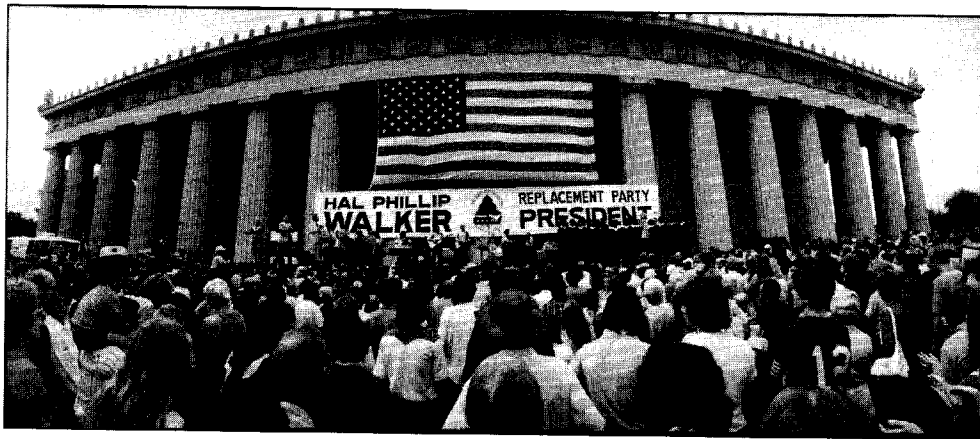

The NASHVILLE CHRONICLES

The Making of Robert Altman's Masterpiece



JAN STUART

SIMON & SCHUSTER *New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore*



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BETWEEN THE Oscar defeat and a sub-blockbuster showing at the box office, ABC's initial flurry of interest in assembling a ten-hour miniseries of *Nashville* from edited material rapidly waned. The proposed bicentennial project never happened. To this day, no one, including the director, knows exactly where the edited footage is sleeping.

While it was not the director's habit to leech off his former successes for new projects, even Altman could not help but feel wistful about the glory days of *Nashville* during some of the less-than-glorious years that followed. During the mid-eighties, when Altman was generating a series of screen adaptations of stage plays whose budgets were as low as their attendance, the oft-kicked-around notion of a sequel to *Nashville* seemed more and more attractive. In May of 1986, a contract for the sequel was drawn up by Altman's venerable agent, Sam Cohn, signing Robert Harders (Altman's associate director on *Secret Honor*) as chief writer and listing Joan Tewkesbury and Jane Wagner.

It was a surprise choice, on the face of it. Harders had no history with *Nashville*. A transplanted New York actor (and by his own accounts a bad one, relegated to "playing younger brothers and boyfriends on TV shows"), Harders parlayed his MFA from Sarah Lawrence into directing gigs in the L.A. Actors Theater. Altman was enamored of one of them, a one-man play by Donald Freed and Arnold M. Stone called *The Last Tape and Testament of Richard M. Nixon*, with a tour-de-force performance by Philip Baker Hall. Under the new title *Secret Honor*, Freed and Stone's play went on a small tour around the country. When it arrived at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Altman put it in front of the cameras, with Harders as his associate director.

Over the coming three years, Harders embarked upon writing a series of projects for Altman that would ultimately fizzle, including an adaptation of Hemingway's *Across the River and Into the Woods*. Over dinner at his Malibu home, Altman stunned Harders by asking him to write *Nashville 12* (a working title referring to the number of years that had elapsed since the events of the original), which proved to be the most formidable nonstarter of

them all. “The prospect of living up to *Nashville* was terrifying,” recalls Harders, who was afraid to ask Altman why he wasn’t using Joan Tewkesbury again lest the director change his mind. In actuality, Altman and Tewkesbury went their separate ways, maintaining a respectful friendship over the years after their planned participation in a film version of E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* broke down.

Altman took his new writer with him to Paris, where Harders remained for the next three months working on *Nashville 12*. Unlike Tewkesbury, Harders had not even had an experience of Nashville. Not surprisingly, the series of drafts that evolved were less dependent on the city itself than on the characters’ preexisting relationships with one another, however tangential they may have been. Working from two- or three-sentence notes that Altman sketched out to give his sense of what might have become of each of the characters twelve years later, Harders worked up an occasionally screwball series of scenarios that were simultaneously more cruel and more compassionate than the ones Tewkesbury had originally cooked up.

Harders’s theme, cribbed from Christopher Lasch’s *Culture of Narcissism*, would be the tendency of Americans to repeat their mistakes because of an inability to learn from their history. In Harders’s scheme, the rich get richer and the poor keep drinking. Haven Hamilton had become the host of a popular Christian TV show modeled loosely on *The 700 Club*. Wearing his new televangelist’s hat, Hamilton exploits the grief and vulnerability of his viewers, raking in thousands of dollars by doing special TV spots on their recently deceased loved ones in exchange for donations. Still traumatized by the shooting at the Parthenon, Hamilton has also become security-conscious to the point of obsession, and has turned his home into a fortress buttressed by guards and elaborate alarm systems. Despite his costly and elaborate efforts, he is shot at from out of nowhere.

Lady Pearl has left Hamilton, throwing her energy and support behind Tennessee gubernatorial candidate Linnea Reese (!). Linnea’s left-leaning politics lead to a nasty incident in which she

is smeared with paint by a conservative troublemaker while on the campaign trail; rather than wash it off, she decides to wear the paint like a badge of honor. Linnea's campaign is supervised by none other than former Hal Phillip Walker manager John Triplette. She has divorced Delbert, who has remarried Sueleen Gay (a truly perverse turn of events given his exploitive role before, during, and after the fund-raising smoker).

Albuquerque, having enjoyed a brief splash of fame and success in the wake of her impromptu Parthenon debut, has returned to obscurity and is back at square one, trying to make it in the business. Her husband, Star, drowns his bitterness over the failure of their marriage and her aspirations in alcohol. At a bar, he encounters Wade, who has apparently not honored his own threats to flee to Detroit. As they chat, Star becomes progressively drunk and Wade offers to drive him home. In his stupor, Star misdirects Wade through a wealthy neighborhood and then suddenly grabs the wheel. The car hits a young boy, who turns out to be the son of country star Tommy Brown, whom Wade had verbally assaulted at the Picking Parlor twelve years earlier. The boy is badly hurt, and eventually dies (Altman fans will note this provocative precursor to a similar incident in his adaptation of Raymond Carver stories, *Short Cuts*.) In the follow-up investigations, it is initially assumed that Wade is the culprit because of his skin color. Harders deliberately complicated the issue of racism by making the arresting cop and the assistant D.A. black. Wade is eventually cleared, but not before his name is muddied in the community. That is the happy version. In the first draft, Harders had Wade being beaten to death in a modern-day lynching.

In a more comic vein, Tommy Brown is again compelled to confront racism when Haven presents Tommy with a song he wants him to sing on his show called "Black Sheep," about a guy who is the outcast of his family. (The song was cowritten by Altman and his songwriter friend Danny Darst, who appears as the mumbling cop in *Cookie's Fortune*.) Tommy initially refuses to sing the song, based merely on the title, but is eventually strong-armed into doing so by the persuasive Haven.

Connie White has become a lush and a floozy, picking up a total stranger for a one-night stand at her home (an over-the-top nightmare of Barbie-pink accoutrements). The stranger turns out to be John Triplette. White gets stupefyingly drunk to the point of passing out. When she comes to and asks Triplette to make love to her, he lies and says they already did, then slips off into the night. Connie White is now managed by Barnett, the widower of her former rival, Barbara Jean.

Professional heel Tom Frank has married L.A. Joan, now Martha again, having fully embraced the life of a Tennessee mother and housewife. For a moment we are led to believe that he hasn't changed his stripes—he is overheard arranging another motel assignation—until it is discovered that the clandestine partner is none other than Martha. Celebrity and marriage have had redemptive power on the least likely candidate. Martha's uncle, the widower Mr. Green, was written out with a funeral scene of his own when Keenan Wynn passed away in the midst of one of the drafts.

The recording world has been less than kind to Tom's former singing partners. Mary has left the business altogether to become a schoolteacher. Bill's singing career has also run aground, and he now works for his former chauffeur, Norman, who has taken over the whole limousine service. (In one of Harders's unkind cuts, Bill is sent to the airport to pick up a client, who turns out to be Tom.) Norman supplements his wealth by installing security systems, and has made a small fortune off the fears of Haven Hamilton.

Harders has reserved his most bizarre pairing for Opal and the Tricycle Man, who revile each another as rivals working at a local TV station. It is later revealed that they are living together.

The woebegone assassin Kenny is now rational and coherent, appearing briefly in a television interview to accept responsibility for what he did and acknowledge that people hate him so much that he will never get out of jail.

The only characters unaccounted for in Harders's several versions are Buddy and PFC Kelly. Dave Peel, who was moving away

from show business and deeper into religion, was not available to reprise his role as Haven's browbeaten son. Harders avoided dealing with the taciturn PFC Kelly altogether. "I blanked him out because I never knew what was going on with him," he admits frankly.

The sequel was structured to begin with the last eight minutes of the original film at the Parthenon, then launch into a memorial service for Barbara Jean at the Nashville Cemetery twelve years later. (Amusingly, if improbably, the Hal Phillip Walker van was going to snake its way into the procession, its unrelenting p.a. system finally conking out midway.) Throughout the different drafts, Harders struggled with ways to bring Ronee Blakley back into the sequel. His solution, which arrived at the eleventh hour, was his most harebrained and inspired conceit: She would reappear as a Barbara Jean impersonator. In keeping with Harders's theme of history doomed to repeat itself, Barnett would fall in love with her.

But how to end the sequel? How do you follow a climactic act as stunning as the one Altman devised for *Nashville*? "I know how I would do it now," says Harders. "I'd have Barbara Jean assassinated again."

The climax would become a bone of contention. Jerry Weintraub, it seemed, was insisting upon an upbeat ending. Perhaps even more alienating to the director was what Harders called the "schoolmarmish" efforts of one of Weintraub's executives to get Altman to adhere to a script. "If it wasn't on the page, it wouldn't go on the stage," says Harders, evoking the same rigid cost-control mind-set that Altman had encountered from the studios throughout his career. "Weintraub was going to teach Altman how to make a film. It was going to be his way or none at all."

Beyond the executive rumblings, Lily Tomlin purportedly had reservations about the script, which appeared to be moving further away from an ensemble effort and more toward a star vehicle with her character at the center. Harders speculated that the impetus for the focus on Tomlin's character was generated by

Weintraub's office, hoping to capitalize on Tomlin's star appeal in the eighties.

According to Martin Starger, the new emphasis on Tomlin's character drew protests from her agents, who weren't ready to settle for the same favored-nations agreement. But for these hitches, few of Altman's ill-fated projects have come this close to fruition. The actors were lined up and ready to go, locations had been chosen, a script, however unfinished, was percolating.

On May 1, 1987, the New York *Daily News* ran a story announcing, "The *Nashville* sequel won't shoot this summer as planned," then quoted Jerry Weintraub as saying it was pushed back to the following spring in fear of a directors' strike and because of "scheduling problems" with Lily Tomlin, who was set to film *Big Business* with Bette Midler.

That was the last that was heard of *Nashville 12*, whose genesis was becoming so drawn out that it was being called *Nashville 13*. One person who regrets its demise is Martin Starger. "Again, I'm not sure it would have been a blockbuster. But I remember when I tried to get the rights to ABC. I said you should retain something of it. Run the original *Nashville* on Sunday night and this on Monday night. You have a miniseries. It's the story of America in political terms."

Tomlin would also come to express regrets about her reluctance to do the sequel. "I think I was stupid, because I think it was worth doing. I wish we had done it now. You know, to have all those actors back together was extraordinary, and I was too ignorant to forget my own subjective thoughts. I have much more appreciation for that kind of continuity and history than I did then."

Years later, when asked about the fate of the *Nashville* sequel at a Television Critics Association press tour, Altman said, "The commercial dragon roared. They wanted to be sure there would be a happy ending. And I just don't know how to make a happy ending."