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# The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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# Before (And After) Film: Other Creative Expressions

When World War II ended in 1945, Robert Altman was fresh out of the army and headed to Hollywood. He was an enterprising young man with lots of ideas about how he might make a living, but he thought he wanted to do something in the entertainment business. For several years he wrote story ideas for radio and television shows as well as lyrics for songs, and he also had several small acting jobs. He returned to Kansas City for a few years in the early 1950's, where he learned the craft of making films by working for a leading industrial-film company, and was able to come back to Hollywood with a resume that soon led him into television and film directing and producing. Later in his career he became involved in staging and writing operas, thanks to a timely invitation from the University of Michigan.

## The Writer

One of the ways in which Robert Altman tried to break into the entertainment world was as a lyricist, and a number of his songs that composer Bob Ecton set to music survive in the Altman archive. Eventually, Altman, Ecton, and writer James Rickard (brother-in-law to actor/dancer Ray Bolger) wrote a Broadway musical, but were unsuccessful in finding backing to have it produced.

Altman worked with the more experienced writer George W. George (the son of Rube Goldberg) on several scripts, including a proposed radio series called *Illusion* in which each story had a surprising twist at the end. One of their movie scripts was purchased and became the *noir* film *Bodyguard* (1947). Several other stories or script proposals also exist in the archive, mainly in the *film noir* vein but showing Altman's characteristic wry humor. Even after Altman returned to Hollywood after gaining more film experience in Kansas City, he still did some work as a writer.



Photograph of Robert Altman behind the scenes on the set of *Combat!*

Manuscript sheet music for the song "Just Me And Love". The page includes musical notation for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "Bright-But not Fast / Look-in' For Romance Searchin' For Love / Can I be cr-asy For Dreamin' of The / Fun will have what we're to-gether At Last - / Tell Me And Love - / Make us-happi-ness A Thing of The Past - / Just Me And Love". Credits at the top: "Music-Bob Ecton, Lyrics-Bob Altman".

PRODUCTIVE THEME for "ILLUSION"

(SMOOTH, VELVETY) Illusion.

What happens when the vapors of phantasy cloud the mind?

Illusion.

This program brings you stories of the mind; stories born of the fumes of fancy.

UP AND OUT

Illusion.....Who can say where reality ends and illusion begins?

THighs story.....etc.

"OPERATION GREEN-CHEESE"

MUSIC SPAYS UNDER

talk has been given to this subject fantasy, to others it is as real as automobiles they ride in.

THE SOUND OF A FLYING DISK.

well you can say what you want but people say they seen a flying saucer to say they haven't.

of course we cannot say that it is impossible so called "saucers" are the product of planet. Buoost....

It's a lot of gibberish. Who ever it's all a hoax.

talk. Many opinions. But NO answers.

If there were real what happened to hear anymore reports. Where did it was all a hoax. I wouldn't surprise Wells fellow started it.

a minute, lady. I wrote this show giving credit to myself just my general idea. I'm glad you see me as the writer. I'm glad you see me as the writer. I'm glad you see me as the writer.

"THE AGENT"

The Agent's office was nestled in one corner of the second story of Hollywood's most famous night club. (Most famous in the minds of mid-western youngsters and most visited by tourists during their two weeks each year)

The Agent himself <sup>Patrolled</sup> ~~worked~~ the Night Club, but only because it was convenient to transport <sup>the Engländer</sup> ~~himself~~ from his <sup>apartment</sup> ~~office~~ to his <sup>Seut.</sup> ~~office~~ without breaking <sup>breaking</sup> the cadence of their drinking.

The Agent's office was never referred to as an office; He ~~was~~ <sup>never</sup> called it <sup>his</sup> ~~secret~~; The ~~writer~~ <sup>actor</sup> referred to it as "my agent's"; The Agent's Secretary was never sure what to call it. She somehow felt that "Office" would be sacreligious. and usually got her point across by calling it "here". The Writer always called it "The Brothel". And since The Writer talked more than anyone else it soon became known to those who never went there as "The Brothel"

The Agent ~~was~~ <sup>Every</sup> ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> looked ~~as~~ <sup>as</sup> very ~~much~~ <sup>much</sup> like other ~~people~~ <sup>people</sup> members of the white race when he arose in the morning. But from that time until he ~~took~~ <sup>took</sup> the first sip of a dry martini ~~at~~ <sup>at</sup> the Restaurant he increasingly gathered distinction. ~~at~~ <sup>at</sup> the Restaurant he increasingly gathered distinction. The aftershave lotion, the soft shirt and knit tie, the loosely tailored suit and suede shoes, the convertible Cadillac, the brisk walk up the steps of the Night Club, the phone calls to ~~the~~ <sup>producer</sup> and the final tip of the boy who parked his car at the Restaurant aggregated ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> ~~his~~ <sup>his</sup> ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> for the remainder of the day.

"Just Me and Love," music by Bob Ecton, lyrics by Bob Altman, ca. 1948. Manuscript sheet music.

Typed sheets of the proposed introduction for the radio series "Illusions" by Altman and George and the first page of a show in the series entitled "Operation Green-Cheese."

First page of a story by Robert Altman, "The Agent," not dated.