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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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Altmanesque Sound & Music

Robert Altman had a passion for music, though he said he could not read a note on the page. This passion shows up again and again in his work, going all the way back to the lyrics he penned in the 1940s, to filming music-rich films such as *Nashville* and *Popeye*, recreating the Kansas City jazz environment of his youth in *Kansas City* and *Jazz '34*, and collaborating in staging operas with Bill Bolcom. And if music was a personal passion, Altman's use of sound in his films is a professional trademark that is among the most distinctive of his work.

The Altman Sounds

The space-shot movie *Countdown* (1968) featured the overlapping dialogue that became an Altman trademark—and is said to have gotten him fired from the project and banned from the studio lot! This technique presented challenges to the technical crew as well as to the actors. Altman's notable sound mixers included James Webb and Robert Gravenor, who are credited with creating “that whole process of simultaneous multi-tracks for production sound.” It has been suggested that the reason there were 24 characters in Altman's *Nashville* was because of the music industry's common use of 24-track recording. Each character was recorded separately and then brought together physically and metaphorically via the sound mixing board. Among the objects included in the Altman Archive is a Yamaha 802 sound-mixing board.

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HOW MOVIES ARE MADE . . .

ROBERT ALTMAN, director of “M*A*S*H” is talking about a feature he made for Warner Bros. in 1963 called “Countdown.”

“Jack Warner stayed away from it completely while I was shooting but asked to have a look at it during the final stages of editing. I turned up for work the next morning and found the studio gates locked against me.

“Warner apparently went round the lot crying ‘Why, this man even has actors talking at the same time.’

“In fact I spent years getting fired for doing things I was acclaimed for in “M*A*S*H.”