



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Nashville

One afternoon in the mid-1970s, I bunked off studies to catch the first screening at the local arts cinema of an American movie set in the capital of country music. After nearly three hours in the cinema, I emerged into the daylight persuaded that the hype – kick-started when the *New Yorker's* Pauline Kael, writing about a rough cut she'd seen, raved about 'an orgy for movie lovers' and 'the funniest epic vision of America' – was for once thoroughly deserved.

So what had all the fuss been about? Some of it centred on the fact that the film boasted 24 principal characters rather than the usual two or three leads; set in the Tennessee capital over five days – watch carefully and you'll find it begins on a Friday and ends the following Tuesday afternoon – it interweaves the 'stories' of a garrulous gallery of musicians (both established and aspiring), managers, partners, a political fixer, a quite possibly bogus BBC reporter, workers, fans and sundry other figures on the fringes of the various concerts, picnics and public rituals that dominate the proceedings. I say 'stories' because most of what we see and hear is intentionally mundane, evocative of everyday life rather than conventionally eventful movie drama; notwithstanding a shooting that eventually brings the film to its still unusually open-ended close, the narrative is perhaps best summed up by Altman's words to the critic David Thompson: 'It was about the incredible ambition of those guys getting off the bus with a guitar every day and, like in Hollywood, trying to make it. [...] I just wanted to take the literature of country music, which is very, very simple, basic stuff [...] and put it into a panorama which reflected America and its politics.'

But it wasn't only the sprawling, multi-character, antiheroic, anti-climactic, anti-cathartic narrative that made *Nashville* so special. Much of the buzz around the movie highlighted Altman's unusual methods. Experimenting with an eight-track recording system (then revolutionary in filmmaking), he had encouraged his cast to improvise dialogue; since many of the scenes featured crowded gatherings shot with several cameras, the actors had no idea whether their contributions at any given point in the filming would be seen or heard in the final cut. Moreover, his deployment of the wide 'Scope screen often privileged dense compositions that included a multitude of characters (Altman would sometimes liken himself to a muralist); eschewing the traditional shot/reverse shot method of constructing a dialogue, Altman was striving for something more closely related to our perceptions of real life.

With the passing years *Nashville* has come to feel still more remarkable. It's almost impossible to imagine such a film getting made today. Then again, even though it did get made, when Altman and his team embarked on the film it must have seemed outrageously ambitious. That's why, unlike most of the films that followed his massive 1970 hit for Fox with *MASH*, its funding hadn't come from one of the major studios, but from ABC (the American Broadcasting Company) which hoped to turn a profit from an accompanying soundtrack album.

Nashville's genesis was itself unusual. Around the time Altman was looking to make *Thieves like Us* (1974), his agent George Litto negotiated a deal with

United Artists, who suggested the director work on 'The Great Southern Amusement Company', a country-and-western musical with singer Tom Jones lined up to star. Altman disliked the script and offered to work up his own country-and-western musical if the studio would finance *Thieves like Us*; he sent Joan Tewkesbury, his co-writer on *Thieves*, to research the music scene in Nashville, and she produced a script based on what she'd seen and heard. Altman implemented several significant changes, adding an assassination attempt and introducing a political campaign by an eccentric populist presidential candidate as the background to the musical events in the film; these additions involved increasing the number of principal characters from 16 to 24.

Altman then set about casting, and invited anyone playing a singer to write their own songs, with or without the help of his young musical director Richard Baskin. He also encouraged his actors to contribute dialogue to their own scenes; the script was a framework, a springboard, not a definitive text. The shoot, which also involved hundreds of unpaid extras as audience members for the concert sequences, took seven weeks, and the film came in for less than £2 million. As Altman told Thompson: '*Nashville* was the first film I really had total control over... Everything was done on the spot, changed on the spot... We'd create events and document them... So it was very much like a documentary, with a small crew moving fast.'

The result was a film that seemed quite unlike anything made before it. The impressionistic narrative – either a tangle of multiple storylines or no plot whatsoever, depending on your point of view – successfully evokes the chaos of real life. At the same time, repeat viewings reveal that for all the semblance of spontaneous everyday experience, *Nashville* has a highly complex, subtle structure which was carefully created to produce maximum thematic resonance. Notwithstanding initial suggestions that it was simply a semi-satirical portrait of country-and-western culture (and there were some in Nashville who complained its take on the city's music scene was condescending), the film gloriously fulfilled Altman's intention that the society it depicted should serve as a microcosm of America itself. Indeed, it speaks volumes about the tensions and divisions brought about by differences in wealth, class, gender, race, religion, age, power, political creed and celebrity; and about the gulf between social realities and the myths propagated about America by politicians and the media (including, of course, Hollywood itself).

Of course, while *Nashville* did feel highly original, it didn't spring out of nowhere. Both stylistically and thematically, it had its precedents in Altman's earlier films. More than the other American directors who came to the fore in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Altman was not only an innovator in terms of style and technique but one of the most 'political' filmmakers working in fiction features (indeed, throughout his career, he would continue to provide incisive critiques of his homeland and its self-image).

Altman was often categorised as someone who made 'revisionist' genre films; but if at the time of their release films such as *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* and *Thieves like Us* appeared to be superior examples of that fashionable 'New Hollywood' practice, as time passed it became evident that he was primarily interested not in upending genre tropes but in looking at America – its history, its social structures and values, and their relationship to the American Dream. For Altman, filmic conventions counted for little; they could be deployed, toyed with, questioned or completely ignored, depending on dramatic or comic requirements. He would simply follow his instincts,

which is why his body of work is uneven and littered with several serious misjudgements, and also why so many of his films feel utterly personal and quite unlike anyone else's.

Altman remains admirably ambivalent about his creations. In this he's helped no end by his customarily idiosyncratic – but inspired – casting: faces familiar from his earlier movies (Keith Carradine, Shelley Duvall, Michael Murphy, Barbara Baxley, Bert Remsen, Gwen Welles, Timothy Brown) sit alongside imports from the TV comedy series *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In* (Lily Tomlin, Henry Gibson – the latter already a veteran of *The Long Goodbye*), established actors like Karen Black, Allen Garfield, Ned Beatty and Keenan Wynn, and country singer Ronee Blakley.

Altman was never one to typecast, nor was he swayed by star power, let alone physical beauty. He chose actors who felt and looked right for the role in question, then encouraged them simply to get on with inhabiting their character. The results include some of the most persuasively naturalistic performances in cinema, *Nashville* in particular being packed with memorable scenes of subtle nuance and emotional complexity.

And just as the casting and characterisation eschew stereotyping and facile moralising, so the songs, be they country-and-western, gospel, folk, country-rock or whatever, steer clear of heavy-handed pastiche. Indeed, thanks to some very fine compositions and performances by Blakley, Black, Baskin and Carradine – who won the movie's sole Oscar for his song 'I'm Easy' – any complaints that Altman's intention had been to attack the country music scene per se were soon forgotten about.

Rather than a straightforward polemical satire of country culture, the movie is a massive, multi-textured tapestry depicting a society undergoing some sort of crisis; it is not only the recuperating star Barbara Jean (Blakley) who's undergoing emotional and psychological turmoil. Families, marriages, friendships, music partnerships, professional alliances and political allegiances are all suffering strain; Nashville, like America, promotes ideals of celebrity, success, material and emotional well-being, equality and unity, but reality often has rather more to do with inequality, exploitation, frustration, loneliness, delusion, deceit and deadly despair.

The miracle of *Nashville* is that it deals with all this in a way that is at once intelligent, wickedly funny, unsentimental, compassionate and tender. It's arguably Altman's greatest achievement, a culmination of his various technical and stylistic innovations and an expansion and refinement of the singular vision that had been increasingly evident in the features from *Countdown* (1968), with its early experiments with overlapping dialogue and an open ending, to *California Split* (1974), a near-plotless account of two strangers joining forces for a gambling spree.

Perhaps, then, *Nashville's* near-isolation in terms of style, technique, tone, form and content only goes to show that it was – and indeed remains – impossible to make such a film... unless, that is, the creator was Robert Altman.

Geoff Andrew, *Sight & Sound*, June 2021

NASHVILLE

Director: Robert Altman
©/Production Companies: American Broadcasting Company, Paramount Pictures Corporation
Executive Producers: Martin Starger, Jerry Weintraub
Producer: Robert Altman
Associate Producers: Robert Eggenweiler, Scott Bushnell
Production Co-ordinator: Kelly Marshall
Assistant to the Producer: Jac Cashin
Production Assistants: Angel Dominguez, Ron Hecht, Steve Altman, Mark Eggenweiler, Maysie Hoy, Allan Highfill, Roger Frappier
Assistant Directors: Tommy Thompson, Alan Rudolph
Script Supervisor: Joyce King
Screenplay: Joan Tewkesbury
Director of Photography: Paul Lohmann
Camera Operator: Ed Koons
Grips: Harry Rez, Eddie Lara
Electrical Gaffers: Randy Glass, Mike Marlett
Editors: Sidney Levin, Dennis Hall
Assistant Editors: Tony Lombardo, Tom Walls
Property Master: Bob Anderson
Wardrobe: Jules Melillo
Make-up: Tommy Thompson
Hairstylist: Ann Wadlington
Title Design: Dan Perri
Music Arranged and Supervised by: Richard Baskin
Music Recordists: Gene Eichelberger, Johnny Rosen
Sound: Jim Webb, Chris McLaughlin
Re-recording Mixer: Richard Portman
Sound Editor: William A. Sawyer
Assistant Sound Editor: Randy Kelley
Political Campaign: Thomas Hal Phillips

Cast

David Arkin (*Norman*)
Barbara Baxley (*Lady Pearl*)
Ned Beatty (*Delbert Reese*)
Karen Black (*Connie White*)
Ronee Blakley (*Barbara Jean*)
Timothy Brown (*Tommy Brown*)
Keith Carradine (*Tom Frank*)
Geraldine Chaplin (*Opal*)
Robert DoQui (*Wade*)
Shelley Duvall (*L.A. Joan/Martha*)
Allen Garfield (*Barnett*)
Henry Gibson (*Haven Hamilton*)
Scott Glenn (*Pfc Glenn Kelly*)
Jeff Goldblum (*tricycle man*)
Barbara Harris (*Albuquerque*)
David Hayward (*Kenny Fraiser*)
Michael Murphy (*John Triplette*)
Allan Nicholls (*Bill*)
Dave Peel (*Bud Hamilton*)
Cristina Raines (*Mary*)
Bert Remsen (*star*)
Lily Tomlin (*Linnea Reese*)
Gwen Welles (*Sueleen Gay*)
Keenan Wynn (*Mr Green*)
James Dan Calvert (*Jimmy Reese*)
Donna Denton (*Donna Reese*)
Merle Kilgore (*Trout*)
Carol McGinnis (*Jewel*)
Sheila Bayley, Patti Bryant (*Smokey Mountain Laurels*)
Richard Baskin (*Frog, piano player*)
Jonnie Barnett, Vassar Clements, Misty Mountain Boys, Sue Barton, Elliott Gould, Julie Christie, James Hill (*as themselves*)

USA 1975©

160 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**Le Mépris (Contempt)**

Tue 1 Mar 18:15; Tue 8 Mar 20:50; Sat 12 Mar 20:50

42nd Street

Wed 2 Mar 18:00 (+ intro by Miles Eady, BFI Cinema and Events); Fri 4 Mar 20:40; Mon 14 Mar 20:45

Cabaret

Thu 3 Mar 20:40; Sat 12 Mar 18:15

8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Fri 4 Mar 18:00; Mon 7 Mar 20:15; Wed 16 Mar 17:50 (+ intro by Giulia Saccogna, BFI Programme & Research Coordinator)

F for Fake

Fri 4 Mar 20:50; Wed 9 Mar 18:10 (+ Intro by Programmer-At-Large, Geoff Andrew); Wed 16 Mar 21:10

Nashville

Sat 5 Mar 19:45; Wed 9 Mar 14:15; Sun 13 Mar 18:00

Les Demoiselles de Rochefort (The Young Ladies of Rochefort)

Sun 6 Mar 13:15; Fri 11 Mar 18:05; Tue 15 Mar 18:10

Baadasssss!

Thu 10 Mar 20:40; Sat 12 Mar 18:10

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