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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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Working with Composers

John Williams, the prolific American film composer who wrote memorable scores for films like *Star Wars* and *Jaws*, worked with Altman on *Images* (1972) and *The Long Goodbye* (1973). His score for *Images*, matching the film's psychological tone, was nominated for an Oscar. The Archive contains items that show many behind-the-scenes agreements and working documents that were part of the complex world of creating films.

19th January 1972

Mr. Hal C. Davis
President, Executive Board
American Federation of Musicians
641 Lexington Avenue
New York City
New York 10022

Dear Mr. Davis:

I have requested that your member, John T. Williams, compose and conduct a musical score for my new film entitled *IMAGES*, which was produced by my Ireland based company, Lion's Gate Productions Ltd.

The entire production is structured to be produced in the United Kingdom, and all music preparation and recording will be done in London, England, where my post production operations are based and where this musical work will be done whether I engage an American composer or not.

It is my hope that Mr. Williams will be able to join me in England for work on my film.

Yours truly,
Robert Altman

John

JTW:of
Encl.

Cover letter from John Williams accompanying a letter from Robert Altman, both addressed to Hal Davis, President of the American Federation of Musicians, requesting permission for Williams to work abroad on Altman's film *Images*.

LINER NOTES FOR THE "IMAGES" LP

In his new film "Images", Robert Altman creates Umhary, the strange "other" world in the life of Katherine, his female protagonist. In photographing the film, Altman shows a remote corner of Ireland to achieve the alone-ness, the never-seen-before strangeness of Umhary. The film, however, does not seek to contrast the two worlds of the schizo-chronic Katherine. Instead, it creates an atmosphere so conducive to Katherine's flights from reality that during the course of the film the audience becomes unable to distinguish between fact and fantasy, for Altman, with consummate skill, withholds this distinction from the audience until the final moments of the film.

When Altman first showed me his film in London in January of 1972, I was overwhelmed by the picture and the atmosphere he had created. It did seem to me, however, that some contrast between the "real" and the "unreal" might be achieved musically - not for the purpose of cueing the audience, but more to get inside of Katherine's head so to speak and musically accompany her state of mind rather than her physical condition or behavior. I wanted to contrast the sad, loveless, childless, greyness of her "real" life with the terrifying encounters of her "other" existence. For her real life music I composed a simple, sad G-minor tune, but with peculiar Prokofiev-like shiftings of key center, and contrasted with a 6/8 running-in-the-woods kind of figure. All of this is presented in a very conventional way, set for piano and string orchestra, without giving any hint of the horrors Katherine is to experience. I also tried to give this "real" music a quality of great age so that it would accompany Katherine as she composed her stories for children, which seemed to be made up of characters from an epic long forgotten.

While searching for an idea for the music of Katherine's "other" life, I remembered a concert presentation given in Los Angeles some years ago. The concert features music performed on sculptures created in Paris by the French sculptor, Bernard Bachelot. I remembered the sculptures being visually striking, and the possibilities for the sounds created on these instruments were unmistakable. A few years after this concert, while on a trip to London, my friend Andre Previn brought the work of a Japanese percussionist, Sotom Yamashita to my attention, and mentioned to me that Yamashita was performing music on the sculptures of Bachelot. The memories I had of the sculptures, with the coincidence of Yamashita's performance in London did not come together in my mind until I was suddenly struck with the idea that these elements were exactly what I needed for Altman's film.

I immediately contacted Yamashita who was instantly receptive to the idea, and we met in Paris where he lives to discuss how I could work out a practical method of notation for the Bachelot instruments. This was not difficult since Yamashita is a superb musician, and was instantly able to play with total accuracy anything I notated for him, including the various vocal noises and more conventional percussion effects that appeared in the score. Combined with string orchestra and keyboards, Yamashita's playing served to accompany Katherine's flight from reality. It accompanies her meetings with lovers past and present, and underscores her three acts of violence, two imagined and one real.

In writing this music I employed some of the current methods of the avant-garde, that is to say, graph-like music without the use of bar lines, etc., producing some random aleatory-like freedom but within the rigid discipline of split-second timing when the film's action required it. This music is written for a normal string orchestra of approximately 26 players, with all vocal and percussion effects done by Yamashita, and all keyboard playing done by myself. Also, Yamashita's own creative contribution was invaluable, especially his performance on Shakuhachi, the traditional Japanese flute, as well as other percussion effects of his own invention, all of which he lent freely to the enterprise.

I also want particularly to thank John Richards of C.T.S. Recording Studios in London for his marvelous work in the recording of the music.

John Williams

Typed draft of liner notes by John Williams for a planned release of a recording of his score for *Images*. Williams describes in some detail the process behind his decisions made for the *Images* score.

Popeye (1980), Altman's first and only attempt at a musical, was riddled with drama throughout its production. Harry Nilsson, the composer who wrote the featured songs, didn't expect Altman's changeability with the score and left the island of Malta halfway through filming. Altman trusted Nilsson to finish the production and claimed to get on with him terrifically despite the disagreement. In the end the dispute was settled, and all of Nilsson's songs are featured in the final film.



Photograph during a recording session for *Popeye*. Shelly Duvall and Nilsson share a pair of headphones while recording *Popeye*.

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IN REPLY PLEASE REFER TO
FILE NO.

November 25, 1980

Paramount Pictures Corporation
5451 Marathon Street
Hollywood, California 90038

Attention: Mr. Richard Zimbert

Re: Nilsson - "Popeye"

Gentlemen:

I have been retained to represent Mr. Harry Nilsson and Nilsson Productions, Inc. in their controversies with Paramount, Robert Evans and Robert Altman. I have been advised of a course of extremely unfair conduct on the part of Mr. Altman and Mr. Evans, in which Paramount has joined and which makes my clients disinclined to have any further involvement with "Popeye."

My clients have repeatedly insisted that specified provisions essential to them must be a part of any agreement between you and that you acknowledge the inclusion of these essential provisions in any such agreement. You have failed and refused to so acknowledge or to comply with these critical provisions. Under the circumstances, our clients no longer desire to conclude these agreements and terminate all further negotiations and any purported right on your part to use Mr. Nilsson's music or lyrics, or his name or likeness, in or in connection with the film "Popeye" or any soundtrack record album or otherwise.

Even if you had accepted the essential terms which our clients made prerequisite to any agreement, your conduct would be in willful and material breach of those terms and would give our clients the right to terminate any further obligations on their part and any further rights on your part, including but not limited to the rights referred to hereinabove.

We must ask that you immediately stop using our clients' property and make it clear to the public that

Typed letter from Bertram Fields to Paramount Pictures, November 25, 1980. This letter revoking the studio's rights to use Nilsson's songs in *Popeye* was received about 11 days before the film opened on December 6, 1980.