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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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Songs & Rights

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.

The Mash Song.

I hear the sound of gunfire
from over the hill.
get your knife and sewing kit
we've got to re-build.

Chorus:
We put 'em back together
and they're off again to be killed.

Stick 'em back together
an arm or a leg
a few more stitches
and our army's re-made.

Chorus:
Here come the choppers
a-loaded with men
slep a few hand-~~made~~
an' they're off again.

Chorus:
So now when ya ask me ^{Boah}
what is a mesh?
I'm just going to tell ya, we're
having a mesh (of a time)
(fixing men in time, for them to
be killed.)

Mike Altman
(over)

I HOPE YOU CAN
USE THIS CART (TAPES)
IT WAS THE ONLY
THING I COULD USE

HOPE YOU LIKE
IT

LOVE
PEACE
MIKE

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.

WALSH

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CHARLES B. BROWNE
NATHANIEL J. BUCHHEIT
WILLIAM C. CANNON
EDWARD C. CANTO JR.
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July 26, 1994

Don Biederman, Esq.
Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.
10585 Santa Monica Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90025

Re: Michael Altman
Tax Id. No.: 564-98-3779

Dear Mr. Biederman:

We are attorneys for the above individual, who regularly receives "mechanical royalties" and "print royalties" from your organization on account of one or more musical compositions that he co-authored. A copy of your most recent royalty statement addressed to Mr. Altman is enclosed.

Mr. Altman desires to sell and transfer to his father, Robert Altman, all of his right, title and interest in the compositions that give rise to the royalties. I am advised by your office that you will prepare and furnish to us a draft contract or assignment that will correctly identify all of Michael Altman's interests in musical compositions for which Warner/Chappell pays royalties, and that will include all language and terms that Warner/Chappell will require in order to recognize Robert Altman as the new owner of those interests. We would like to receive such a draft at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Very truly yours,
Jerome K. Walsh

JKW:dca
enclosure

cc: Michael Altman
Robert Altman

Letter from Jerome K. Walsh, lawyer for Robert Altman and his son Michael, to Don Biederman of Warner/Chappell Music, July 26, 1994, asking for a document listing the sources of Michael's royalties so that ownership can be reassigned to Robert Altman.

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.



Ronee Blakley sings to a crowd as Barbara Jean in Altman's hit *Nashville*.

September 23, 1975

8314-18-1

Mr. Robert Altman
c/o The International Hotel
220 Fourth Avenue, S.W.
Calgary, Alberta
Canada

Dear Bob:

In this week's issue of *Billboard*, there is a full page ad for Ronee Blakley and her first record album for Warner Bros. I am enclosing a xerox of the main portion of the ad. As you will note, her album includes *My Idaho Home* and *Tapedeck In His Tractor*.

Ronee's letter agreement with Landscape Films covering the use of her performances for phonograph record purposes contains the following provision: "You hereby agree that you shall not, within one (1) year after the release of the Picture or the release of the record, whichever shall be first, record for phonograph record purposes any selection performed by you in the Picture and used by us or our designee or assignee in phonograph records." Needless to say, this provision has been breached. ABC Records would be the most logical party to complain, inasmuch as it has acquired the soundtrack album rights from Landscape. I have not heard from anyone at ABC about the situation (probably because no one at ABC knows what's on the *Nashville* album!)

Do you want to register any protest, either directly or through ABC Records? Of course, even if you prefer to let the matter slide, ABC will have the right to object to Warner Bros. and Ronee Blakley.

If you care to make any objection, please let me know within the next few days if you want me to do anything.

Hope all is going beautifully up there in the tundra.

Sincerely,
of
MITCHELL, SILBERBERG & KNUFF

WMK/plk
Enc.

cc: Elaine Bradish

Typed letter from the legal firm of Mitchell, Silberberg & Knupp to Robert Altman, September 23, 1975, alerting Altman that Blakley has violated her contract not to record any songs from *Nashville* within one year of the film's release.