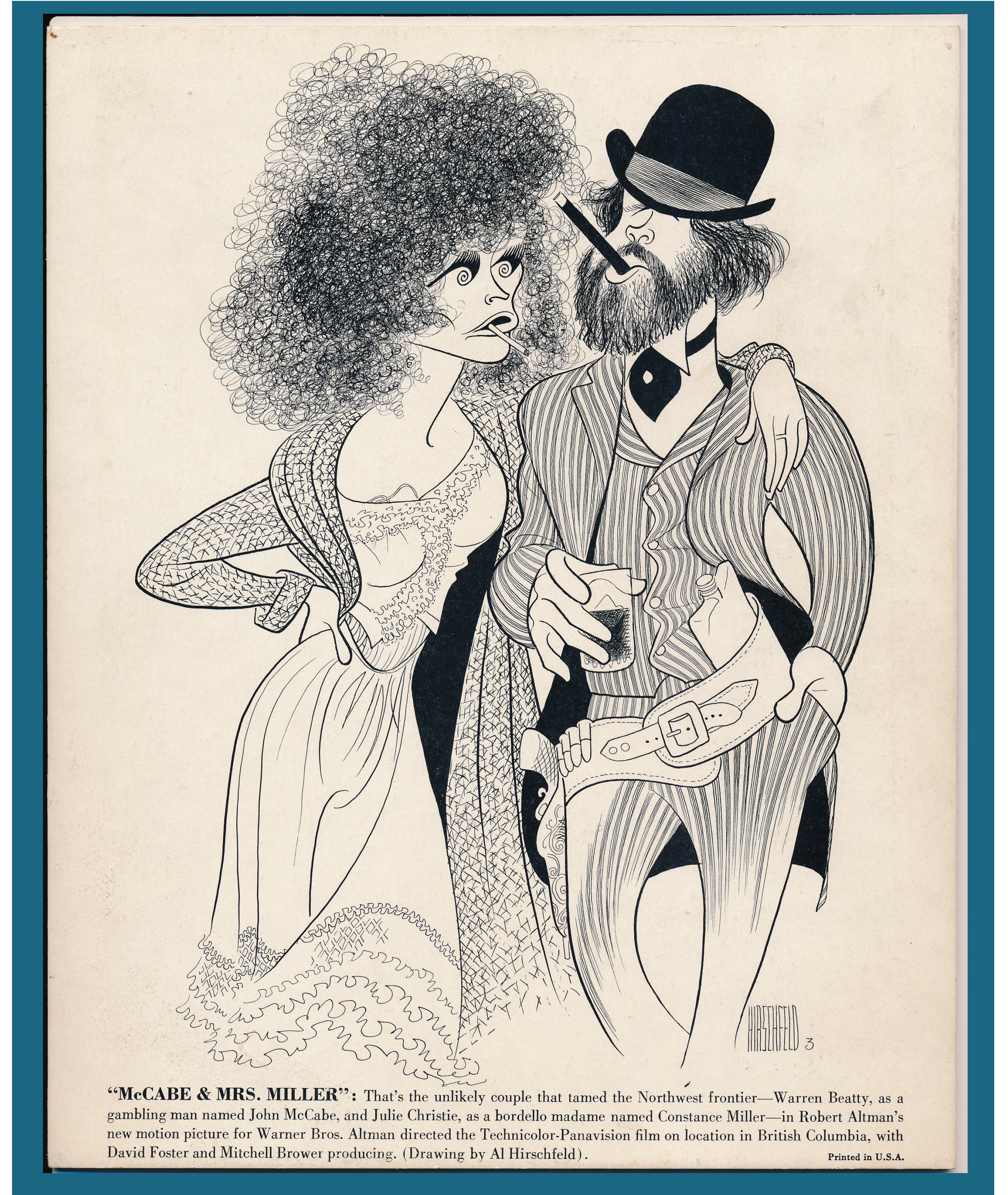
*Downloaded from Deep Blue, University of Michigan's institutional repository*

# McCabe & Mrs. Miller [1971]

Though *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* is one of Altman's most popular films and is now respected as a "classic," it received mixed reviews upon release. There are many laudatory film reviews and fan letters in the archive, but also some detractors, including influential critic Rex Reed, who called it "an incoherent, amateurish, simple-minded, boring and totally worthless piece of garbage...."



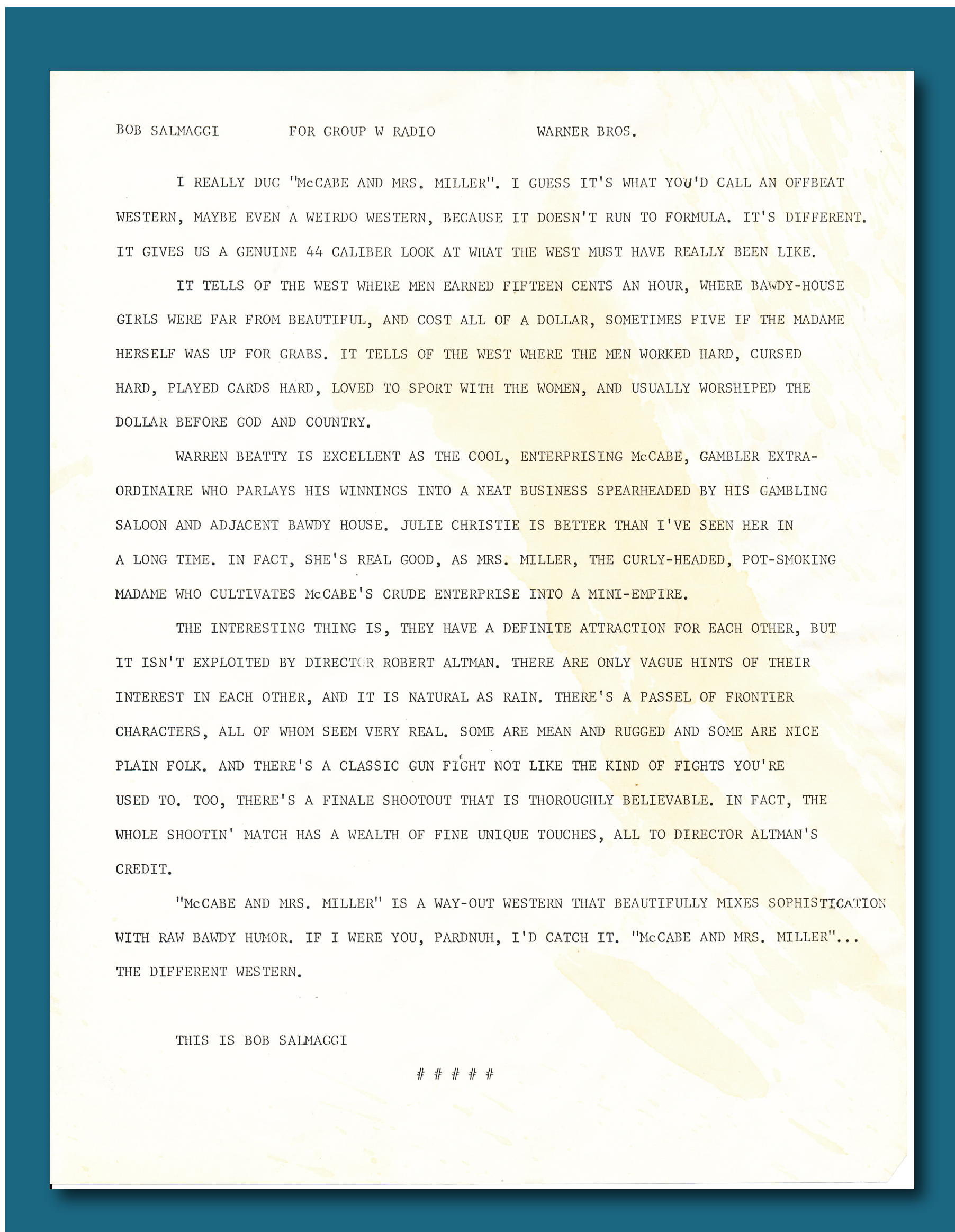
"Altman is the kind of director who lets actors do whatever they feel like doing."  
- Rex Reed



"McCABE & MRS. MILLER": That's the unlikely couple that tamed the Northwest frontier—Warren Beatty, as a gambling man named John McCabe, and Julie Christie, as a bordello madame named Constance Miller—in Robert Altman's new motion picture for Warner Bros. Altman directed the Technicolor-Panavision film on location in British Columbia, with David Foster and Mitchell Brower producing. (Drawing by Al Hirschfeld).  
Printed in U.S.A.

Altman's Latest is Just T\*R\*A\*S\*H, New York Daily News, June 25, 1971.

Al Hirschfeld, "McCabe & Mrs. Miller," caricature of the two leading characters in the film, probably done for the New York Times, and used in graphics for various reviews.



Bob Salmaggi, review of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* for Group W Radio, photocopy of typescript. Had there not been a copy in the Altman Archive, this little gem of a broadcast review for Group W [Westinghouse] Radio might have been lost forever.

**WHILE YOU'RE WAITING FOR THE CRITERION TO REOPEN READ THE RAVES ABOUT "McCABE & MRS. MILLER"**

"McCABE & MRS. MILLER" is the work of a more subtle, more deeply gifted—more mysterious—intelligence than might have been guessed at from 'M-A-S-H.' What this movie reveals is that there's poetry in Robert Altman and he is able to put it on the screen.

The picture is testimony to the power of stars. Warren Beatty and Julie Christie have never been better, and they are the two most interesting people in the town.

It's hard to know what makes Beatty such a magnetic presence; he has become just as attractive a screen star as any of the romantic heroes of the past.

Julie Christie has that gift that beautiful actresses sometimes have of suddenly turning ugly and of being even more fascinating because of the crossover."

—Pauline Kael, *The New Yorker*, July 3, 1971

★★★★★

"McCABE & MRS. MILLER" are two wonderfully engaging characters as played by Warren Beatty and Julie Christie. Beatty has never seemed more at ease in a role. Miss Christie gives the best performance of her career!"

—N.Y. Daily News

"A BRILLIANT, COMPLETELY FRESH WESTERN that provides the ultimate truth about the making of America, the way it was—and is, with Warren Beatty, Julie Christie, and director Robert Altman displaying new dimensions of their art!"

—*Guinness Newspapers*

"McCABE & MRS. MILLER' IS ROBERT ALTMAN'S MOST AMBITIOUS FILM, most haunting, extraordinary, maddening, and one of the most visually beautiful films you are ever going to see.

Warren Beatty has never been as interesting or sympathetic as he is as McCabe. He makes something memorable of the role. Julie Christie has never been as warm and moving. Those who are interested in seeing what one of the most strikingly original talents in the industry can do are going to cherish this picture!"

—*Guinness Newspapers*

"I REALLY DUG 'McCABE & MRS. MILLER.' It's different. Warren Beatty is excellent. Julie Christie is better than I've seen her in a long time. It's a way out western that beautifully mixes sophistication with raw bawdy humor. If I were you, pardnah, I'd catch it!"

—*Group W Radio*

"Dignity may sound like a curious word to use in this case, but the characters of McCabe and Mrs. Miller, as written and as played, do have an essential dignity that is very real and honest. Beatty's gambler-turned-businessman is a truly comic, clay-footed entrepreneur, and Miss Christie's tough-talking whore is about as appealing as that sentimental character can be.

As in 'M-A-S-H' and 'Brewster McCloud,' Altman fills his screen with sometimes exceptional vivid details!"

—*New York Times*

"ROBERT ALTMAN AND HIS FILM-MAKING TECHNIQUES MAY BE THE MOST EXCITING FORCE NOW WORKING IN THE MOVIES!"

—*WCBS Radio*

"I LIKED IT. I find the film irresistible!"

—*Newsday*

**...AND IF YOU CAN'T WAIT—SEE THE MOVIE TODAY AT**

**LOEWS CINE**  
3rd Ave. at 68th St. • 427-1532  
12:00, 2:00, 4:00, 6:00, 8:00, 10:00  
DOORS OPEN 11:45 A.M.

Advertisement, "While You're Waiting for the Criterion to Reopen Read the Raves About McCabe & Mrs. Miller" *New York Daily News*, June 30, 1971. Because Bob Salmaggi's radio review had been shared with them, staff in the Altman office were able to use it, among quotations from printed sources, in advertising the movie.

July 19, 1971

THE NATIONAL OBSERVER

The Movie Melange

**Hooray! 'McCabe' Is the Real McCoy!**

By Bruce Cook

Rather than write this review of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (Warner Bros.) I would much rather go back and see the movie again. And again, and again, and again, and again.

It is that kind of movie, the rare sort in which you can lose yourself in exactly the same way you can immerse yourself in a rich, dense, grand-dimensioned novel. Like that kind of novel, it creates its own world, with its own resonances, its own people and places. You feel that it is all real, but you are seeing a part of the action but that other things are happening at the same time, that those in the town of Presbyterian Church, Wash., have lives of their own—facts that precede the few months sometime in the 1890s whose events we witness, and for all but a few of them, futures as well.

The world-maker is Robert Altman. He directed the film and collaborated with Brian McKay on the screenplay, adapted from a novel by Edmund Naughton. More important, Mr. Altman saw and heard, even smelted and felt the reality he had to communicate, and then managed to convey his vision of it all as nearly perfectly as anyone has in an American film.

None of this is to deprecate a single performance, as this is a director's film, it is just as surely and just as rightly an actor's film. It should remind you that great artists (that's right, artists) like Warren Beatty and Julie Christie appear on the screen in a world of real quality; they more than portray roles. They fill the screen with the special sense of their own reality. They add dimensions that could only be suggested, say, on the stage. What they do together in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* exemplifies the very essence of screen acting.

(Have I gone too solemn here? I hope not, for this one is, among other things, a very funny film—in a raw, vulgar, masculine way. Its dialog is the truest in this regard, and its situations the most authentic of any yet.)

McCabe (Mr. Beatty, of course), a gambler with an ill-deserved reputation as a tough customer, shows up in Presbyterian Church, a grim mining town named after its most prominent structure. Before long, he has grand plans for gambling and prostitution. He will run the town. He builds McCabe's House of Chance, then journeys off to the next town, buys three chipmunks, brings them back to Presbyterian church, and installs them in tents, ready for business.

Enter Mrs. Miller (Julie Christie). "Mr. McCabe," she tells him in purest East End cockney, "I'm a 'ore, and I know a lot about 'ore houses." She is and she does. She takes over the bordello operation for him, running it on a percentage, imposing her own girls from Seattle.

They succeed perhaps a little too well, for these two little fish attract the attention of a very big fish. The mining company that owns and operates just about everything in that part of the country sends up a couple of representatives, who take a look around and order to buy out McCabe, lock, stock, and barrelhouse. He turns them down, perhaps guided by Mrs. Miller's constant urging to "Think big, McCabe."

But McCabe is a very little man, as

you soon see when the company's gunmen turn up. A small-timer? Sure. But with his back against the wall he will fight. And he does—like the nasty little ferret he is at heart.

What this is all about, of course, is how the West was really won. In this sense it stands in some relation to a few more realistic Westerns, the best being *Wild Poney* and the most recent being *The Wild Bunch*. Yes, simply in being what it is, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* seems qualitatively different from any Western ever made. It doesn't seem like a Western at all, for it simply does not deal in the usual myths, not even to debunk them. It is a story in the deepest sense—personal history, maddening bits from the patchwork of human experience.

In a film as nearly perfect as this, the only jarring notes come from the Leonard Cohen songs that provide the film with its only musical background. They are pretentious and terribly literary (Cohen's Joseph looking for a manager—come on, everything that the rest of the movie is not. Even so, I don't expect to see a better movie this year, or next year, or for some time to come.

Bruce Cook, "Hooray! McCabe Is the Real McCoy!" *The National Observer*, July 19, 1971.

"Rather than write this review of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, I would much rather go back and see the movie again. And again, and again, and again, and again."  
- Bruce Cook