The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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The Director and His Peers

An artistic jack-of-all-trades, Robert Altman was a legend within the film industry, his innovative style and personable nature were an irresistible siren call to others. His relaxed sets, with their unconventional emphasis on collaborative filmmaking that allowed actors extraordinary access into the creative process with personal character input, original dialogue, and improvisation, fostered strong bonds and friendships. As a result, many of his collaborators, such as actors Elliott Gould, Lily Tomlin, and Shelley Duvall, returned again and again to work on multiple films. Here is a glimpse into a small sampling of these countless relationships, as reflected in the Altman Archive.

Robert Altman and Actors


This handmade calendar was apparently a special gift to Robert Altman from his staff or family. It contains many casual photographs of the director on sets with actors as well as listings of occasions to remember.


Robert Altman, Keith Carradine, and Shelley Duvall on the set of Thieves Like Us (1974), a film based on an Edward Anderson novel by the same name that chronicled the doomed love affair of an escaped convict and the daughter of a gas-station attendant in 1930s Mississippi.

Harry Connick Jr., handwritten Note to Robert Altman, 2005.

Expresses his gratitude for working with Altman on a 2005 SunCom Wireless commercial.

Dear Mr. Altman—
I was contacted by a studio to work on a TV commercial for SunCom Wireless
but the director suggested I consider you. He was quite impressed by your work
and he thought I would enjoy working with you. Your work is very different
and I think it would be a great opportunity for both of us.

Sincerely,
Harry Connick Jr.

Tom Hanks, Typed Letter to Robert Altman, 1996.

Although he was forced to decline Altman’s offer due to previous commitments, this letter from Tom Hanks attests to the movie star’s strong desire to someday work with the director, a sentiment shared by countless other Hollywood performers.

Dear Mr. Altman,

I am writing to let you know that I am unable to accept your offer to work on your upcoming film. I have had a number of commitments that have arisen since we last spoke, and I cannot accommodate the time commitment required for this project.

However, I was thrilled to hear from you and I am grateful for the opportunity to work with you. I am a great admirer of your work and I hope we can work together again someday.

Sincerely,
Tom Hanks