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

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# Kansas City Jazz



Once he had gathered an amazing collection of jazz musicians together to make the film, Altman had the idea of using them for a second purpose. He recreated what an all-night jam session might have sounded like in the middle of the Depression in Robert Altman's *Jazz '34*, which aired on PBS television early in 1997.

Born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, Altman spent much of his youth listening to the city's jazz musicians. These early experiences inspired him to create an ode to Kansas City's raucous 1930s night life, its dirty politics, and the jazz played in the hottest downtown clubs in *Kansas City* (1996). Altman's film embodies the spirit of Kansas City jazz with its spontaneity and exciting storyline. Above all, it brings back a poignant nostalgia to natives of Kansas City and those deeply invested in the jazz music scene.

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June 1, 1996

Dear Bob

What terrific news! My deepest congratulations to you for having been awarded the Legion of Honor. Sharon and I were thrilled to hear about it and we are very happy for you. All along, filmmakers have said to me that you are the best and when they reflect on your work they talk about how really brilliant it is. That goes double for me Bob.

I'm glad Kansas City is coming out! I'm not apt to forget the "cutting scene" you showed me when I visited you in Malibu last summer. That scene is so memorable and so much on the mark that I feel I can play it over in my mind a year later without skipping a beat. The spirit of the thing and the way you shot it says really a lot about the situation and the people involved. I have a special feeling for all this because when I was a kid (around 14 or 15) I used to sneak into a place called Elsie's Breakfast Club to hear the jazz. Elsie's was a swinging, crowded, intense, after hours club in San Francisco during the 40's where the best players in town went to show their stuff, just like the scene in Kansas City. And during those same years the "Norman Granz Jazz Concerts" came to the Geary theater. It was a union rule that there had to be twelve musicians in the pit and luckily I was hired for that. All we were supposed to do was play the Star Banged Banner, which was a bit embarrassing, but then we could sit back and listen to the finest veteran jazz players ever - Hawkins, Young, Webster and many others. They looked fine standing up there on the stage. When I saw the scene from Kansas City these experiences came back to me in waves.

By the way, it now looks like we'll finally be coming back to California permanently and relatively soon. I'm arranging for a "package" to leave Rice University behind us. I have a picture to do here this summer which has a fairly large range of elements to work with. Gratefully, we will have the Houston Symphony Orchestra for the recording. My book on film music is in the 2nd printing now and is being translated by the Film Press of the Republic of China. If anybody says in a caustic manner that my book reads like Chinese I can always point out that we've got that covered.

Sharon sends her love, and again, my heartfelt congratulations to you Bob.

George

Letter from George Burt to Robert Altman, June 1, 1996, mentioning how a scene from *Kansas City* seen the year before was still remembered and was evoking memories for him. Burt had composed the scores for Altman's *Secret Honor* (1984) and *Fool for Love* (1985) and had been Professor of Musical Composition at the University of Michigan when Altman was in residence.

## motion picture news

by Gregory Solman

### Robert Altman's Missouri Breaks

In my *Solitude*, you haunt me with reveries of days gone by," goes the song inside Robert Altman's head.

"In my *Solitude*, you haunt me with memories that never die." The jazz halls where "the first music I ever heard was Duke Ellington's 'Solitude,'" the Kansas City of the 1930s, at least the part that sonorously echoes Altman's youth, "is still there," Altman says, with a sense of satisfaction, even surprise.

The last two times he visited, 10 and 15 years ago—to lay his parents to rest—he'd hardly noticed.

"In my *Solitude*, I'm praying dear Lord above, send back my love."

"My son, Stephen, did a beautiful job with the production design, but often, all we had to do is move a few street lights," says Altman, who returned to his hometown to film Fine-Line's *Kansas City*, about two nights and too many sounds, in 1934. "There are a lot of original buildings still there. The old Union Station was like a morgue. We refurbished about half of it. We rebuilt, on 18th and Vine, a whole row of clubs, false fronts and all. It's a truthful rendition, authentic to the times."

Authenticity for Altman, an artist who has dramatically experimented in this area, starts with the photographic image, which by its mediation of the truth, is always a creative counterpoint. "I'm trying to ask the audience to enter into a memory bank," he explains, of the cinematography by Oliver Stapleton. "And anybody's memory bank of this period is black and white. So we photographed the film in color, but we shot it so as to offer the emotional illusion of going back to that time."

The entire run of the film—every release print, one of the few advantages of making modest films that won't go around had a dream-like quality."

### Escape Again

Harrison Ellenhaw, outgoing vice president of Buena Vista Visual Effects, Burbank, says goodbye to Disney with 100 visual effects shots for John Carpenter's *Escape From L.A.*, supervised by Michael Lessa, with miniature and model work by John Sorber of the Sorber Visual Network, and production design by Lawrence G. Paull (*Blood Runner*). "The tone is reminiscent of *Escape From New York*," Ellenhaw relates.

"It's a drab film, but a little tongue-in-cheek. In non-realistic films like this you have more options. Sometimes—no always—the joy of effects is precisely the fantastic and fun sense of them. John Carpenter wants the audience to really feel the effects. So they are high on the spectacle scale, rather than on the convincing scale."

1996 august

in which the silver normally lost during the negative processing is re-bonded to the release prints. (Some of *Seven's* original prints were given this rare treatment, which increases the luminosity in light portions, increases the density of dark tones, and subtly mutes the color.) "The process makes it look richer, which is important because most of it was shot at night, at jazz clubs, and the shooting of the music was very important."



Altman, in his element, with the Hey Hey Club Musicians, directing *Kansas City*.

"It's not like *Nashville*. The story here is simple. The film is constructed like jazz, and I see it as a jazz film," Altman adds, stretching between the grating sets of a long press junket at a New York hotel. "The story is a melodrama, and the film is, in a sense, the way jazz musicians would play their respective instruments. The structure of the dialogue is elliptical, like jazz solos, spherical. The jazz complements the picture and vice versa."

"It's all based on sense memories," Altman says in a mellotone. "The people I remember, the stories I heard, the things I heard. So for me it's truthful stuff. When I returned there, I knew all the places and the streets. But I don't know any of the people there. It was a cold nostalgia, not unpleasant in any way, but walking around had a dream-like quality."

If that other uniquely American institution, Altman—one of America's truly great filmmakers—seems as outmoded as jazz to the summer crowd, the director hasn't given up hope. "My era isn't over, though we may be seeing the last days of it," says Altman, starting a film for MGM called *The Wild Card*, in Chicago, "a contemporary comedy about a baseball card," and producing Alan Rudolph's *Afterglow* in Montreal. "I don't know how it will be resolved or what will replace it. There's only two film companies left, really. The Internet might save the artists—not the majors or the big theater owners—but that network of communications that's growing so fast."

"You can't stop the filmmakers themselves," Altman says, drifting toward his next interview. "Something will be the salvation for the few artists who are left in this business."

millimeter 31

"Robert Altman's Missouri Breaks," *Millimeter*, August 1996.

Los Angeles Times - 1/29/97

## Celebrating Altman's 'Kansas City' Music

TV REVIEWS

Robert Altman's film "Kansas City" was not exactly a box-office success, despite the picture's gritty look of 1930s authenticity. But Altman is probably right on target when he says, "The music will outlive the movie."

His "Robert Altman's Jazz '34," shot concurrently with the film for PBS' "Great Performances" series—and including a great deal of footage used in the picture—vividly confirms Altman's praise for the steaming, atmospheric swing sounds that bring the movie to life.

Although it is initially structured as a kind of documentary, with voice-over by Harry Belafonte (who starred in the theatrical "Kansas City" film) and occasional

narration by others who recall the era, the heart of the program is a series of numbers performed by an all-star lineup of young musicians. Among the many who perform prominently are saxophonists Joshua Redman, James Carter, Craig Handy and David "Pathead" Newman Jr., trumpeter Nicholas Payton, pianists Gerri Allen and Cyrus Chestnut, drummer Victor Lewis and bassists Christian McBride and Ron Carter.

It's hard to go wrong with a lineup like that, and there isn't a single false note in a program of tunes that includes such swing classics as Lester Young's "Tinkle Tink," Bennie Moten's "Molten Tink" and Coleman Hawkins' "Queer Notions."

In the film, the players were asked to assume impressions of famous players—Redman as Lester Young, Handy as Coleman

Hawkins—without necessarily attempting to simulate their styles. It works beautifully. What emerges is a series of performances, both improvised and structured, that bring a startling degree of youthful, contemporary vigor and imagination to the familiar swing styles of the '30s. And the presentation is enhanced by the authentic costuming, pinstriped suits, ties, fedoras, and, in Redman's case, Young's famous pork-pie hat.

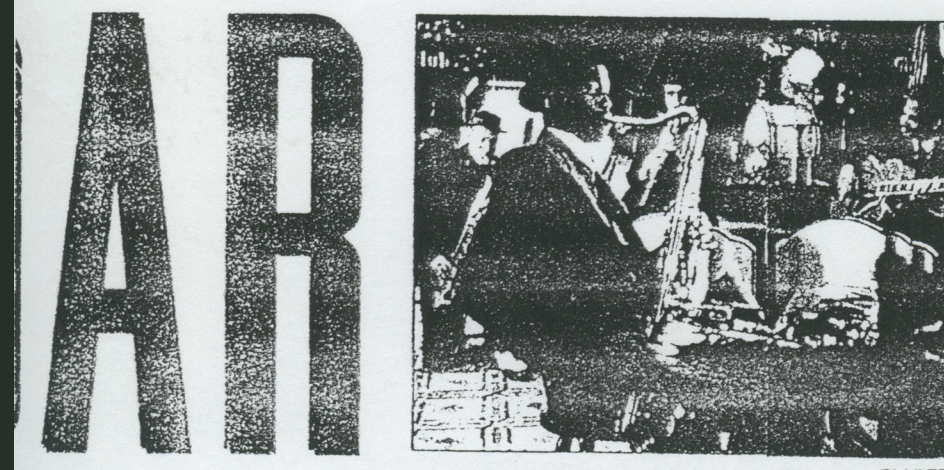
The hour show is filled with musical gems—tenor saxophone encounters between Redman and Carter, and Bodman and Handy, stylish piano from Allen as Mary Lou Williams, a gorgeous bass duet between McBride and Ron Carter.

Finally, the sound is superb and accurate. Altman insisted upon filming everything "live" rather than taking the more familiar route of having players pretend to play their instruments to an audio playback. The result is a sense of aliveness and participation that reaches out and pulls the viewer into the music.

First-rate jazz, brilliantly played, visualized and produced.

—DON HECKMAN

JAZZY: "Robert Altman's Jazz '34," tonight's "Great Performances" episode, was shot concurrently with the film "Kansas City" and vividly confirms Altman's use of the steaming, atmospheric swing sounds that bring the movie to life. (Reviewed by Don Heckman '97)



## CYBER CHAT

It's a big week for Robert Altman: His movie "Kansas City" came out on video Tuesday, and tonight PBS shows "ROBERT ALTMAN'S JAZZ '34," a documentary/concert film he shot concurrently (review, F2). The "Kansas City" Web page features clips of actors and musicians in both projects: <http://www.ft.com/ke/>

"Celebrating Altman's 'Kansas City' Music," *Los Angeles Times*, January 29, 1997.