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

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## The Long Goodbye [1973]

The Long Goodbye, based on Raymond Chandler's novel of the same name, was often compared by reviewers to earlier film adaptations of Chandler in the 1940s (i.e., The Big Sleep and Murder, My Sweet). Some critics seemed to appreciate the updated settings and characters chosen by Altman, even saying that he was "the best thing to happen to Raymond Chandler." However, others argued that Altman and screenwriter Leigh Brackett strayed too far from the original novel's storyline.

## The Baroness Nina and her brash Svengali

MALIBU BEACH

HERE REALLY ought to be a law against "scarlet ladies" wearing blue jeans and gingham or having long blonde hair and an angelic face. I mean it destroys the whole mystique. And it was such a pity really because the whole thing started out so well.

I turned off Pacific Coast Highway on the unfashionable side of Malibu Beach, drove up a perilous, pitted driveway to the Villa Chiquita—a once grand California version of a Mediterranean style house high on a cliff overlooking the ocean. It's a little down on its luck but all in all a highly suitable setting for the notorious Baroness Nina—the other woman in the Clifford Irving-Howard Hughes debacle.

So I expected smoked glasses, false eyelashes and a cigaret holder at the very least. But there she was in faded jeans, bare feet and yes, heaven help us. pink and white gingham—not a scrap of makeup and baby fine flaxen hair that had never seen a peroxide bottle.

Okay, I thought, so the hair is real and the nose no plastic surgeon could dish out, but the title—that at least must be phony. Nobody could be the Baroness Nina van Pallandt for real—not outside the pages of Henry James anyway. But even that, you see, is on the level.

Husband Frederick is a Baron. They're separated now after years of being Nina and Frederick a highly commercial and ridiculously youthful folk singing duo who were the rage of European TV and cabaret in the fifties and sixties—a kind of Baez, Peter Paul and Mary and Dylan all rolled into one.

They were beauty and class and every teen-age girl in Britain wanted to grow up to look like Nina. Then the next anyone heard of her she'd been cavorting around Mexico with Clifford

Now an appearance before the New York Grand Jury and a three-week smash stint at the St. Regis Hotel in New York behind her, she's in Hollywood filming Raymond Chandler's The



Nina with Elliot Gould at work on her first film, The Long Goodbye.

man, with Elliott Gould, Sterling Hayden and Henry Gibson and trying to launch herself in the United States as Nina van Pallandt, actress.

Altman spotted her on a late night talk show and "liked the way she handled herself," which freely translated probably means he was impressed by her looks and all that marvellous free publicity she'd been garnering in New York. He tested her for the role (actually the van Pallandt publicity machine put up the money for the test) and Nina got the part, that of the cool blonde wife of Sterling Hayden, who hires private eye Philip Marlowe (Gould) to trace the missing Hayden.

(Gould) to trace the missing Hayden.

It wouldn't surprise me in the least if she turned out to be a smash. She seems to have pulled off everything else. But how, I wondered, did this quiet, self effacing (she really is, honest) European lady burst on the American lady burst on the last lady burst on the American lady burst on the last lady burst lady burst

ican scene with the combined impact of Mata Hari and Elizabeth Taylor?

Simple. There's a fly in the ointment, a villain of the piece, who fits the role of wheeler dealer, compulsive loudmouth and crass opportunist assigned to him by the press to a T. John Marshall, a globetrotting English man, producer-writer-entrepreneur-manager who adopted Nina a couple of years ago at a London party

and brilliantly parlayed her very mar-

ginal role in the Irving-Hughes caper

into a new career for the beautiful

Newsmen frequently come to see Nina and leave to write about Marshall. It's difficult to do otherwise. He left us alone for precisely 10 minutes then, attired in a red terry bathrobe and an overabundance of gold jewelry, he descended, and interrupted

that question,' or, 'there's a very simple way to answer that.'
He's the perfect foil for her—as
brash as she is reserved, almost custom designed to make her look dignified by comparison

His scenario for Nina's New York nightclub debut was as carefully planned as a summit meeting.

"I deliberately held off with the information about her professional background. It was enormously frustrating to read descriptions of her as 'awould-be singer' or 'a one-time cafe singer'. Course there was an enormous temptation to call them up and say, 'do you know she's done three Royal Command performances and appeared with some of the biggest names in showbusiness,' but I resisted it because I thought it would be much more effective when she eventually did sing.

"One reporter told me afterwards he had the first line of his review all ready to go . . . "Her manager built a beautiful launching pad for her but Nina van Pallandt failed to get off the ground'."

But she was a smash, one critic noted, "the best thing to happen to the over thirties since hormone injections," and she got standing ovations every night.

Marshall's presence has proved a source of annoyance to many of the people he's come into contact with this time out. Rumors abound of conflicts between Marshall and director Altman and Marshall has been noticeably absent on leastion.

To call him Svengali would be to turn his role into something a great deal more subtle than it appears to be. He is more like any old fashioned fairground barker, "How can you dislike Nina," he says. "She's super, she's charming, she's attractive, she's intelligent, she's not bitchy, she's not a

He's wangled her a six figure book contract. "It's my autobiography," says Nina, then characteristically adds, "I'm not sure what it'll be called . . "He steps in to tell her, "Why Nina" van Pallandt by Baroness Nina van

This interview with Nina von Pallandt, who by then had been cast in The Long Goodbye, explains the ways in which she was already known to European audiences. She and her husband, Baron Frederick von Pallandt, had been an enormously successful folk-singing duo as "Nina and Fred" in the 1960s. She also had become known as a mistress of author Clifford Irving at the time he was falsely claiming to have written the autobiography of reclusive Howard Hughes. The "Svengali" referred to is a third man in her life, manager John Marshall.

The result is delicious, going beyond simple parody to become

Robert Altman - director of M.A.S.H., IMAGES, JOHN McCABE -

If this film did not have any success in the States, its because

of its unconformism, a quality which pleases the French. And the

is at all times in total control of his work, helped by his talented

truly entertaining and, in fact, more faithful to Chandler than

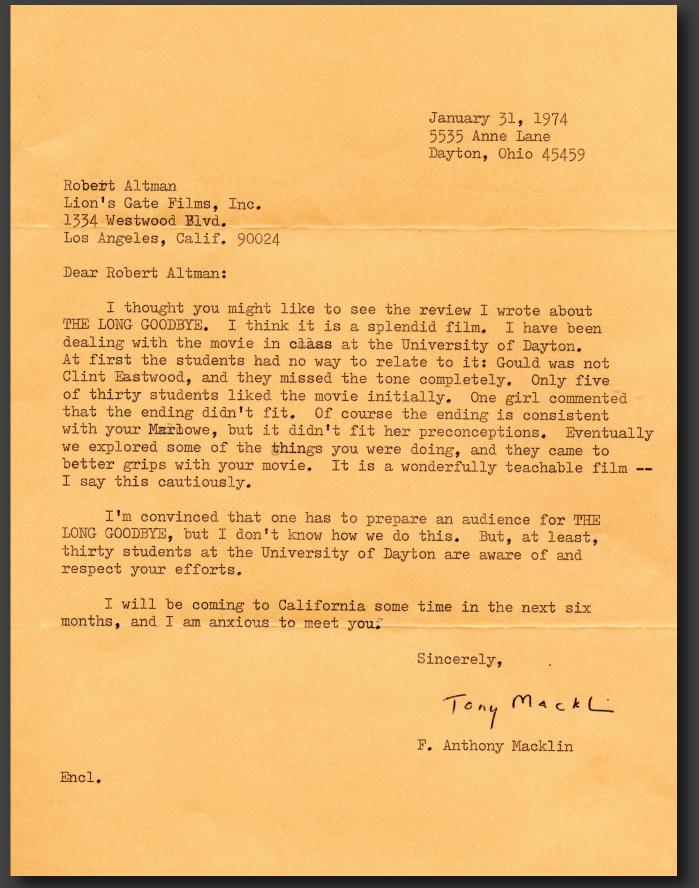
any other film, but not at all conforming to tradition.

photographic director, Vilmostz Sigmond.

You must see this film at all cost.

actors are superb.

Ivor Davis, "The Baroness Nina and Her Brash Svengali," *London Daily Express*, date unknown.



A. Anthony Macklin, typed letter to Robert Altman, January 31, 1974.

Tony Macklin, who taught at the University of Dayton in Ohio, described his students' reactions to *The Long Goodbye*.

"It is a wonderfully teachable film--I say this cautiously. I'm convinced that one has to prepare an audience for *The Long Goodbye*, but I don't know how we do this." - *Tony Macklin* 

Altman's films often garnered as much interest in Europe as they did in the U.S. This French reviewer not only praised the film, but explained that French audiences liked nonconformity, whereas the Americans might not.



with typed English translation of part of the review.

Robert Chazal, "... De rien" [About nothing], France-Soir,