Re-released after 40 years: The strengths and weaknesses of Robert Altman's Nashville

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Robert Altman's film *Nashville* has been playing in movie theaters across the US recently to mark 40 years since its original release in the summer of 1975.

The nearly three-hour work follows two dozen characters over the course of several days in the city of Nashville, Tennessee, the official capital of country music. As was his wont, Altman created a rambling, improvisational film, which includes a number of intertwined storylines.

Psychologically fragile country music star Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley) is returning to the city and its cutthroat music scene, accompanied by her gruff, controlling manager-husband Barnett (Allen Garfield), after a somewhat mysterious stay in hospital. Various hangers-on and admirers orbit around her. The dreadful Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson), a veteran country performer, presides over the Grand Ole Opry (a weekly country music concert and radio program broadcast since 1925) and the city's music industry with an iron fist.

The members of an "alternative" folk-rock trio are in Nashville to record an album. Tom Frank (Keith Carradine), the group's most prominent figure, pursues or is pursued by several women, including a garrulous British journalist (Geraldine Chaplin), a local matron, gospel singer and mother of two deaf children (Lily Tomlin) and the female singer in the trio, Mary (Cristina Raines), who is currently married to the group's third member, Bill (Allan F. Nicholls).

A presidential election campaign is underway. The voice of the candidate of the newly founded pseudo-populist Replacement Party, Hal Phillip Walker (Thomas Hal Phillips), is heard throughout the film, as his campaign van broadcasts his empty, platitudinous message on the streets of Nashville. Two of his representatives, the oily John Triplette (Michael Murphy) from California and local lawyer Delbert Reese (Ned Beatty), are making efforts to line up support in the music world for their candidate. A large outdoor rally for Walker, at which all the singers are set to perform (Barbara Jean has more or less been forced by circumstances to show up, others have been bribed), forms the denouement of the film.

Altman and screenwriter Joan Tewkesbury introduce various other personalities in *Nashville*, including Barbara Jean's bitter rival, Connie White (Karen Black); a Vietnam veteran still in uniform (Scott Glenn); an older man (Keenan Wynn) whose wife has been hospitalized and his niece, a would-be "groupie," visiting from Los Angeles (Shelley Duvall); a waitress and aspiring singer, Sueleen Gay (Gwen Welles); an African American short order cook (Robert DoQui); an estranged husband and wife (Bert Remsen and Barbara Harris); and a young man from out of town (Kenny Frasier) who carries a violin case and seems infatuated with Barbara Jean. The young man turns out to be her assassin.

One of Altman's innovations, which has its positive and negative sides, was to encourage his actors to write and perform their own songs in the film (and also contribute lines and entire speeches). In fact, in the end, the best of the music is the most compelling single element in *Nashville*. The emotion and beauty of certain songs is the strongest proof of the enduring quality of popular music, including country music.

Altman's work was shot in the summer of 1974. The resignation of President Richard Nixon took place during the filming. *Nashville* is permeated, among other things, with moods produced by the Watergate scandal, part cynical, part hopeful. In fact, the film was released in the wake of explosive developments in American life extending back fifteen years or more: the civil rights movement and inner city rebellions, a series of assassinations of major political figures, the Vietnam War and the mass protest movement it provoked, the strike wave that engulfed American industry in the early 1970s and more.

Altman and Tewkesbury set their sights on the emerging celebrity culture in America, a crass and vulgar culture that was reducing country music and politics alike, in the director's words, to "popularity contests." At its best, *Nashville* sets its struggling and often bewildered, but well-meaning, human figures against the hollowness, cruelty and greed of the existing set-up. Altman had his definite weaknesses as an artist and a thinker, but his instincts in regard to authorities of every kind were invariably hostile.

There is a certain prescience in the film, in its attention to the rise of Nashville and the Sun Belt more generally, with their association with "free market economic thought," parasitic economic activities of various kinds and the move away from industrial production. One commentator notes that the "Sunbelt boom of the late 1970s paralleled the popularization of country music and auto racing [also present in *Nashville*] … In sum, the Sunbelt became fashionable in the 1970s." The 1976 election of Georgia's Jimmy Carter, the first Southerner since before the Civil War who had come to the presidency by election, seems presaged by the film. Moreover, when John Lennon was murdered five years after *Nashville*'s release it seemed to many horribly like life imitating art.

The director, an inveterate gambler and, at the time, heavy drinker, adopted a semi-anarchistic approach to life and to filmmaking. Actors were brought in at the last moment for key roles. Altman often wrote dialogue for a given scene the morning it was to be filmed. He devised a means, with the help of technicians, of recording the voices of various characters and even "extras" speaking simultaneously. The resulting overlapping dialogue in the final film is a trademark of his. The result, *at its best*, is a chaotic, amusing tumult in which the many-sidedness and even absurdity of human behavior finds expression.

Certain sequences and personalities stand out. Lily Tomlin's Linnea Reese conveys sympathy and dignity at every point. It is a remarkable moment when Tom (Carradine), in a crowded club, attempts to reach her over the heads of three other women through a seductive and, presumably, honestly delivered song. A few minutes before, Mary (Raines) has belted out a song, expressing her own feelings for Tom. Critic Andrew Sarris suggested that Tomlin, Raines and Carradine "turn a smoky café into an arena of yearning sexuality." Later, in bed, Linnea teaches the self-absorbed Tom sign language.

One remembers, with chagrin and pain, the hapless Sueleen (Welles)

perform a striptease before a crowd of hooting male spectators at a Walker fundraiser on the promise that she will be allowed to perform with her idol, Barbara Jean, at the upcoming concert.

Above all, there is the performance of Blakley as Barbara Jean, in the words of critic Molly Haskell, "a white-clad Ophelia whose psychic disorder is expressed in those odd, uncoordinated hand gestures." Her on-stage breakdown (based in part on singer Loretta Lynn's problems) is poignant and believable. The immense, unbearable pressure of "show business" claims another victim. Nothing is more destructive in America than success.

As noted above, the music, intentionally or not, is *Nashville*'s most enduring and endearing feature, and Blakley, a songwriter and singer, provides the best of it. Along with Carradine's "I'm Easy" and the trio's "Since You've Gone," Blakley's "Tapedeck in His Tractor," "Dues" and "My Idaho Home" are to a large extent what draws one back to the film time and time again.

Altman and Tewkesbury are quite sharp about certain things. They may have been somewhat easy targets, but the noxious patriotism and piety of the country music establishment were in considerable need of a vehement attack. Haven Hamilton (inspired by the figures of Roy Acuff and Hank Snow, among others), who performs wretched songs about America's greatness and the virtue of perseverance in public, is behind the scenes a hypocritical, conniving, Machiavellian scoundrel, with considerable political ambition.

The filmmakers were no doubt aware of the warm welcome Acuff, for example, had given to President Nixon on the occasion of the opening of a new, suburban home for the Grand Ole Opry in March 1974, a few scant months before the latter's departure in disgrace.

Altman's film came in for fierce criticism in 1975 from right-wing sources. The ideological pedigree of many of those who pretended to be speaking for supposedly caricatured Southerners and the abused country music scene was extremely dubious. Those claims blended in with a general chorus of abuse from openly reactionary defenders of the status quo, deeply offended by Altman's blows against some of the American establishment's sacred cows. George Will, already turning out his reactionary rubbish, rejected Altman's work, with its criticism of "callousness, exploitation, [and the] failure to communicate," as "not a close approximation" to American life.

Right-wing columnist Patrick Buchanan (a former adviser and speechwriter in the Nixon White House) also denounced the film, for, among other things, depicting country music's "public patriotism" as "false and phony." Buchanan argued that *Nashville* was "a slander on America; it is a notion that lives only in the jaundiced eyes of men like Robert Altman and the artistic and intellectual community that endorses and applauds what he is saying about the United States." One obviously has to defend *Nashville* against these claims.

All that being said, and *Nashville's* sporadically extraordinary qualities having been recognized, a re-viewing of the film today brings home two central facts: first, that if it was Altman's intent to create a panoramic view of modern American life, his effort was audacious and entirely creditable; and second, if such was his intent, that he failed, perhaps inevitably, in the effort.

The numerous exaggerated claims made for the film over the decades, that it is "a masterpiece" and "an epic pronouncement on the state of the union," that "it might just be the greatest American film of all time" and so forth, need to be set aside. *Nashville* is not a great film; it is one with a good many strengths and a good many weaknesses. It contains intriguing and insightful moments, along with much sloppy, careless and irritating material. Of course, the film's sharp and persistent contradictions need to be seen within the appropriate context. Altman's limitations were not entirely of his own making; they were bound up with the state of political and intellectual life.

In any event, too many sequences and characters in *Nashville* lead nowhere. Its first hour meanders somewhat tediously. The satire in the early airport and traffic accident sequences is rather heavy-handed. The film is stretched too thin in its initial portion for the demands being made on it by dozens of characters and situations.

Bert Remsen, a fine character actor, has nothing to do but look grumpy. Until the final scene, Barbara Harris is also essentially given little to do. Jeff Goldblum's silent Tricycle Man is a mystery that does not interest one. The relationship between Keenan Wynn and his niece never fully convinces. Altman makes Chaplin's journalist, critic Robin Wood noted, "as idiotic [and annoying] as he can."

Altman never worked out his attitude toward society and human beings. He passed back and forth, often in the same work, sometimes in the same scene, between compassion and rancid misanthropy. Wood describes Altman's all too frequent "smug superiority to and contempt for [his] characters." In *Nashville*, one is often left uncertain precisely who and what are being satirized and from which point of view. The problem extends to the music. Carradine and Blakley simply go ahead and perform the songs they want to sing, with sincerity. Other numbers, however, hover confusingly (and ineffectively) somewhere between camp and genuine commitment.

As we noted two decades ago, "Unpredictability, instability, the working of chance, spontaneity, arbitrariness, the lack of logic in the universe—these make up Altman's sensibility." In contrast to the many stultified products of the Hollywood system at the time, this sensibility opened the filmmaker up to sides of American life—in *The Long Goodbye* (1972), *Thieves Like Us* (1974) and *California Split* (1974) in particular—that were unavailable to more staid figures.

But all of this had a limit. And when Altman attempted to make a grand statement about American life, to use Nashville and the country music world "as a metaphor," he inevitably faltered. *Nashville* demonstrated the limitations of a far too heavy reliance on artistic intuition at the expense of conscious understanding. One cannot stumble upon the truth about a society and its prospects by accident, nor does a major work, as Hegel points out, come to the artist "in his sleep."

The failure expresses itself in his ambivalent (at best) attitude toward the American people. One has the definite sense that Altman, like many radical intellectuals at the time, blamed the population for Nixon's electoral victories (especially for the defeat of liberal George McGovern in 1972), and for the general shift to the right taking place by the mid-1970s.

Asked in a 1975 interview whether there were any political figures or movement with which he could identify or sympathize with, Altman replied, "I'm a Democrat, if anything. I supported [Eugene] McCarthy, McGovern, [probably Robert] Kennedy. I was very, very angry from the beginning about people like Richard Nixon. I don't like [Ronald] Reagan or [George] Wallace."

He went on, "I think change is going to come through social pressure. The anti-materialist movement ["counterculture"] that took place in the sixties is certainly an expression of that."

A banal outlook, common to the garden variety American intellectual of a certain type. The difficulty, and it is not Altman's personal difficulty, is the sharp decline by this time already in the influence of left-wing thought and analysis. The Cold War purges, the alliance of American liberalism with ferocious anti-communism, the decline of the labor movement, combined with the crimes of Stalinism that did so much to damage the standing of socialism in the eyes of millions, all this had taken its toll.

Unlike artists of an earlier age, who followed events with an eye to concrete social relationships, to class association, Altman speaks largely in abstract, vague generalities. He proceeds to blame the population for apathy and for its supposed lack of understanding. "The majority of the people … have done what they have been told they were supposed to do."

He speaks rather contemptuously of those who have “worked for their new Chevrolet every two years and they’ve got their house and their barbecue and they’ve sent their kids to college.” Later he suggests, “That’s what the picture [*Nashville*] is about, really. The whole point of making political analogies to the country-western stars is the fact that people don’t listen.” This is the language of the middle class radicalism of the time, including the New Left, which wrote off the working class in America as hopelessly backward and inert.

In fact, the American working class had just passed through one of its most militant and combative phases in history. The General Electric strike of 1969-70 lasted 122 days and involved 133,000 workers. In March 1970, 200,000 postal workers walked out, in the first national strike by public employees. In the fall of the same year, some 400,000 General Motors workers stayed out for 67 days. In 1970 alone there were some 5,600 work stoppages and 6.2 million lost worker-days.

The chief difficulty in the 1970s was not apathy, or an unwillingness to do what people were not “supposed to do,” but historically accumulated political problems associated with the continued alliance of the trade unions with the Democratic Party, the very party in which Altman continued to have and to sow illusions. The enormously militant movement of workers reached a dead end because it remained within the confines of capitalist politics and capitalist economics. This gave the powers-that-be a breathing space and made possible the vicious counter-offensive against the working population that began in earnest in the late 1970s.

This historical and social analysis was a closed book to American filmmakers. Behind Altman’s claim, in the same 1975 interview, that he has “high hopes, great expectations,” one feels rather, as Wood describes it, that his “gestures toward a progressive viewpoint thinly conceal despair and a sense of helplessness.”

Nashville is a work full of strikingly, almost provocatively unresolved contradictions, some of them more intriguing and richer than others. Whatever its serious failings, however, one cannot come away from a viewing of the film, and of its climactic assassination scene in particular, without a sense of deep social and moral malaise, of a troubled and tormented society headed, sooner or later, for a breakdown. In that general intuition at least Altman was unfailingly correct.