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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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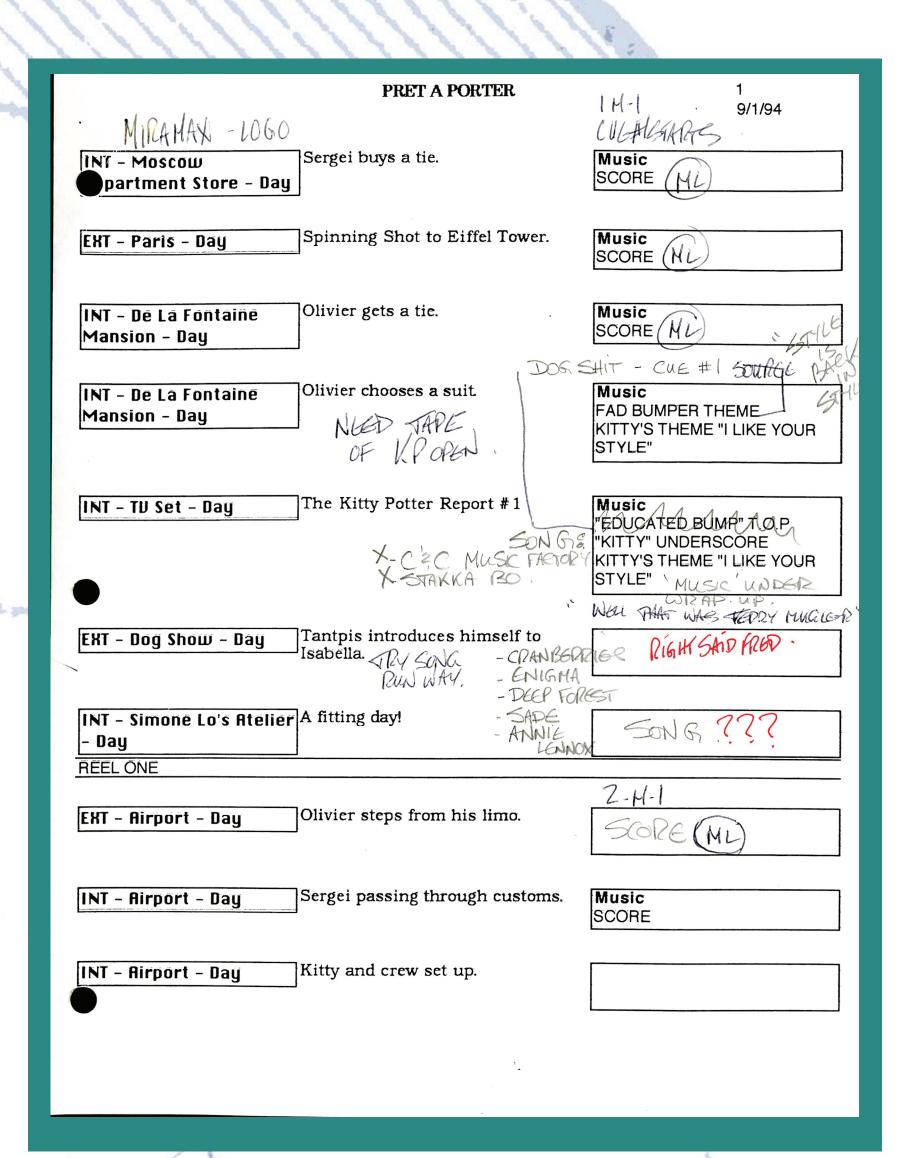
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Overlapping Dialogue

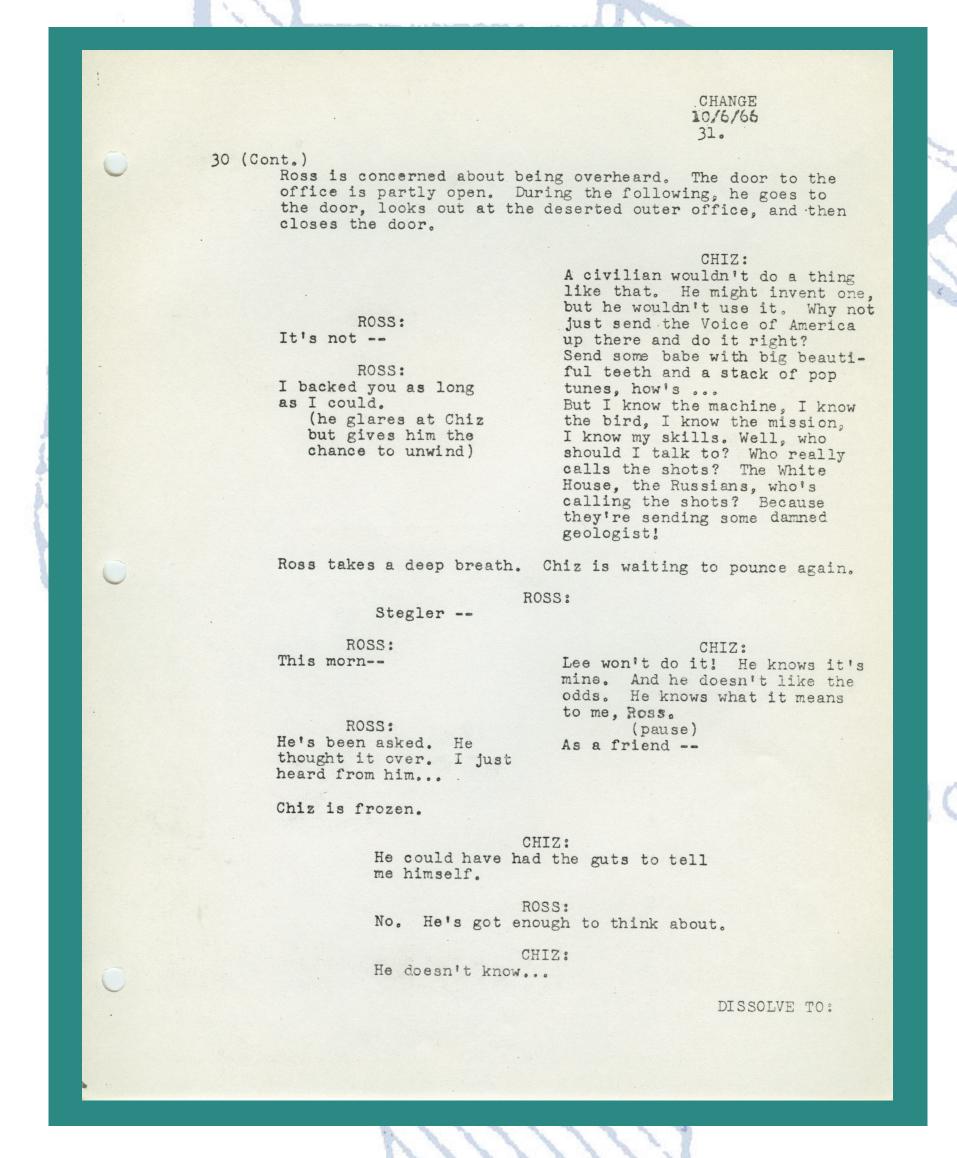
The quintessential and recognizable Altman trait of using overlapping sound and dialogue has been pointed to as a symbol of the messiness of real life, of making characters behave more as their real-life counterparts do. It is so much a part of how he is known as a director that Lily Tomlin and Meryl 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



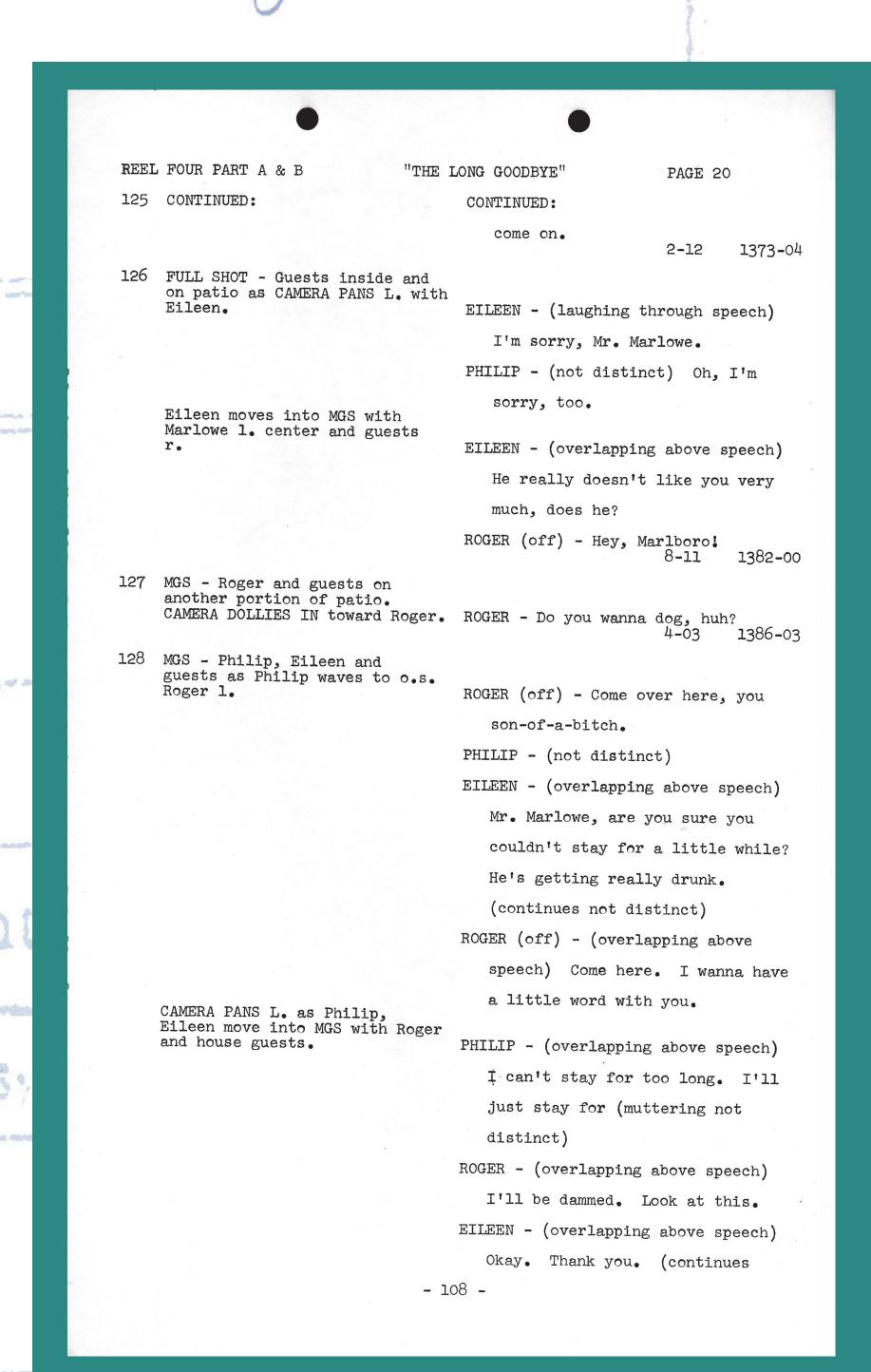
The archive also contains papers related to planning and tracking the capture of sound. Shown above is a sound cue sheet, and the panel backround is diagram of a studio, both from Ready to Wear (*Prêt-a-Porter*, 1994).



Script page from *Countdown*, 1968, written by Loring Mandel.

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2 (Cont.1)
                          FLORA:
                  (to J.J.)
           Do you want one of these, or not?
           Is he wearing a gun?
                  (he crosses to the bar)
           It's not a Colt. It's a funny little
                          GILCHRIST:
           What the hell's he got a gun for?
           It's a Swedish gun.
          A Swiss Swedish gun?
           No. Not Swiss. Swedish.
The little knots of conversation and speculation go on as
Shortreed, Derek and Sheehan stand in the kitchen looking out
          He's not going any place. He's just
          getting something out of his bag.
           He's coming back in.
Sheehan hurries back to his bar, pushing Owl aside as he ducks
                         SHEEHAN:
                 (to Owl)
          Will you get outta the way?
                 (he moves to the cash register)
          Fix the corn.
Owl looks at him, his face a question mark.
                          SHEEHAN:
                  (continuing)
          The corn. It's dripping. Fix it.
                          OWL:
          How?
                          SHEEHAN:
          Tie a rag around it.
Andy Anderson and Quigley are observing all this as they make
a bet on getting a free drink out of the free bottle.
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Script page from McCabe & Mrs. Miller, 1971, written by Robert Altman and Brian McKay.



Script page from *The Long Goodbye*, 1973, written by Leigh Brackett.