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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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Nashville [1975]

There were many differing points of view in relation to Altman's film *Nashville*. It was critically acclaimed by many at the time of its release and was considered one of "the great American films." Reviews and personal letters show that the film indeed had a strong fan base, but there was some negative critique as well. The country-music industry and residents of Nashville, Tennessee, thought the film ridiculed them and found the film offensive. In the end, the film was nominated for five Academy Awards and nine Golden Globe Awards, and was named to the National Film Registry of the U.S. in 1992.

AUGUST 14, 1975 — ENTERTAINMENT & RECREATION — SANTA CRUZ, CALIF.

Nashville: Where Everyone's a Star

Nashville, produced and directed by Robert Altman. Written by Joan Tewksbury. Paul Lohmann, director of photography. Music arranged and supervised by Richard Baskin.

by Christian Kallen

UNLIKE MANY OF HIS OTHER MOVIES, ROBERT Altman's *Nashville* is certainly not being under-publicized. The reason behind this is unclear to me: *Nashville* is Altman's best film to date—better and potentially more successful than *M*A*S*H*—although I think he can, and will, do better still. But *The Long Goodbye, Thieves Like Us* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* were all excellent movies as well, yet received no push from the distributors anywhere near *Nashville's* proportion. Perhaps the country music boom is a factor; perhaps the surprising success of last year's *California Split* or the recognition of a growing cult making Altman suddenly "fashionable." Whatever the reason, it just might have a little to do with the breakthrough quality of *Nashville:* it's not as if it is designed as an unqualified crowd-pleaser, like *Jaws*. It is simply a tremendous movie—"great" or "excellent" or "fine" aren't enough to define it. It is of an unreal scale, unusual and strong enough to shock an audience—and the industry—into a startled recognition of its director's talent.

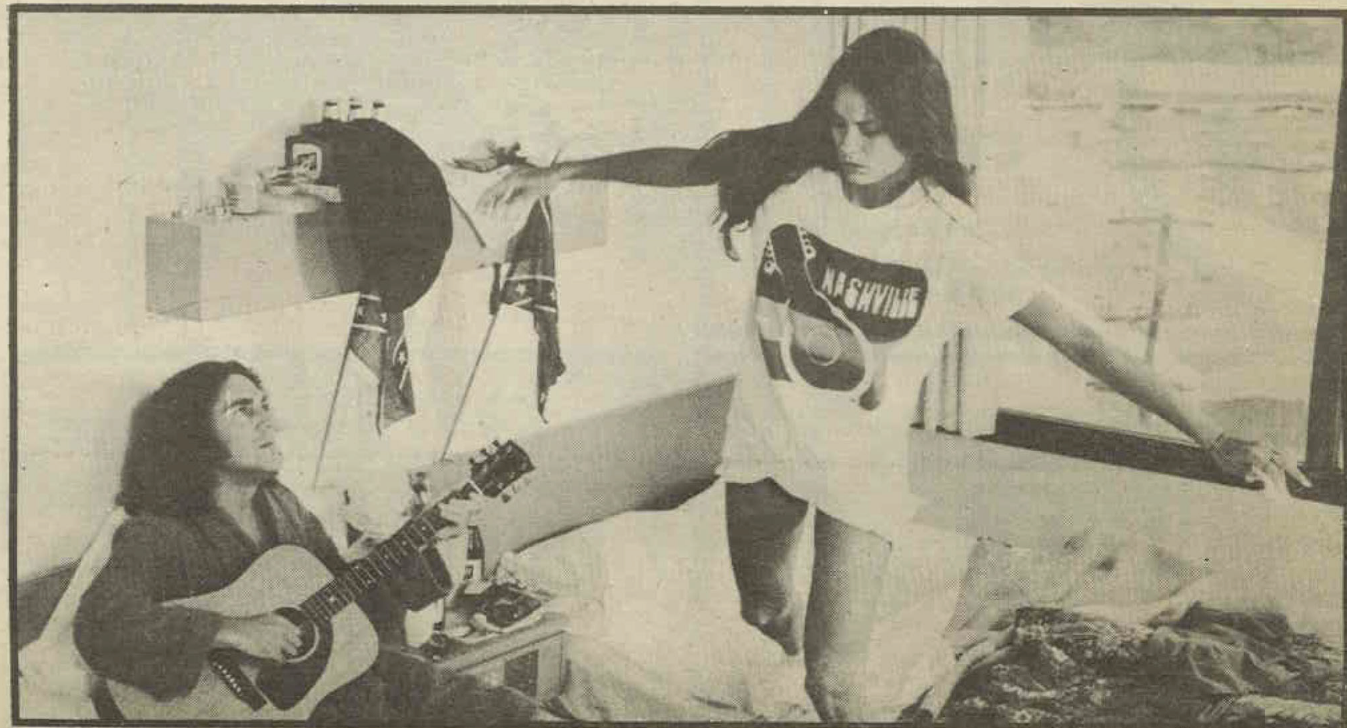
What makes *Nashville* an important and significant film is not its theme—something to do with America at its 200th birthday—nor its plot—which is blatantly non-existent—nor its acting, its dialogue, its photography or anything else that usually elevates a film to an artistic level. *Nashville* is created by its techniques and its structures, idiosyncratic features that are firmly grounded in all of Robert Altman's work. It is not as if Altman finally learned how to make movies: it is that people have finally learned how to see them.

When viewed at its most obvious level, *Nashville* has no plot—a large group of people are in Nashville, Tenn., over the same five days, and often in the same places until they all arrive, as if by chance, at a political rally for a neo-populist candidate, Hal Phillip Walker (whose political campaign, a Kennedy-McGovern-Wallace mix, was created for Altman independent of the rest of the film by Thomas Hal Phillips, a veteran political organizer). Nearly all of these people are hustlers to one degree or another: the campaign manager (Michael Murphy) hustling to organize the rally, the young singers (Gwen Welles and Barbara Harris) hustling to get discovered, the rock singer (Keith Carradine) compulsively hustling women.

There are two dozen "stars" in the movie, some of them little more developed than walk-ons, and many "extras" who come to life as truly as the featured performers. There are at least a dozen sub plots or intrigues which involve two or more of the many characters. Any one person on the screen at any moment seems capable of becoming the film's focus, the lead into the narrative structure that is often all that movies settle for. But before the viewer is allowed to follow that character, the camera cuts to another, doing something totally different, following his or her own inspiration, unconcerned with the life of the preceding person.

This structure is disconcerting at first, but its insistent rhythm begins to create a very specialized reaction: the film begins to restructure the viewer's perceptions. Instead of following the story, one is taken in by a set of currents which flow in seeming disarray, currents which cross continually without interfering with each other's own motion, but which violently collide at the film's conclusion. Although there is no plot, the ending—in which, it is more than enough to say, someone gets killed—produces a very strange effect. It is as if that single action creates a thematic wave which spreads in reverse, a backwash, through the film *after* it is over, restructuring its dynamics, crystallizing its motifs, altering its content as a change in key can affect the mood of a piece of music. (The policy of the Aptos Twin, where *Nashville* is currently playing, of inserting a totally ill-advised and poorly-timed intermission midway through the movie is an insensitive gesture which destroys an incalculable amount of the film's artistic merit.)

Most movies of the commercial cinema are constructed in a highly literary way, as if they were (as they often are) filmed novels. There is a protagonist who interacts with a



Allan Nichols and Cristina Raines have marital problems when another man enters the scene, in Nashville.

romantic interest against an antagonist with a lot of lesser personalities whose major concern is to set up a confrontation between the hero and the villain. There is the usual anthology of variations—the one protagonist may be split into two, often both blue-eyed and blond; the antagonist may wind up being the protagonist (man's own worst enemy), and so on. But don't expect to see experimentation with an audience's reactions in the commercial cinema. P.T. Barnum's adage that nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public is nowhere more religiously observed than in Hollywood.

Altman has always chaffed under this yoke. He was fired by Alfred Hitchcock for rejecting a script the Master wanted him to direct for his television program. He was sacked by Jack Warner for allowing and even encouraging the dialogue to overlap in the 1968 science fiction feature *Countdown*. He has rejected the tried-and-true whenever he could, even giving the distinct impression of seeking out the cliches of movie story telling just to upset them. He audaciously tampered with the character of Philip Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye* (casting Elliott Gould, everybody's favorite creep,

—continued on page 10

INSIDE TRACK

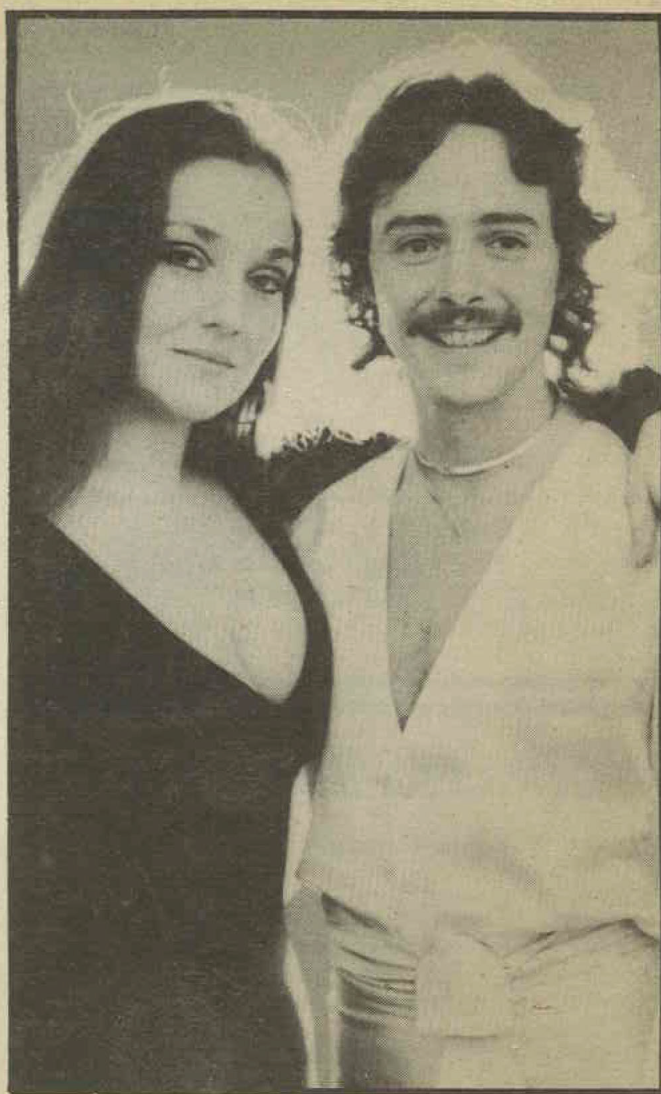
Music—*Neil Young stopped by Margarita's last week to see Bo Diddley do his thing (his same old thing). Page 3.*

Eating Out—*This week we skip the blunch and tackle a hearty breakfast and bargain dinner. Page 5.*

Ask Us—*Ready? Okay, why do stars twinkle? how do you clean a garlic press? is it possible to write a literate book omitting the letter e? For the thrilling answers turn to page 8.*

Theatre—*Shakespeare comes (once again) to the Duck Island and the notorious Thomas (his friends call him Tenny) Williams plays at the Civic Theatre. Page 9.*

Calendar and TV Movies—*Pages 6 & 7.*



Hot numbers: Don and Pilar, two highly popular singer-songwriters from Marin, will be appearing Friday and Saturday at Simoni's, Highway 9, Boulder Creek. With pianist Paul Petzold, the group performs all original compositions striking for their imaginative lyrics and classical melodies.

NASHVILLE—from page 1

as Marlowe was tantamount to treason) and actually glorified gambling, for which he could have been excommunicated, in *California Split*.

Sometimes his free spirit has brought him success—notably *M*A*S*H*, which was released just weeks before Mike Nichols' much heralded *Catch-22* and beat it hands down in entertainment value, critical prasie and—most importantly—grosses. But most often it has brought him anonymity: last year's *Thieves Like Us* is so unknown many critics forget to list it among Altman's credits, even though it is one of his most confident and distinctive works.

The fact is that Robert Altman does not believe in stars, and does not believe in them with a vengeance. One suspects that Karen Black's role in *Nashville* is dwarfed by Ronee Blakley's primarily because Black has become a headliner, and Blakley is an unknown. Altman does believe in actors, however: they are given the outlines of a character by writer Tewksbury to fill in with their own interpretation and experience. The greater part of the dialogue is improvised—the intent of the scene is determined, but its execution is loose and anarchic.

Out of this technique come some striking moments, striking for their spontaneity and reflection of human emotional confusion: Ned Beatty dropping an egg in boiling water after hearing his wife, Lily Tomlin, get propositioned over the phone; Ronee Blakley recoiling after her husband-manager Allen Garfield tells her "Don't tell me how to run your life—I've been doing pretty good so far;" David Arkin, chauffeur to the stars, hopefully strumming a guitar while rock singer Keith Carradine talks on the phone.

Undoubtedly many will come to *Nashville* out of love or affection for country music. Despite the listenability of most of its 27 songs, and the occasional presence of a real country artist such as Vassar Clements or Johnny Gimble, those songs which are written by the actors who perform them are for the most part forgettable, poor imitations of the style of country-Western with few of its saving graces. Ronee Blakley, who is as close to a protagonist as the film allows itself, writes and sings far better than most of the rest; but she is a singer and songwriter by profession, who accidentally came into the movie when she tried to sell some material to Altman. Of the three pillars of C & W, there is barely a single song about drinking, divorce, or driving trucks.

This is one of the sour notes in *Nashville:* it doesn't really seem to be about Music City U.S.A., but a Hollywood idea of Nashville. No doubt there is just as much hustling and surface amiability over deeper cynicism in Nashville as there is in *Nashville*, but it seems more than a little misguided to ascribe to Nashville those qualities which filmmakers can certainly find closer to home. The country music scene is taken advantage of in a way that is barely the callous side of vicious.

But Altman's amoral stance—which infuses his films—is itself callous. He loves people, and he hates them for the same reasons. People are gullible, deluded creatures who dance on the edge of the void, unaware that chaos suffers their presence only so long—unaware, that is, until sudden and violent death brings the point home. With the exception of *California Split*, every one of his films since *M*A*S*H* is punctuated with murder at its close. Whether this murder is cathartic or gratuitous is actually a secondary concern of Altman's: it must simply be there, like the signature of a cynical and short-tempered deity.

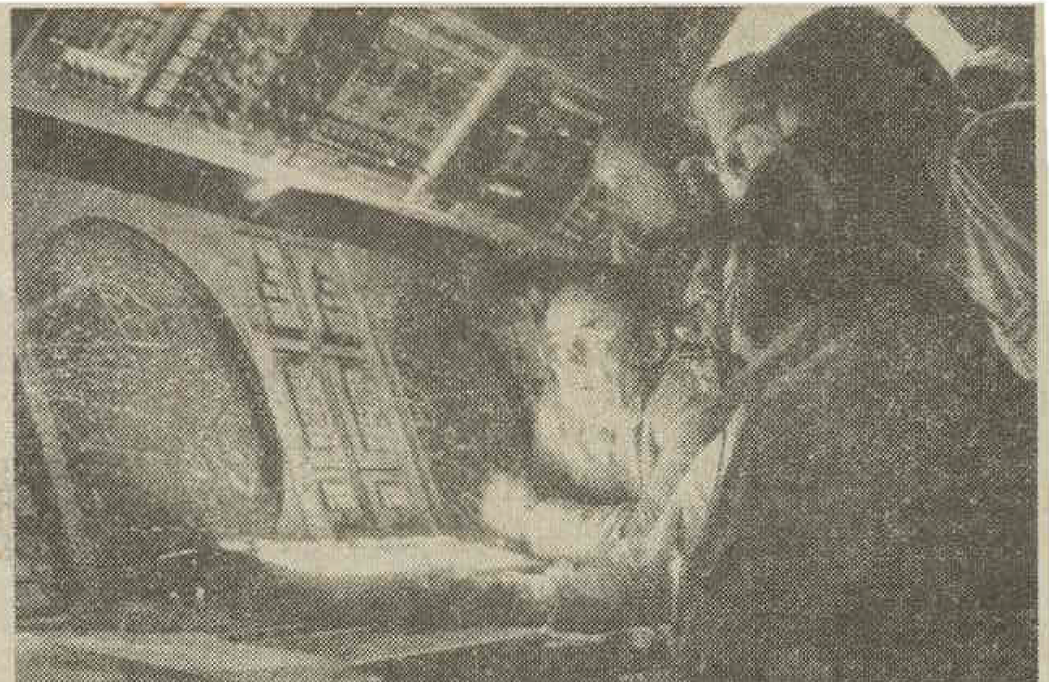
It is certainly worthwhile to recognize the influence of Bernardo Bertolucci on Altman. Altman termed *Last Tango in Paris* the "most perfect and total movie" he had ever seen, and his films since that time share with *Tango* a restlessly moving camera that never ceases to reframe its subjects. Whereas in *The Long Goodbye* this technique was disorienting—the camera became positively garrulous—in *California Split* and *Nashville* (both filmed by Paul Lohmann) the camera is articulate and fluent. It is an icy presence, not unlike the omnipotent narrator in Joyce's *Ulysses*, who knows all and portrays everything with equal indifference.

Last Tango, The Conformist and *Spider's Stratagem* are also concerned with the meaning of death, and the absurd posturing that goes on at its brink. But while Bertolucci operates in a much more stylized culture, Altman's vision is rich in the abundance of detail that characterizes so much of American artistic endeavor—from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Herman Melville to Thomas Pynchon, from D.W. Griffith to Orson Welles to—Robert Altman. •

Christian Kallen, "Nashville: Where Everyone's a Star," review, *Good Times* (Santa Cruz, California), August 14, 1975.

"Nashville is created by its techniques and its structures, idiosyncratic features that are firmly grounded in all of Robert Altman's work. It is not as if Altman finally learned how to make movies: it is that people have finally learned how to see them."
- Christian Kallen

UFO film worthy of second viewing



Air traffic controllers track UFO in 'Close Encounters'

Don Morrison

I really went through inner torments Sunday when Robert Altman's "Nashville" turned up (shockingly soon) on television.

I regard it as one of the best American movies ever made. During its theater run, I saw it but once because I felt the need to sort of marinate myself for a while in pleasurable first impressions before that second look and its inevitable readjustments of same. I counted on regular return engagements to movie houses in due course.

But there it suddenly was on TV. And there was my dilemma. I did not want to re-see it squinched onto the little tube. And, even if its length were not cut for TV, I couldn't bear to see it chopped up by commercial breaks, especially because the original "Nashville" had been pared down to the bare bones of staccato narrative that was tenuously, but brilliantly, held together by the sheer impetus of its editing. Any interruption of this rhythmic movement could be fatal.

SUNDAY NIGHT, I stayed away from "Nashville," although one of my sons was watching it and I admit that I tiptoed downstairs a couple of times to peek when I heard a favorite scene in progress.

However, the experience scared me into being less cavalier about the future of special movies. If a major item like "Nashville" gets dumped on the TV market a bit more than a year after its release, the process obviously is speeding up.

It was enough to send me back to see "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," which opened only a month ago. I'm sure it has a

viewing, free of "show-me" attitudes induced by foolish overselling, reduces such cavils to a petty part of the whole. The structure of the first half is a bit ramshackle but contains many choice bits of humorous characterization easily missed the first time around. Plus striking small effects possibly overlooked in one's excessive anticipation of what flashy thing is going to happen next.

By now, you doubtlessly know the basic story. Richard Dreyfuss plays a super-average lineman for a power company at Muncie, Ind. During a night of general power failure and strange celestial phenomena, he sees, really sees, flying saucers. As does Melinda Dillon, a young widow living nearby, and her 3-year-old son, Gary Guffey, a marvelous little kid whose delighted facial expressions do much to establish the movie's message that the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life is a marvel, not a menace, a thing to rejoice over, not recoil from.

There are funny things I failed to appreciate fully, such as Dreyfuss' long-suffering wife (Teri Garr). He is exploding with excited new awareness of life's possibilities, as vast as the universe, and drags her out in the middle of the night to see "his" saucers. After uneventful waiting by a country roadside, she gently asks: "Don't you think I'm taking all this pretty well?"

Driven by wonder and apparently by subliminal clues the space people have given earthlings of unsophisticated good will like him, Dreyfuss heads for Wyoming with Ms. Dillon to kibbitz a secret rendezvous with the saucers, arranged by a heavy-handed and suspicious officialdom that is, itself, won over by awe and the beauty and benignness of the alien's arrival.

The unparalleled splendor with which director Stephen Spielberg, photographer Vilmos Zsigmond, special-effects wizard Douglas Trumbull and the rest create and sustain this 40-minute climax supplies all the believable awe and beauty needed. I'm glad I saw that again and hope to do so in the future.

Don Morrison, "UFO Film Worthy of Second Viewing," Minneapolis Star, January 11, 1978. Though this review is ostensibly of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, it starts by paying homage to *Nashville*, and talks about its surprisingly quick appearance on television.

"I regard it [Nashville] as one of the best American movies ever made. …I couldn't bear to see it chopped up by commercial breaks, especially because the original 'Nashville' had been pared down to the bare bones of staccato narrative that was tenuously, but brilliantly, held together by the sheer impetus of its editing."
- Don Morrison

"I happen to consider [*Nashville*] the most important American movie since 'Citizen Kane.' Like 'Kane,' 'Nashville' is both a metaphor and a microcosm of the American scene. And also like 'Kane,' it is couched in a fresh cinematic language that may well foreshadow films to come." *- Arthur Knight*

KNIGHT AT THE MOVIES

'Nashville' Under Attack

New York — Last Sunday's "Arts and Leisure" section of the "New York Times" featured an article by one John Malone that left me more than a little irate. Titled "Let Us Not Praise 'Nashville's' Failures," the piece proceeded to take apart "Nashville's" considerable accomplishments in even more considerable detail. Malone found the film "colorful, self-indulgent, overblown and vastly overpraised." He allowed that director Robert Altman had achieved "some brilliant performances, moments of peculiar unnerving tension . . . and a strong sense of place," but countered these with "a story with more loose ends than you can count, a soundtrack deliberately designed to prevent you from hearing what the characters are saying to one another, a visual style that seems to have been learned at the knees of television news and quiz show cameramen . . . ."

Malone goes on to characterize Altman's treatment of women in the film as one "that often borders on celluloid rape"; but that's something I'd just as soon not get into this morning. The "celluloid rape" that I'm more concerned with is the one that Malone commits in his own frontal assault on "Nashville," which — if I may recap my Reporter review, I happen to consider the most important American movie since "Citizen Kane." Like "Kane," "Nashville" is both a metaphor and a microcosm of the American scene. And also like "Kane," it is couched in a fresh cinematic language that may well foreshadow films to come. When I reviewed "Kane" in 1941, I called it a movie 20 years ahead of its time. Now, 35 years later, I feel exactly the same way about "Nashville."

What disturbs me is not the fact that another critic has taken a somewhat dimmer view. Who expects to find a consensus among critics? But what are the special qualifications of the august "Times's" John Malone that induced the editors to run his words as a featured piece on the front page of "Arts and Leisure," instead of printing them as one of their more nasty "Letters to the Editor"? "John Malone is a novelist with a particular interest in movies," the "Times" informs us by way of identification. Great! Maybe next week they will run an assessment of "Jaws" by an icthyologist "with a particular interest in movies."

The point is that almost everybody has "a particular interest in movies," but that doesn't necessarily make him a movie critic. As a matter of fact, I find the novelists "with a particular interest in movies" the most suspect of all, and I think that Malone's piece more than justifies my suspicions. The novelist is, after all, primarily concerned with words; and, as Malone is the first to admit, "Altman clearly doesn't like or trust words very much." Which is true. What Altman aims for — and in "Nashville" substantially attains — is a cinematic texture derived from both the visuals and the soundtrack. Much that is said in what passes for real life is either mundane or irrelevant, and we have all taught ourselves to tune out or tune in at will. Malone presents us with an image of someone in a crowded restaurant straining — successfully — to hear a conversation at the next table. To which Altman would reply, quite logically, "Who needs it?"

(Continued on Page 10)

Arthur Knight, "Nashville Under Attack," *Hollywood Reporter*, August 15, 1975.