

Nashville

By David Sterritt

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It was clear in 1975, and it's still clear decades later, that "Nashville" is the film Robert Altman was born to make.

Altman has directed other films of distinction, to be sure. He was a slow starter—years of TV episodes and a few minor movies preceded the 1970 comedy "M*A*S*H," which introduced his personal style and launched the major phase of his career—and his (occasional) peaks of popularity have been separated by (frequent) spells of relative obscurity, the most lengthy of which extended clear through the 1980s. Still, he has directed a larger number of momentous movies than most filmmakers manage to do, from "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" and "Thieves Like Us" to "The Player" and "Short Cuts," and he is regarded by most right-thinking cinephiles as an original and influential artist. To say "Nashville" is his masterpiece is to say it's a central work from a central figure of modern American cinema.

It's also a real sweet honey of a number, to borrow the language of its country-tinged screenplay. With a whopping twenty-four characters, a cluster of social and political themes, and more than two and a half hours at its disposal, it turns America's country-music capital into a colossal "Grand Hotel" bubbling with life, lunacy, and the pursuit of hipness. Altman moseys through this humming Babylon the way self-reflexive filmmakers have long meandered through Hollywood—peering curiously behind its billboards and facades, glancing wryly at the glitter but gazing intently at the humanity lurking beneath it. Altman gives similar treatment to other milieus in later films, most notably the film industry in "The Player" and the art world in "Vincent & Theo," but he's never outdone "Nashville" for wit, insight, or audiovisual audacity. It brims with the bad and the beautiful, careening among comedy, drama, public spectacle, private angst, sociocultural commentary, and magic tricks—and all without dropping the beat of music, music, music that's ultimately the movie's heart and soul.

The current that carries all this along is a political campaign—surprising at the time from a filmmaker more in-



Ronee Blakley and Henry Gibson receive cheers at a rally.

Courtesy Library of Congress

terested in personalities than ideologies, but revealing of the direction he'd take in future projects like the stage play adaptation "Secret Honor" and the "Tanner '88" television series. Hal Phillip Walker is the candidate's name, and the Replacement Party is his cause. We never see him onscreen, but we hear a lot of his rhetoric, and some of it has an almost-makes-sense loopiness that recalls the goofy (il)logic of a Preston Sturges advertising parody ("Christmas in July": "If you can't sleep at night, it's not the coffee, it's the bunk!"). It also anticipates the real-life silliness of H. Ross Perot and his Reform Party campaign. "When you pay more for an automobile than it costs for Columbus to make his first voyage to America," says Walker with blithe disregard for the notion that words might actually mean something, "that's politics."

But in "Nashville" as in life, most people pay only fleeting attention to the man who'd like to run their country. Their own joys and sorrows interest them more, so that's where the movie's real action is. Its two dozen characters comprise an eclectic catalogue of loves, hates, hopes, fears, ambitions, and desires, turning Altman's epic into one of cinema's very few meaningful microcosms of the American scene. The scarlet thread that ties the movie together is the gradually unfolding tale of a young man who's edging his way toward assassinating a public figure. But the subsidiary stories are at least as effective, centering on everything from the mental instability of a singing star to the stream-of-consciousness musings of a

BBC reporter who doesn't quite realize what a stranger she is in this strange, strange land. "Nashville" touches on moral issues but does little moralizing, preferring to let us draw our own conclusions. While its style is sometimes theatrical, it more often has a sense of documentary authenticity and improvisational spontaneity. Loose ends dangle from its fabric realistically, evocatively, mysteriously. The violent climax seems as inexplicable as it is startling and sad. Yet the movie's final vision is at once wistful, hopeful, and—above all—affirmative of the pulsing social rhythms that hold individuals together in a media-drenched modern society.

Amid the multilayered bustle of the film's plots and subplots, Altman pans, tilts, zooms, tracks, and cranes his camera with boiling energy, plus a sense of purpose and proportion that stands out in his oeuvre to this day. The soundtrack is assembled with equal virtuosity, marking a high point in Altman's pioneering use of multiple recorded tracks. The narrative structure gets scattered at times, and Joan Tewkesbury's screenplay (clearly just a blueprint for the finished film) dips now and then toward the sentimental and unsubtle. Altman keeps everything under firm control, however, by measuring all the hubbub against the bedrock expressiveness of the human face and form. The faces and forms he shows us have the look of regular people rather than movie stars, and some of them have never been in a film before. Newcomers fill certain major roles, such as Ronee Blakley as Barbara Jean, a country singer with severe emotional problems. In other cases they hover in the background, their unschooled mannerisms lending "Nashville" an extra charge of genuineness. More genuineness comes from Altman's decision to have the actors write their own songs for the movie's many musical interludes. This angered some in the pop music industry—what makes these mere actors think they can compose real tunes?—but it adds immeasurably to the authentic populism that informs both the subject and style of the film.

There are stars in "Nashville" as well as just plain folks. Lily Tomlin and Henry Gibson, both instantly recognizable in the mid-1970s from TV's hugely popular "Laugh-In" show, are perfectly cast as a gospel performer with a difficult home life and an egotistical singer thrilled with his own importance. Karen Black gives one of her best performances as the second-best rising star in the city. Keenan Wynn does the same as an aging man who can't quite figure out what he's doing in this out-of-control environment. Several of Altman's regular collaborators are also on hand, from Shelley Duvall and Bert Remsen to Keith Carradine and Gwen Welles.

It took a few years for Altman to follow up the promise of "Nashville" with a similarly ingenious offering. His next movie, the 1976 western "Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or, Sitting Bull's History Lesson," failed with critics and audiences, partly because of tensions between his wish to make a "very historical" film while maintaining his artistic prerogative to "present history on an emotional level" with results that are "correct philosophically, if not actually," as he unhelpfully said at the time. The hallucinatory "3 Women" fared even worse, confusing all but his most perceptive admirers with its deliberately diffuse narrative and oneiric visual style.

Only with the 1978 comedy "A Wedding" did Altman further refine and expand the large-canvas ingenuity that "Nashville" brought to such impressive heights. Not that most reviewers or moviegoers saw it this way. "A Wedding" was greeted with disappointment even by Altman admirers, many of whom found it a botched effort to reproduce the "Nashville" magic rather than the adventurous step beyond "Nashville" it really attempted by doubling the number of characters, restricting the place and time to a single home on a single day, and telling its loosely structured story through a bold visual style that proceeds from dignified, almost ritualized order toward an increasing unpredictability that reflects the social and spiritual chaos lurking just beneath the all-too-human surface of the nuptial event it chronicles.

Altman's career as a theatrical filmmaker grew even shakier with "Quintet" and "A Perfect Couple" in 1979 and didn't start to improve until "Vincent & Theo" struck a positive critical chord in 1990, a full fifteen years after "Nashville" seemed to confirm him as a directorial genius. For most Altman loyalists, "Nashville" remains his greatest achievement, enhanced and enriched by its extraordinarily textured soundtrack, restlessly roving cameras, allusive images, and offbeat performances. Not to mention its canny blend of cynicism, sentimentality, tuneful songs, colorful clothes, and underlying affection (not the misanthropy some carping critics claim to find) for the odd mix of people it so imaginatively portrays. All this and lotsa laughs, too. "Nashville" is one sweet honey of a number.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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