The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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Overlapping Dialogue

The quintessential and recognizable Altman trait of using overlapping sound and dialogue has been pointed to as a symbol of the messiness of real life, of making characters behave more as their real-life counterparts do. It is so much a part of how he is known as a director that Lily Tomlin and Meryl Streep used it brilliantly in presenting him with an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement in 2006.

Even in various screenplays with different writers, the final drafts indicated in some way Altman's desire to use overlapping dialogue. Not surprisingly, the Altman Archive contains documents that reflect how this signature overlapping was expressed on paper. There are a number of subtle marks within the scripts:

- In *Countdown* (1968) the writer puts the dialogue of two characters side by side.
- In *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) parenthetical cues begin to appear, but are very sparse and subtle.
- By *The Long Goodbye* (1973) there are entire pages of parenthetical cues, clearly stating how overlapping is to occur.

The archive also contains papers related to planning and tracking the capture of sound. Shown above is a sound cue sheet, and the panel background is a diagram of a studio, both from Ready to Wear (Paris, 1994).