

Robert Altman

Cinema Film Director
1925-2006

By John A. Horner

Robert Altman was born in Kansas City on February 20, 1925. His father Bernard was a successful businessman in insurance, and his mother Helen (née Mathews) traced her ancestors back to the Mayflower.

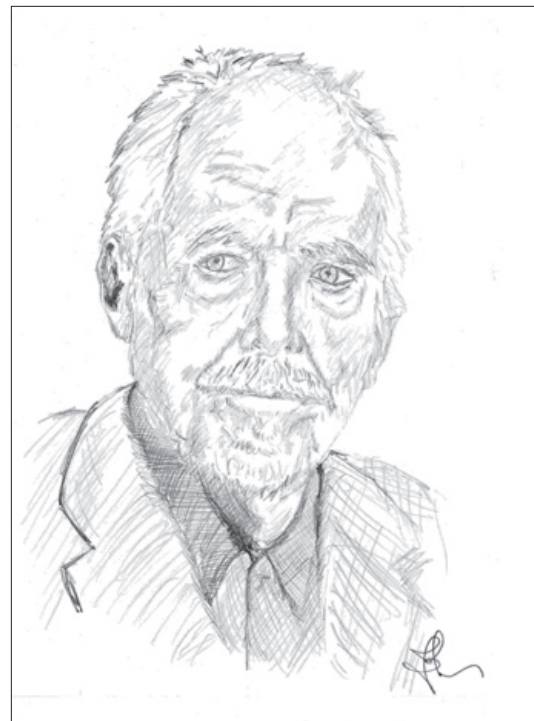
Altman originally attended Rockhurst, a Catholic high school, before he convinced his parents to let him attend Southwest, the public high school that served Kansas City's suburban upper middle-class neighborhoods.

In the middle of his junior year, Altman left Southwest and transferred to Wentworth, an expensive military boarding school in Lexington, Missouri. He also took junior college courses at Wentworth. In 1945, as World War II was drawing to a close, he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces, becoming a B-24 copilot. He trained at March Field near Riverside, California. It was during this time that he first encountered the social world of nearby Hollywood.

Altman was stationed on Morotai, an island in the southern Philippines. By this time most of the news-making missions for that area were long over, though not necessarily the danger. At the end of the war, he had risen to the rank of lieutenant. Later, when he began making a name for himself directing television and films, Altman would draw upon his war experiences to inform his work.

In 1947 Altman was discharged and, after marrying for the first time, went first to Hollywood, then to New York, then back to Hollywood, trying to find success as an actor, writer, director, and finally running a business that would tattoo dogs with an Identi-Code—he even got so far as to tattoo Harry Truman's dog while Truman was still in the White House. Financially he was not successful, even though he co-wrote two scripts that were produced.

This failure was one of the most important events in Altman's life, because he returned to Kansas City and began working for the Calvin Company, which made industrial and commercial films. Because Calvin's films were low-budget, Altman had to wear many hats and



gained invaluable practical experience in all aspects of film-making. He began exploring the experimental camera angles, overlapping dialogue, and other techniques that would become so identified with his style.

In 1956 he was hired to write and direct *The Delinquents*, made entirely in Kansas City for \$45,000. By 1957 he had moved back to Los Angeles and set out making contacts with great persistence. He had a big break when he met Alfred Hitchcock, who hired Altman to direct an episode of the new series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.

This started over a decade of work in television in series like *The Millionaire*, *Maverick*, *Bonanza*, and *Combat*, often rewriting the scripts he was given. He directed some films during this time, such as *Countdown* and *That Cold Day in the Park*. He also grew increasingly frustrated and confrontational with the Hollywood system.

In 1969 Altman directed M*A*S*H, the film that really brought him into the public eye. Ring Lardner Jr.'s script was a starting point from which Altman encouraged the actors to improvise. The film was a surprising hit at the box office, the anti-establishment attitude of the characters resonating with the younger audience.

M*A*S*H was followed in the next few years by *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *The Long Goodbye*, and *Nashville* (which received an Academy Award for best song). Other films include *Popeye*, *The Player*, *Short Cuts*, *Kansas City* (for which he returned to his hometown), *Gosford Park*, *A Prairie Home Companion*, and *Tanner '88*, a fictional documentary about a presidential candidate.

Altman was nominated five times for the Academy Award for best director, but it was not until 2006 that the Academy honored him with a lifetime achievement award.

Altman died on November 20, 2006, in Los Angeles.

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