The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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In 1969 Michael Altman, son of Robert Altman, wrote the lyrics to the theme from *M*A*S*H* when he was only 14 years old. An original draft for the lyrics signed by him is in the Altman Archive. The song's music was written by veteran songwriter Johnny Mandel. In an interview in the 1980s, the director said that his son had made more than a million dollars in royalties for the song, while his fee for directing the hit film had been $70,000. Given the popularity of the television show *M*A*S*H* which used this song as their theme, the large and continuing royalties payments are not surprising. In the American Film Institute’s “100 Years … 100 Songs” it is ranked #66. The archive has legal documents from 1994 showing Altman buying the rights from his son, after months of correspondence and draft agreements.

An early idea for the lyrics, originally typed and signed, with a handwritten note, perhaps to Robert Altman, from his son Mike. These early thoughts were changed significantly in the final version, which became immediately recognizable as a piece of American culture.

After Ronee Blakley starred as Altman’s fragile country singer Barbara Jean in *Nashville*, she released an album within that same year featuring several songs she wrote, composed, and performed from the film. This violated the contract between Blakley and the film company, which spiraled into a series of lawsuits that extended from 1975 to 2005.

**M*A*S*H* Song (Suicide is Painless)**

Through early morning fog I see
Visions of the things to be
The pains that are withheld for me
I realize and I can see...

[chorus]
That suicide is painless,
It brings on many changes,
And I can take or leave it if I please.