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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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Nashville [1975]

gnashville

by Joel E. Siegel

No movie in recent memory has been as ruthlessly shoved down our throats as Robert Altman's Nashville. From Pauline Kael's scyphantic pre-release review some months ago in *The New Yorker*, through all of the lengthy pieces on Altman and his film in newspapers and weekly news magazines, Nashville has been touted as a major cinematic event, even the most important picture of our time. Well, Nashville has finally opened, and the word is spreading that, far from being a great movie, it isn't even a good one. It is instead a bloated, slapdash, simplistic effort, full of hollow attitudinizing about the Emptiness of American Life, an enterprise concocted of equal parts arrogance, condescension, and gall.

The recent deluge of extended, adoring Altman profiles has made the director's working methods known to just about anyone who can read. Most of his shooting consists of improvisations based on loose, outlined screenplays. His actors are encouraged to invent much of their own dialogue and bits of business. Altman's sets, swarming with chums and hangers-on, are said to be freewheeling parties, highlighted by lots of drinking and pot smoking, two of the director's favorite activities. Some say you have to be stoned to see Altman's films properly, and I suspect they're right. The director's best movies (*M*A*S*H*, *California Split*) and his worst (*Thieves Like Us*, *Brewster McCloud*) are marked by faintly narcotic stylistic similarities — muzzy, softened-edged camerawork, mumbly, overlapping dialogue tracks, limp, somnambulant pacing. Altman has drawn an analogy between how he makes a movie and the way jazzmen improvise. Journalists have bought this one, but the analogy is faulty. True, jazz musicians improvise within the harmonies of a song's structure, but their work remains abstract, consisting of sounds and moods. Altman's work is moodily all right, but essentially mindless; language and ideas cannot be manipulated as freely as musical tones. The director's films aren't really thought out or fully imagined. His formal and intellectual weaknesses are especially apparent in a movie like Nashville, which presumes to take the spiritual temperature of our nation.

Nashville is a free-form study of several days in the lives of a ragtag collection of characters floating through the frenzied daily activity of Music City. Paramount's publicity claims that the picture features 24 major players, but some of them, like David Arkin and Bert Remsen, appear to have suffered when the picture was trimmed from its original eight-hour rough cut to its present length of slightly more than two-and-a-half hours. Altman has called the film "my metaphor

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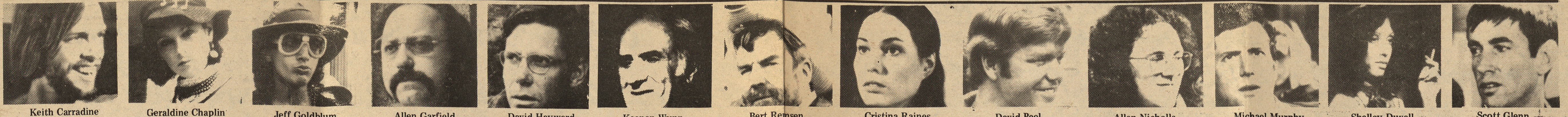
Joel E. Siegel, "Gnashville," review, *Film Heritage Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1975.

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by Amond White

D. H. Lawrence once wrote, "The essence of poetry with us in this age of stark and unlovely actualities is a stark directness without a shadow of a lie, or a shadow of deflection anywhere. Everything can go but this stark, bare, rocky directness of statement, this alone makes poetry today." And that can very well stand as a description of Robert Altman's method of work, though it should be added that Altman's is work of smoothness and great aesthetic beauty. In his past films, where he put our dependence on dramatic narrative to the test, Robert Altman literally let everything in the way dramatic conventions go and began to develop his own open, structureless poetry, which included new ways of using actors, sound, music, editing, photography and screenwriting that blend triumphantly with improvisation. His past films addressed just about every movie genre there is, and his last movie, *California Split*, addressed life itself as depicted in movies.

NOW, HAVING gathered his forces, Altman comes forth with "Nashville," a truly original, daring, complete vision of life. Not that Altman's best past films were not great visions too, but this one flows, and more so than any of his other films, it's a vision with an idiosyncratic taste to it; life filtered through Altman's sense of humor, which is also a uniquely American sense of humor.

You can't talk about plot here. There are 24 different characters, all with nearly equal amounts of screen time, and they interweave throughout the film's close to three-hour length. This mobile mosaic (a condensed version of the eight million stories in the naked city blended into one) coalesces into a diffuse, brand new picture of American life. It expresses our intransigence, the release we find in our popular culture, and in many other places (religion,

politics). It captures the true way Americans feel about this experiment in democracy, and the American attitude that has in other places been described as apathy is radically redefined here as adaptability.

"There's a character in Kurt Vonnegut's 'Breakfast of Champions' who says, 'Every human being in this room must be worth a great novel.' And Altman, in his presentation of characters, seems to concur by giving each one of his characters equal time and by taking the time to show their individual behavior. America is made up of types, and all portentous, it seems populated with each kind.

Another passage in Vonnegut's novel also states Altman's methodology: "Once I understood what was making America such a dangerous, unhappy nation of people who had nothing to do with real life, I resolved to shun storytelling; I would write about life. Every person would be exactly as important as any other. All facts would also be given equal weightiness. Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order instead, which I think I have done. If all writers do that, then perhaps citizens not in the literary trades will understand that there is no order in the world around us, that we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead."

Vonnegut goes on: "It is hard to adapt to chaos, but it can be done. I am living proof of that; it can be done." But Vonnegut isn't really proof of that, Altman is. Vonnegut's novels are clever, but thin; he strives for a continuum of life, but he's limited not only by himself but by literature itself. Yet there's nothing you can't do in movies, that's why Altman can juggle as many as 24 characters and not lose focus on any of them. Characters like Shelly Duvall's hilarious wandering groupie, a cycle freak played by Jeff Goldblum and Scott Glenn as a lonesome soldier can just appear on screen and we can read them.

"Nashville" The Great American Movie

Dramatic 'structure' is so totally discarded in "Nashville" you occasionally lose the sense of watching a movie and you seem to jump across time, like Vonnegut's Billy Strange in "Slaughterhouse-Five": seeing what's happening in a number of places to a variety of people and without the slightest discomfort.

I'M COMPARING Altman's work to that of an inferior artist only because I want to convey his style very simply, for "Nashville" is a movie that shouldn't be missed (or misinterpreted as Tom Wicker did in a scrawny, inconclusive piece in "The New York Times"). So many people have missed Altman's past films, where his stock company of actors and his stylistic methods were introduced, that I think the total ease and confidence with which "Nashville" is made might throw them.

In Altman we have a truly innovative director, but to the uninitiated, "Nashville" might seem like an unholy mess, though it's anything but that. People have been writing about The Great American Movie for this point in time. "Nashville" is his epic, his musical, his showbiz film and his vision of the state of the nation, and no matter from what level or perspective you look at Altman's movie there's no way to shoot it down.

It's a work of large spirit and large intelligence. Like the best of Eugene O'Neill's plays, it seems to have Promethean wisdom, also an infectious wit.

Country-and-western is one of the truly American forms of music (jazz is

another) so Nashville, Tennessee—Music City, USA—is an ideal place to base an epic vision of America today. These numerous characters converge on Nashville significantly, and the culture that comes from there seems to express something that's deep within the country, that's central to it: the desire for the good life, for success.

"Nashville" is the first movie that seems to be tuned in to the political and social thought of this country, though lesser films have also pointed this way, like the road pictures: "Slither," "The Sugarland Express," "Rafferty and the Gold Dust Twins," "Harry & Tonto," "Payday," "American Graffiti," "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore," and even the recent, counterfitted, but surprisingly honest "Moonrunners" (where one of the lead characters bade his friends farewell, guitar in hand, saying, "Me and Bessie goin' to Nashville. I'm gonna be a star!").

The splitting up, the seariness and the journeys on the road of so many recent American movies aren't just moviemakers' trends like horror films, disaster epics or, a few years back, blockbuster musicals, but they really express something about this country. And now, through Joan Tewkesbury's fertile script, it seems all those road movies have led us to "Nashville," where that cultural political, social 'something' finds its most moving, quixotic expression.

THERE'S NO easy explanation for the tenor of American life today. A lot of people fall into the trap of trying to find an easy answer, but Altman keeps things loose and open, the answers keep shifting according to the situation. And the funniest character in the film, Opal (Geraldine Chaplin), a reporter from the BBC doing a documentary on Nashville, keeps coming up with pseudo-profound social worker, Tom Wolfe-like explanations of everything she sees around her. She's laughable because her explanations are all wrong but they're also all right. Opal's head is full of stereotypes about the US; she's like the many filmmakers who attempt a "scathingly truthful" portrait of the US or an "inspiring, patriotic" one, both using stereotypes.

And though stereotypes aren't wrong, we all know the complex, sometimes paradoxical truth behind American stereotypes. Altman does too. "Nashville" shows it, even in the ending, which, when you think about it, is not as unreal as it may seem. It's a poetic expression of a larger truth—naturalism transcended.

Life can be a comment on itself, that's the secret Altman has found in his amorphous, improvisational style. That's why he can ignore the rhyming plots that have dominated art for centuries, and give us the rhythms of life instead. He's made poetry out of being true life.

In "Nashville" his two dozen characters and a 25th who is never seen, but whose voice is heard throughout—Hal Phillip Walker (he's a

residential candidate for the replacement party; the ultimate politician, whose campaign rally brings these characters together at the end)—all make up, to borrow one more phrase from Vonnegut, a spiritual matrix. Life in "Nashville" has endless interconnections, endless ironies. It's life with all its richness, craziness, and all its meanings and possibilities. Another way of saying this is that Altman bursts the screen wide open and the whole world—at least all of America—seems to flood in.

Such a cornucopia is the one thing "Children of Paradise"—the film "Nashville" most resembles—didn't have. "Nashville" is like "Children of Paradise" exploded, and in its scrutiny of c and w, and transient characters it's also like an expansive "Rafferty and the Gold Dust Twins." There are more characters here so they 'say' more, but the movie also makes more out of the complexities and regroupings of characters than those films. It works a surprising number of variations on the theme of how life reflects art and how artists use situations in their lives to create their art.

In "Nashville" the character representative of this is Barbara Jean, the queen of c and w, who is going through a mental collapse. And in this role Ronnee Blakley (in her movie debut and a phenomenal performance) does with music what, in movies, Barbra Streisand alone has done, plus more. She shows us how much the music is a part of her. It's both a mystifying and entrancing experience to watch her perform. Barbara Jean, the ideal c and w songstress, who's gone after that ideal with little else in mind (and is now like the American ideal falling apart) comes fully alive when she sings—when she expresses a longing for those ideas.

TO SAY she puts her heart and soul into her music is not a cliché but a heartbreaking truth. She brings the c and w ideas vibrantly alive. Her singing is affecting, the way an essential expression of ideal democracy can be. When she sings, her emotions are uncorrupted and you can feel the passion of her ideas.

Art certainly reflects life, as it does with Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) who is a c and w equivalent of a political demagogue. He even has aspirations to public office. And of course this reflection of life is "Nashville's" substance, the people in this demystification of America are the story: There's the Keith Carradine as a narcissistic Pop star, Barbara Harris as a feather-brained success-struck hillbilly, Timothy Brown as a singer with his ethnicity mixed up, Robert DoQui incensed by it and ready to tell Brown of it and others. The characters are smartly conceived and awesomely well acted (particularly Barbara Jean and Geraldine Chaplin's Opal). The roles don't seem acted at all. It's the most splendid movie cast this decade. Acting oases will have to be given out by the eons to accommodate it. The only complaint I would raise here is that Lily Tomlin shows impressive

ability but of all the roles hers is the faulty one. Her adultery doesn't jive with her religious activeness and hypocrisy isn't enough of an explanation for the deep gospel singer Tomlin portrays. Cristina Raines in a smaller role as the cool, adulterous singer in a trio comes through better.

Two other things bothered me: it doesn't make sense that a choir would wear their robes in a recording studio as in one of the early scenes, and at the end, the police are more visible at the political rally before a tragic incident than after. These lapses in continuity are



Barbara Harris

today.) Yet, Altman's is still the swiftest pace in all cinema. He's left behind all the aesthetic theories we grew up on and are still being taught. He works on a multitude of new levels. There are no allusions that are here to artists who, like Altman, though less than him, have forged new ways of seeing. Artists like Bertolucci, the Kubrick of "2001" and Godard.

IT ALWAYS appeared that Altman was, in a sense, taking off from Godard (though, who hasn't?) but in "Nashville" it seems Altman is perfecting his refinement of Godard's narrative experiments. He occasionally, purposely, throws us outside of the movie with effects like Karen Black portraying Connie White and the two special guest star appearances, yet such things work better for Altman than they did for Godard: they playfully catch us up in the vision he's created.

Welles about her talent; Dave Peel as Haven Hamilton's fresh-faced, acquiescent son, yielding his heart in a song to Opal; Keenan Wynn as a lonely old man who loses his wife; and Karen Black, deep in her own star glow. These, and others, are moments that, in the way they express human experience—simply, vividly, touching the imagination and not reducing the essence of human experience to pat, plotted-out statements—will, I think, be impossible to forget. And the accumulation of these moments makes "Nashville" a key portrait of modern life and a miraculous, legendary work.

Altman's movies are generally irresistibly funny, but on the third viewing of "California Split" I realized that it was the saddest comedy I'd ever seen. "Nashville" has that same mixture. It's a tragic comedy, but full of hope. There are no villains here—Altman has too much wit to try to make a middle-class critique and have us hate any of the characters because they all,

in their wonderful aliveness, are us. They're us in our strength, our indomitably hopefulness which overcomes our failings. Though it's less classical than Altman's "McCabe & Mrs. Miller" and less dynamic than his "California Split," "Nashville" is this greatest American director's greatest and most American film.

Robert Altman subordinates all his peers. When I see his films I wonder why everyone else keeps trying, because they hardly compete. Of course Altman's method isn't the only way movies can be made, but after seeing "Nashville," it's impossible to look at other movies—or the world—the same way again.

And what a vision—photographed with amazing delicacy by Paul Lohmann and smoothly edited by Sidney Levin (who did "Mean Streets"). I miss Louis Lombardo's editing rhythms and "California Split's" more complex sound track, but in mentioning what I miss, I don't want to sound begrudging, because I really loved the movie. Besides, in a truly epic work (and "Nashville" is definitive on the many subjects it raises—marriage, the family, greed, politics, communication, morality, religion, sex, celebrity and the yearning for it—the major modern American issues) we don't ask for perfection but for insight and deft eloquence in the expression of it.

"Nashville" has a master's light touch, and it brims with achingly beautiful moments: DoQui's levelling with Gwen



Karen Black

Gwen Welles

Lily Tomlin

new for Altman (the uncanny accuracy of his movies is part of their pleasure) but the lapses aren't fatal and they're understandable: Altman's never worked on such a large scale before. No one has.

There are fewer bravura set pieces here where Altman masterfully orchestrates a spiritual matrix—that's because he's trying to orchestrate a big one throughout but he doesn't always keep up the momentum. The film slows down a bit after the giddy, inspired title sequence (which leaves you dizzy) but Altman does sublime things in the calmer pace like his scanning four women during Carradine's "I'm Easy" number. (A scene that I think people will talk about for years and that will establish Altman as the most sensitive director of women in American films



Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) cheers on Barbara Jean (Ronnee Blakley).

Amond White, "Nashville: The Great American Movie," review, *The South End* [student newspaper at Wayne State University], July 8, 1975. Reviewer Amond White, a student at the time, is now a film reviewer in New York.

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