

U2 LIVE; SPRINGSTEEN PREVIEW

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Rolling Stone

**NEW FACES
OF ROCK**
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NIRVANA

**Inside the Heart
and Mind of
KURT COBAIN**

**SEATTLE
SCENE**

The New Liverpool

CITIZEN GE
By William Greider



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'ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS'

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COVER: Photograph of Nirvana by Mark Seliger, Melbourne, Australia, February 1992. Production by Jacqui Mott/Photo Search. Lettering by Dennis Ortiz-Lopez.

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ROD LAR

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"I TRY TO DEBUNK MYSELF AS MUCH AS ANYBODY ELSE."

ROBERT ALTMAN MAKES MEMORABLE films: some because they are sublime, some because they are ridiculous. A few are both. He did his best work — the films that established him as an anti-establishment figure and a cockeyed auteur — from 1970 to 1977. *M*A*S*H*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Nashville*, *The Long Good-bye*, *California Split*, *Thieves Like Us*, *Three Women* and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* presented a swirling, hazy yet acute portrait of an America, past and present, that was Altman's very own.

Over the next ten years, however, the director lost his way. His work ranged from the pleasantly competent to the screamingly bad. The good films of that period were his taut adaptations of plays — among them, *Come Back to the 5 and Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean and Sam Shepard's Fool for Love*. But the bad work dominated: From the boring bluster of *Quintet* and *Health* and *A Wedding*, to the pathetically out-of-touch unfun-ness of *O.C. and Stiggs* and *Beyond Therapy*, it looked like Altman had, in some way, had it.

And just when we thought we wouldn't have Altman to kick around anymore, he came back with three impressive pieces: *Tanner '88*, in which he and

Garry Trudeau ran a fictional character for president, was a clever, compelling mix of fact and fiction made for HBO. *Vincent and Theo*, in 1990, emerged as a slashing portrayal of a punkish Van Gogh and his brother and resurrected Altman's high-art credentials. And now, improbably, back to Hollywood waltzes this aging, acid dumping of a man, where he turns out a killer — *The Player* — masquerading as a sheepish, fluffy comedy.

I talked to Altman recently in Santa Monica, at the Skywalker Sound facility, where he was sort of busy putting the final mix on *The Player*.

To start, I'm curious as to what moments in your films most thrill your soul? What moments do you cherish?

The accidents. The things that happen that are totally uncalculated, unprepared for, unanticipated and take on the guise of a discovery. It's the only time I'm truly put in the position of the audience, for whom I'm supposed to be monitoring all this activity.

A number of months ago when you gave a talk in San Francisco, you said that "the process of making the film is the only value." I mean, some artists are very attached to process, but that statement seemed extreme.

Well, it probably is an exaggeration. But I think it probably is the only value. Selfishly, it's the only value to me. The afterglow, the afterburn of it, is nice and it's memorable, but the process is being in the activity while it's happening and really being out of control. The last

stage is the sitting back and grinning, or denying that you had anything to do with it.

You also said that "eighty-five to ninety-five percent of [your] creative work is done by the time the film has been cast."

I think by the time the casting is complete, most of the work that I'm going to do, most of the creative work, has been turned over to those people that I have cast.

But from that time to the end, there's a long road to hike, and if you really feel that way, doesn't it get boring, tedious?

No, because it's always full of these surprises. And these discoveries that take place are not boring. This sound mixing we're doing right now: I sit here all day and play solitaire with the editor and do crossword puzzles, and I make phone calls and jokes, and I eat and wish we were through with it. But it's something that has to be done, and in the process of doing it, invariably, five, six, seven times during the whole thing, I will feel: "Wow! I didn't know that was going to be like that. That's good! Leave that!"

The real movie for you is the dailies.

Well, the best movie is all the dailies. Because you're seeing much more of the characters, the life of the film. Because these people in the film don't exist. Everything in the film is a lie. *Everything*. Then we show it to an audience as if it is a true thing — an event that happened, a piece of history. So, in dailies, when you see the same scene being played seven times, eight times, and you see the little changes, the nuances, it's going into your brain as if those people were real and as if there were more options available. By saturating yourself with the dailies, you're saturating yourself with that event.

Does it also give you the feeling that you're almost doing a documentary?

Yes, that's what I am trying to do. I'm trying to do a documentary about these fictitious people. Documentaries are not real at all. In many ways, this is more real. Documentaries are not truthful.

They are a slant on the truth, but they are just as constructed, even Fred Wiseman's.

Oh, absolutely! More so! And what we do is no different than what Fred Wiseman does. Fred Wiseman goes in and sees a bunch of old people chewing their food, or they're singing in a church pew, and he uses that. That's no different from what I do when I see an actor acting those things. In fact, what I'm really try to do with the actors is get them to be less creative and just use their own natural selves more, as if they were the character in that circumstance.

Not so much "actorial" as behavioral?

Behavioral. Behavior is what it is.

Your films are fascinated with catching that kind of behavior in a way that, I think, sets them apart.

Well, I don't know about that, but I know that seems to be the main thrust of all of this stuff.

Is it fair to say that some of your films are edited more than they are directed? I don't mean this as a slight —

Yeah. Absolutely! Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely. I think, simply, what I try to do is create an event — and that event can be somebody pouring a cup of coffee and spilling it, or not spilling it — creating that event and then documenting it. And whether it's a riot or a church fire or a cup of coffee, you try to create the event and then not manipulate everything to work for what you would like to have. And many times getting less than you would like.

You continually screen rough versions of your films to those both inside and outside your circle. What do you learn by

"reading the backs of people's heads," as you've said?

Well, I learn nothing, but I learn from my own embarrassment. If I sit in that room the first time I show an assembly of a film, and I have twenty-five people in there, and I know who they are in most cases, or I know about them, and the film starts, and suddenly a scene goes up, and suddenly I go, "Oh, Jesus!" and I cringe with embarrassment. . . . Because I'm looking at this film for the first time through somebody else's eyes. So, through my own embarrassment or my own glee, I leave something in and enhance it, or I take something out.

How do you know what their eyes are seeing if you're not talking to them about it?

Because I'm the one that's seeing, but I'm seeing from another standpoint. In other words, it's a way for me to try to get rid of all this knowledge that I have — so much more knowledge than the audience has — because I've been exposed to so much more information. And, also, I have to come to the realization that none of you really gives a shit! You will, as long as I keep you entertained and interested and involved. But the minute it becomes boring to you and you say, "Listen, I saw this about sixteen times last year in various forms," you're out of there.

And you can see that from the back of the room, by their body language, that they are "out of there"?

I feel it. It's not them — it's the fact that I know that they're there, that's a truth; so I suddenly have to become aware of those people, and I'm responding — I'm a different me. I've moved my position: from myself alone to myself in a room with twenty-five people that I don't want to be embarrassed in front of.

Isn't this process really Bob Altman's version of a focus group? Doesn't this serve the same function for you that the studios seek when they go out and test films?

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Only mine is more truthful. Because at least all the judgments that are being made about this thing are being made from the same point of view, not from several different points of view. I don't trust what anybody tells me at these screenings, anymore than I would trust the people in the focus groups. 'Cause I know how much I lie about my very, very closest friends' work. I mean, the people that I truly love, I do not tell them my true feelings.

Why not?

I don't want to hurt their feelings.

If they've asked you for your opinion?

I don't believe they really want it. And I just don't have the courage to do it.

You think you're doing them any good by lying to them?

I think it's much more selfish than that. No, I think it would do them much more good if I would be totally honest with them. But I'm not that way.

You just want to avoid the conflict?

I don't want the confrontation. Yes.

And no two people will have the same reading of a film, anyway.

None, whatsoever. If suddenly you are zapped with a truth ray and you say, "I hate this fucking film," it doesn't make any difference to me. Now, if I've made this film that nobody gets or nobody likes or nobody understands, then it's a bad film.

I'm starting to think that each project is a pond of thin ice. And I've got to walk, taking everything I have with me — all the people, the actors, the musicians — from one side to the other, and there are all these steps that have to be taken. And one step that's too heavy, one,

"NOBODY FOLLOWS HUNCHES ANYMORE-IT'S ALL MARKETING."

breaks the whole fuckin' ice, and everybody sinks.

You're in a sort of unusual position in that you're not as much of a writer as some others we think of as auteurs, and you've always struggled with your writing.

I think I'm probably much more of a writer. I tend to do more writing than not.

Let me qualify: It's not the sitting-down-with-the-blank-piece-of-paper writing that you do, it's the interactive writing—the collision with other writers' material.

Yeah, I do better rewriting. Something has to make me believe that something is true. And then I can go in and adapt and deal with it.

Why do you think that is?

I don't know. I just don't come up with imaginative ideas. Everything I've ever done has been off of something that somebody else has done—that has already been there. Something that exists.

Can you not make yourself believe that an original story of yours is true?

Well, to a degree. But once I find something that's true, you can't convince me that it isn't. And then I have the confidence to go ahead with it.

Last year you said: "I can't write alone. I have on occasion, but I've never been comfortable with it. I've had these little sessions with myself when I've said, 'Oh, screw 'em,' I'll just take six months, and I'll go and sit there, and I'll write every word, and I'll like the way I write, but it's too painful. And I always feel there's something missing. I'm dry. I don't have enough ideas."

Yeah, it's true.

What's the painful aspect of it?

The painful part is very simple: It becomes physically painful for me to sit at whatever device—a typewriter, a computer—by myself. I get pains in my body, and I wish I could go somewhere else and do something else, and I bite the inside of my mouth, because I want to get this done, and I get sort of lost in it, and time passes a lot.

Has that been a lifelong thing?

Oh, yeah. I'm very gregarious, and I always liked being with other people. There are times when I love to rest, to read, but the idea of going off and spending three days by a lake, by myself, would be torturous to me.

I know enough about you to know that you don't have a self-analytical bent, but do you ever wonder why that is?

No. No. What difference does it make? I hear people say, "I love to go spend time alone," and I think, "God, don't you get bored?" Maybe they're more interesting to themselves than I am.

You've praised actors to the hilt throughout your career, and I've not seen the same kind of praise, or respect, for writers.

Well, I don't think the respect is the same. I praise actors because actors are thrown into a situation where they only have control over their own place on the table. They have nothing to do with the table. Writers I think of as more like myself: They're part of the main planning board, and they have more control, and they are doing pretty much the same thing I'm doing.

I get the credit for most of my pictures, but that credit is for selecting the people that I collaborated with. So I'm really just a manager. You can strip me down to having no artistic input whatsoever, other than of selection.

Isn't that just a bit disingenuous, Bob, that you're just the guy who comes in and turns on the lights and says, "Go?"

It's very true, though. I think it's very, very true. It's just like this mixing thing. If I were in New York, then these people would all be doing what they thought I

would like. This thing would be fine. It would be different than if I was here, but it would be as good or better.

One of the things that strikes me about your body of work is something that's not there. And that's the presence of the erotic. What do you think accounts for this?

Well, I'm not aware of that. I never really thought of that before. I don't know. Maybe I'm not capable. Maybe I just don't do that. Maybe it's something—obviously, all that I show you reflects my personality and all I see. I don't know. I think the scene I did, the lovemaking scene, in *The Player* is erotic.

For you, given the landscape of your work, that's pretty demonstrably erotic. Maybe not for other films Greta Scacchi has been in. I don't know if it's because of your Catholic upbringing in the Midwest or—

I don't know. But I tell you, primarily, most of what anybody does is imitating. I imitate the things that I like and admire. I'm showing you what I like to see. And maybe I don't like that. Maybe I'm embarrassed by that.

Yeah, I think so. Even in those situations when you do show nudity—like the shower scene in *M*A*S*H* or the painful striptease in *Nashville*—it seems you're much more interested in depicting how you felt women were being depicted by our society, rather than delectating over them yourself.

[Pause] That's all I can think of to show. I don't know a circumstance. I can't think of a circumstance. I'm trying to think of something erotic.

Eroticism for me ties more into voyeurism than it does participation. When you get into participation, suddenly the element of showing and watching doesn't enter into it. Very few people have their friends pull up a chair in their bedrooms and watch them fuck and have a cup of coffee. Very few people. So it's not a natural condition. The simplest answer is that it makes me uncomfortable. And in most cases when I use nudity, I have a different attitude about it. A lot depends on what the person performing will give you.

It's ironic, because in *The Player* you're dealing with an actress [Scacchi] who's become known for being comfortable with nudity and sexual situations.

Well, she's comfortable with her nudity, but during this picture she sure wasn't.

She's probably trying to get away from that.

Oh, she is. She hates it. You know, there's some show in England where they use those puppets—political things—and they made her one of the characters along with Reagan and Thatcher, and she's sitting around saying, "Oh, Dickie"—Richard Attenborough—"Oh, Dickie, when do I get to take my clothes off?" So she doesn't want to do that stuff. But I have to do a certain amount of sex in this film because it's obligatory, because it's a film. But my whole point is to never show her nude. Which is why I had the girl who played Bonnie Sherow, when I cast her I said, "It's very important that you be nude in the hot tub for this scene." And she [Cynthia

Stevenson] said, "No one ever asked me to be nude before." And I said, "I want it for just that reason." Because I want to give them [the audience] the nudity—but I don't want to give them the nudity that they think they're going to see. Paul Newman's comment after seeing the picture was "You don't get to see the tits you want to see, and you get to see the ones you don't want to see." [Laughs] And that was really the idea!

[Pause] I think the erotic in film is a very tough situation. If you literally do arouse a sexual feeling, really arouse erectile tissue in an audience, and then if it isn't relieved, and we move on to the chase, and you're sitting there in your seat, and there's this other thing going on—the blood is still pounding in your temple—you're not going to concentrate on what you're supposed to. So I've got a lot of questions about that.

Do you feel there's a politics to your style, to the style itself?

You mean, am I using it politically?

Whether you feel that the way in which you order a film, or disorder it, as the case may be, whether you feel there's a political bias there? The tradition in the criticism of your work is that by decentering the hero, the icon, and that by concentrating on

the periphery, and by flattening the playing field, the work is intrinsically democratic, left leaning, less hierarchical.

Oh yeah, I think it's more... subversive. It's not revolutionary, but it is subversive.

What do you think you're subverting when you say your films are subversive?

Uh, set ideas. Fixed theses. Platitudes. Things that say this is this. Commandments. Attitudes. Those kinds of things. I'm saying it's not true. It's true, but it's not.

What gave you such a passion for debunking?

I have no idea. I have absolutely no idea at all. It's just what interested me, and I'm talking after the fact. It's not like I sat around thirty years ago and said, "Ah, this

is what I'm going to do." I'm trying to debunk myself as much as I'm debunking anybody else.

You once said that there's never been a time in your life when you weren't in debt. Is that still true?

That's true.

Do you set things up to be that way?

No, but I don't store money away. And I've lived all my life that way. What can happen to me? [Quietly] I'm not going to starve. I'm not in danger of being a homeless person. Although that could happen, I'm sure. Being in debt means you just borrow from the bank. If I don't go to work in a few months, it will be very uncomfortable for me. I'll have to do something. So I'll take a job. I'll take some kind of assignment. And every time I've done that [which is constantly] something very, very good has come out of it. The assignment has turned into some kind of a very, very good experience for me. Whether it's a successful experience in terms of somebody else's yardstick is a different thing.

Last winter, for instance, I never got paid for Vincent



In 1971, Altman directed Hollywood player Warren Beatty in *'McCabe and Mrs. Miller.'*

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"THE OLD MOGULS HAD PASSION...AND HATE."

& Theo. The guy just stiffed me. And I have to sue him, and it's going to cost me \$150,000 to bring the lawsuit, and I don't think I'll ever get that \$150,000 back. Now, if I get an assignment in the next month or two, and I see that I can burn \$150,000, that's the first thing I'm going to do, I'm going to take it and burn it just to get this guy. I would really prefer that he would die of some kind of terrible, cancerous disease, and I could read about it. Or have his wife call me and tell me. I'd love that! Or his children. They're too small to talk, but... Because the guy is just a terrible person. And our business is just full of those kinds of people. And they can operate in an artistic environment because the artists always want to get their work done. And these guys just feed on these people. And that's been going on since the beginning of time and it will continue to. [The producer was unavailable for comment.]

But if I had played safe and done things, protected myself and, say, had \$10 million in the bank working for me and was totally secure, well, so what? What does that do to my life?

Theoretically, maybe it gives you the freedom to turn down a job you don't want to do?

Well, I turn down the job I don't want to do until I can't turn it down. On the other hand, if I could turn it down forever maybe I'd be like Warren Beatty or these people who go every five years and make a picture when they find one that's exactly right. And I think maybe that's a little too safe. And I think it's too dangerous. And when I see that everything is very safe, I think the picture's going to turn out just that way as well. So I think it isn't any fun for me unless it's a real stretch, a real uphill climb, unless I'm doing something that I don't think can be done.

Let's deal with drugs and booze.

I mean, in that book that kid wrote [Patrick McGilligan's *Robert Altman: Jumping Off the Cliff*], there were several places where he indicated I would come into work drunk. And it just is not true. I've never had a drink in my body in my life when I've worked. The last shot of every day, the crew would know it was the last shot, 'cause they would see someone bringing me a glass of wine. And I know people who do work on grass — millions of musicians do that. But I can't do it because... I'm gone. There's something about being there with your feet wet, in a very hard reality. The minute your obligations and decisions are finished, then you can get as wasted as you want.

Around 'Nashville' you said, "I work a lot when I'm drunk, and I trust that all of it will eventually appear in my films."

What I mean is, when I'm drunk or when I'm stoned, I'm talking and I'm thinking about things, and I was that way most of my life. At the end of the day, I don't sit around sober in the evenings unless I'm working. All the time, the forty-five or fifty years I was drinking heavily — I say heavily, and I did, I was a very heavy drinker — I never drank at lunchtime. I couldn't do it. It's not any moral judgment or anything, it's just simply like putting on a blindfold. But these kind of statements come out, and it indicates that I'm floundering around on the set, saying "do this" and "do that," when I'm chemical out, and I've never done that. I think smoking grass, for the many years that I've done that, probably the first fifteen or twenty minutes of getting stoned, some very, very creative ideas have come out. And I've held on to them and executed them.

So in that sense, you think it has a positive effect on your work?

Oh, absolutely. It's my life. It's the way I live my life. The way I live my life is the only thing that has any effect on my work.

When did you stop drinking heavily?

About three years ago, heavily. And it's been about a year and a half that I haven't had any alcohol at all.

Doctor's orders?

Yeah, it's my heart. My heart is enlarged. So I just stopped. I still smoke grass when I can. That's medically advisable. And I sometimes turn around, spin around the room, to make myself dizzy. Try to change my temperature.

Was it painful to stop?

No, just boring. Not painful at all.

It's become a cliché, but do you feel you're an addictive personality?

Well, I think I have an excessive personality. I don't know if I'm addictive. I'm excessive. All this stuff — the gambling, sex, drinking, drugs — all this has been put in some kind of category that these are all the bad things.

Well, let's correct that.

It's bullshit. Because they are not bad things. They can hurt people, but so can obesity. How you conduct your life and how you conduct your art are really your own choices. And these things I say about what I do, I'm telling you what I find from experience works for me and what doesn't work for me. That doesn't mean it's applicable for other artists. Or it's what Alan Rudolph does or David Lynch does. I don't much care what they do.

No, David collects body parts in fluid.

Well, okay. [Laughs] Whatever it is, is fine, as long as he's not collecting my fluid!

Does Hollywood feel like it's changed in twenty years?

The power has been taken away from

more people, and the bottom line has become more strongly the power. I don't know anybody who runs any of these studios who could make a decision about what to put their money into and what not to that will follow their instincts.

Their avaricious instincts or their artistic instincts?

Their artistic instincts. Just to have a feeling, a hunch. Nobody follows hunches anymore — it's all marketing, it's market research. And it works. They've figured out how to make a bad picture like *Robin Hood*, go out there and generate big grosses by the way they market it, the kind of cartoon that it is. It's just terrible what we do. It's all based on money.

Hasn't it always been that way? Isn't that the American way?

It's become that way. It's become so refined at this point that there's no room for any mistakes. The only good things that ever come out are in the mistakes. Every film that was a breakthrough film — that changed the way films are made and changed the way audiences see films — has been an accident. *Easy Rider*, *M*A*S*H*, *Five Easy Pieces* — those are pictures that should not have succeeded. They were never backed. And you can probably name twenty-five other ones that were real benchmarks that changed things. The point is that different kinds of things do get made and will continue to get made, but now totally by mistake.

Were the old moguls better than the new moguls?

Absolutely. Because the old moguls had control, and they had passion, and they had hate. They could say: "I'm gonna burn this goddamn picture! This actor is never going to work again! That actor can go to another studio!" And then the other studio would make a big hit. It wasn't computerized. And now it is. You don't know now who is the boss at Columbia. Really. You don't know, and nobody can find out. It's a Japanese corporation. And maybe there isn't any person anymore that is the boss.

So maybe the *Old Boy* network, in comparison, doesn't look as bad now as it did at the time?

No, there was some humanism in it. They may not have made the pictures that you and I would have liked, but they made the pictures that they liked — and that's something.

You've spoken about trying to "train an audience," trying to bring an audience along with you —

Absolutely. This work doesn't exist unless an audience is half of it. If they come there and sit in front of their sets or in the theater, and they don't go halfway with you and take the material in

front of them and process it through their own history, it's meaningless. Ideally, I want someone to walk out after one of my pictures and say, "I don't have any idea what that was about, but it was right."

What fascinates you most about people?

The absolute differences between each individual and yet the sameness of them. I think of ants. I stand and see a little ant-hill and a line of ants. And that's people. And every once in a while, you see one little ant that gets out of line — you see one of them out there, about an inch from the main line. In the main line these guys are crawling on top of one another, and some of them are hooking rides, maybe. And the one that goes out by himself, usually he gets stepped on. They don't get out very far. But that's Picasso and Einstein and Hitler. . . .

And the Altman ant?

The Altman ant is in the middle. Well, hopefully, I'm over to one of the edges of the mainstream.

But not too far out to feel someone's heel?

Well, I've never been out that far. If I get out that far, I'll get stepped on.

How do you think of yourself?

I think pretty highly of myself, I know that each individual is the center of the entire universe. And everything else spins around them. So everything that has ever happened in my life, in my experience, spins around me. But I'm spinning around somebody else. And I think that all my children think about is me, and all my wife thinks about is me, and everything is based on me, and I'm absolutely incorrect about that. I'm the only one who only thinks about me.

Going back to Kansas City, what did growing up surrounded by women — your father was on the road a lot — do to you?

I don't have any idea. Except it was a fact. I suppose I became manipulative and comfortable with women and not threatened by them.

Why manipulative?

Well. [Pause] I think that's probably what people do like that. I'm sure I'm a much different person than if I had grown up with two brothers. It may not be discernible in my personality, but it certainly is discernible in my art. Not that as a specific thing, but anything that happened to me. Those are my basic chips. Nobody else can be me. And every experience that happens, every crossroads, the weather, whether it rained a certain night and didn't rain another night, somewhere is buried in this sphere that grows, that is you.

You've certainly been willing to give women more focus in your films than most directors of your generation.

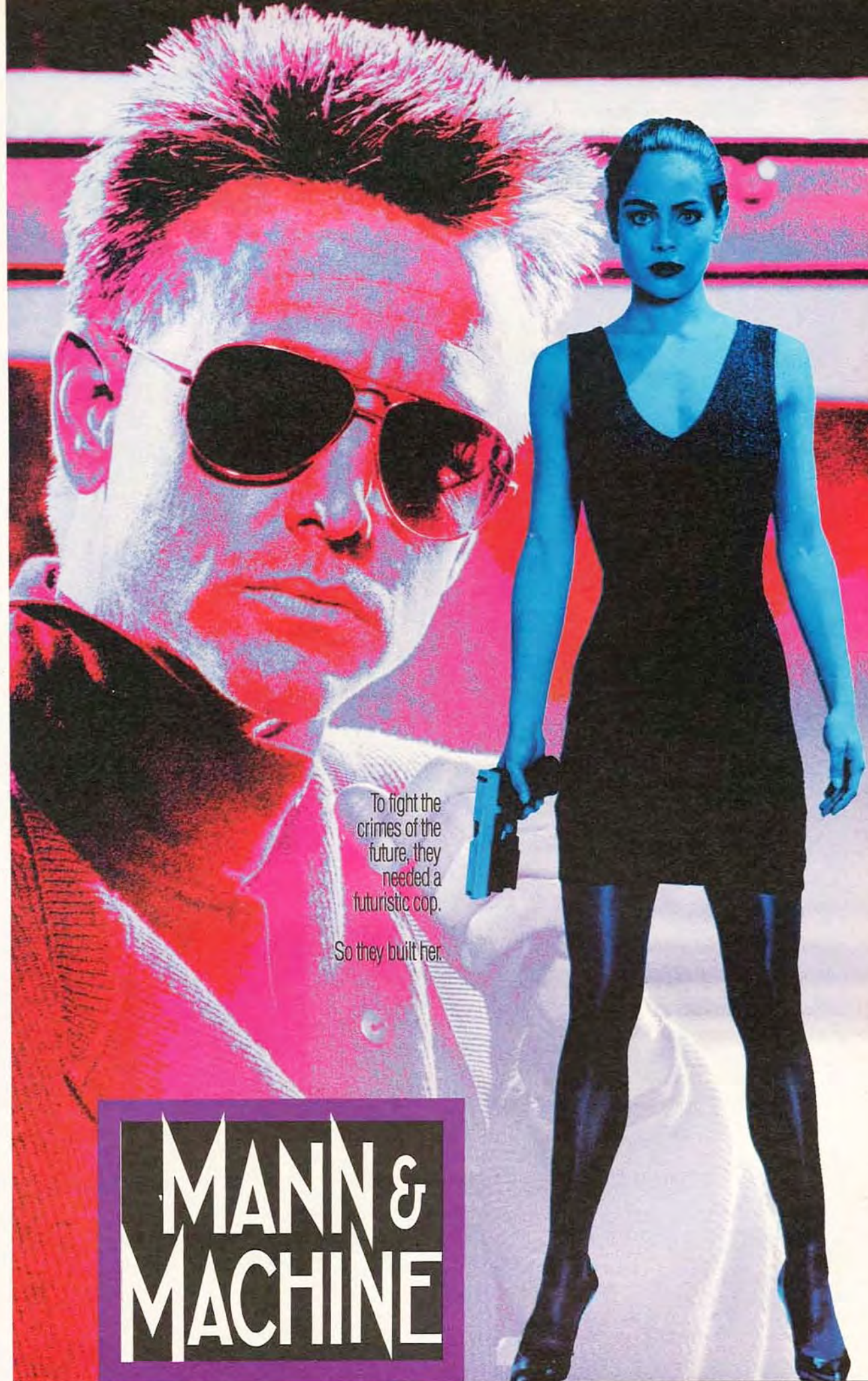
I have, but I've never done that consciously, and I don't know why. I don't have any idea.

Are you very much your father's son?

I don't know. I hope not.

Why not? Your father, B.C., was supposed to be a very grand character.

Well, you know, he was [Cont. on 86]



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★ ★ ★ 1/2

MACK DADDY

Sir Mix-A-Lot

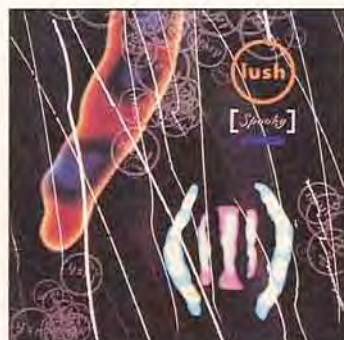
Rhyme Cartel/Def American

SIR MIX-A-LOT STATES HIS AGENDA right up front. He's a rock-solid conservative — everybody who fondly remembers the mid-Eighties breakthrough of rap say, "Ho!" With two crudely produced and derivative independent records under his belt, Mix-A-Lot has tapped the talents of onetime Def Jam mastermind and current metal maven Rick Rubin for his third — a shrewd and effective gambit. *Mack Daddy*, Sir Mix-A-Lot's major-label debut, exults in hormone-stoking funk beats and locker-room goof routines.

For openers, Rubin winds Mix-A-Lot's compelling false-arrest scenario ("One Time's Got No Case") around a Stevie Wonder clavinet figure (from "You Haven't Done Nothin'") propelled by a taut, bass-driven groove. "I fought with the brain and not the gat," Mix-A-Lot declares at the surprise ending of the track. He also thanks his lawyers.

The title tune of *Mack Daddy* suggests that, for Mix-A-Lot and his crew, posing like pimps and talking trash is all part of a night out with the guys. "A Rolls Royce full of big, black men in the suburbs mixing with the citizens" — even set to a throbbing, testosterone-pumped rhythm track, it sounds funny and true, not intimidating. Mix-A-Lot proves himself a nimble freestyle tongue wagger on "Lockjaw," though his strong suit lies in the randy come-ons and humorous storytelling of traditional hip-hop. "Baby Got Back" celebrates a section of the anatomy long revered by rappers ("beggin' for a piece of that bubble" is a new twist). Asserting the perilous nature of his hometown projects ("Seattle Ain't Bullshittin'") or the insidious effects of dope ("I'm Your New God"), Mix-A-Lot sounds altogether less assured. When he has to strain his narrow vocal range for impact, Mix-A-Lot puts a spin on his rhymes that becomes irritating. And while the National Rifle Association probably won't sample his anti-gun-control rant "No Holds Barred," it certainly could.

Mack Daddy bottles two timeless rock & roll qualities: gross irresponsibility and shameless macho. Consumed in moderate doses, this party album provides a bracing and abrasive tonic. — MARK COLEMAN



★ ★ ★

SPOOKY

Lush

4 AD/Reprise

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, BRITISH indie rock has been dominated by bands known as shoegazers (because they're shy onstage), purveying a style of music termed dream pop (because of its rapturous noise). While not a pioneer like My Bloody Valentine or A.R. Kane, Lush is one of the best bands from dream pop's second wave. Its noise is almost entirely guitar generated, but Lush isn't exactly a rock & roll experience. Instead of riffs, the effects-laden guitars exude a billowing haze that mingles with Miki Berenyi and Emma Anderson's pallid harmonies. On "Nothing Natural," only the surging, faintly ominous bass line guides you through the blizzard of sound, while "Superblast!" is a giddy rush of iridescent textures. Lush also excels at gentler songs, like "Covert" and "Monochrome," that fill the mind's eye with halcyon imagery.

At times, the loveliness of it all gets wearying. At its worst, Lush can be criminally insipid, as on twee lullabies like "For Love" and "Untogether." Another problem is that Lush is too enigmatic for its own good. Berenyi's demurely forlorn vocals are more just another pretty thread in the aural tapestry than an emotive force. When decipherable, the oblique lyrics hint at mild angst or blissful disorientation. You can find yourself longing for the group to smash through the lustrous sheen of its sound (which owes a lot to producer Robin Guthrie of the Cocteau Twins) with some kind of explicit emotion. In Britain, *Spooky* saw the members of Lush transformed almost overnight from press darlings into pariahs; critics decreed that the dream popsters were too wispy and winsome to be relevant in the post-Nirvana order. While that's an overly harsh verdict for an album that offers much delight, it's probably true that Lush does need to open up and bleed. — SIMON REYNOLDS



★ ★ ★ ★

PIECES OF AFRICA

Kronos Quartet

Elektra Nonesuch

KRONOS QUARTET IS ROOTED IN the classical-quartet tradition, but its members look and sometimes sound more like escapees from the college-music circuit. Kronos has consistently and irreverently bridged musical styles ranging from jazz, rock and blues to folk and avant-garde music, creating, in effect, a challenging commentary on the different kinds of music available in our culture. Its efforts on earlier releases like *White Man Sleeps* (1987) and *Black Angels* (1990) have scrambled cultural codes, calling into question the ways in which musical genres are categorized.

Pieces of Africa, consisting of works written specifically for the quartet by African composers, continues Kronos's obliteration of boundaries. The album merges traditional African concepts of composition and time with the typically Western instruments found in the string quartet. The result is not merely novel or exotic but a fresh, real and unusual musical experience.

Instead of relying on the Western concept of harmonic tension and release, these pieces take shape through the development of motives, rhythm and timbre. Melodic lines, like those in "Ekitundu Ekisooka" ("First Movement," composed by Justinian Tamusuzza), may be drawn from scales that are atypical in the Western repertoire. The rhythmic layers in "Wawshishijay" ("Our Beginning," by Obo Addy) never compete but rather continually unfold and transform. The two violins, viola and cello combine with traditional African instruments such as the *mbira* (thumb piano) to create a gamut of compelling, sensual textures: the sinewy, fervent lines of "Escalay" ("Waterwheel," by Hamza El Din) or the rhythmic effusion of "Tilliboyo" ("Sunset," by Foday Musa Suso). This results in a sense of time that is both broad and immediate.

Kronos continues not only to perform contemporary music but to establish important directions for it. *Pieces of Africa* is at once a constructive critique and an album of quiet, deep and expansive joy. — SUSAN RICHARDSON

Altman

[Cont. from 77] a nice guy, but he was kind of an asshole.

How so? In what way was he an asshole?

He was kind of... I don't know... He lived in a very narrow, very small world.

He was sort of a supersalesman and a hustler. You've described yourself as having kind of turned into a con man and a hustler.

Well, I can occasionally detect those traits in me. [Pause] I find I'm shaving his face occasionally.

If we were in for a session of Chinese-Communist self-criticism, what would you say are your greatest weaknesses?

Probably egocentrism. I'm probably self-oriented. I probably misrepresent myself. I'm probably one of those people that think I know more than I actually do. All the normal things.

As a director, is it fair to say you have a problem with endings or that endings are a problem for you?

But that's not a problem, that's a blessing.

Let's put the word "problem" in quotes.

I don't do satisfactory endings because I don't think anything stops. The only ending I know about is death.

The ultimate "cut."

Death is, to me, the only ending. People say I don't know how to do an ending. I probably don't know how to do that well. I probably would like a good ending if it were presented to me — and I'd probably reject it.

Which is why *Tanner '88*, having looked at all six hours of it, feels kind of perfect to me — in that it goes on, and it goes on, and it goes on, and that's Altman, that's what you dig, really.

Yeah. That's right. That's what I'm showing. There aren't any endings.

The endless serial is a perfect form for you.

Yeah, it is. I've been trying to do this for forty years. I remember when I read *Tales of the South Pacific*, it was before the musical was ever done, I went crazy. I wanted to make a ten-hour picture of that. Five 2-hour films. You could look at them in any order. There would be no Part I. It would just meld together. The form of *Nashville*, the form of *L.A. Short Cuts* [as yet unfilmed], everything that I ever put together myself usually has that form, where the edges of different stories touch. And I would love to do a never-ending story, a continual serial. And I'll do it. If someone gives me the television wherewithal to do it. I would probably rather do something for television than I would for film.

What did you learn doing *Tanner '88*? You said it was the "newest" work you had done.

Well, I think it was the most creative work that I've done. I think I broke the most ground on *Tanner*.

In what sense?

In that style of crossing [Cont. on 94]

Citizen GE

[Cont. from 93] gations to law and society in a more reliable manner? And why is it that corporations, while regularly abusing public law and trust, are allowed to continue functioning as the preeminent citizens in American politics?

The two questions could be answered together by developing meaningful sanctions and penalties that will punish lawless corporations in the only language that an "artificial legal person" understands: profit and loss. The corporation must know that repeated offenses put it at risk of losing not only real value – the financial privileges of government contracts or tax preferences – but also the political privileges of appearing in the public arena as an advocate for itself and others.

The new sentencing guidelines, now in the final stages of review, represent only a modest step toward this kind of discipline. Fines and other penalties will be stiffened. In extreme circumstances courts may be able to impose terms of probation on corporate managements, a kind of conservatorship that monitors corrective action. California has enacted tough new standards for corporate criminal liability, partly in frustration with the federal government's weak enforcement of environmental and occupational safety laws.

Criminal prosecution of companies, though somewhat increased in recent years, is still quite rare – especially for major corporations that have the capacity to negotiate away their legal troubles. In 1988, for example, only 475 companies were convicted of violating federal criminal statutes – and eighty-five percent of them were small businesses (fewer than fifty employees and sales of less than \$1 million). Criminal prosecution of individuals can be therapeutic, especially in pollution cases, but sending managers to jail will not necessarily change the behavior of a recidivist corporation.

In the interest of equity, law and legal doctrine could fashion methods for altering corporate behavior: sanctions that reverse the incentives inside corporations by raising the bottom-line cost of lawlessness. Any company, to be sure, may on rare occasions be unwittingly implicated in an offense. For the repeat offender, however, a system of graduated penalties ought to extract real losses. Because it is not a real person, a corporation cannot be sent to prison, but its freedom as an enterprise could be restricted in other ways.

A recidivist, as Ralph Nader has proposed, should be barred for a time from selling to the government – banishment prescribed in law, not by a forgiving Pentagon. To avoid economic disruption, a company could be required to divest a subsidiary that has a record of defrauding the government or committing other of-

fenses. The forced sale of a division would cost the offending company dearly, but the factories would continue to operate under new owners. Like ordinary criminals, a corporation with a rap sheet ought to be ineligible to hold broadcasting licenses or other lucrative franchises. GE's growing media empire, for instance, would be put at risk by its continued cheating of the Pentagon.

Corporations might also forfeit their political rights, just as citizens do. A convicted company, for instance, could be prohibited from funding candidates or lobbying Congress directly or appearing before regulatory hearings or pressuring regulators in private. The suspension of corporate political rights would be equivalent to what happens to people when they are convicted. Corporate ex-convicts would have to learn how to live for a time without their Washington lobbyists.

This basic principle of accountability could be incorporated in many different kinds of statutes – especially the tax code – with evidentiary thresholds less demanding than those of criminal law. A company that accumulates repeated civil offenses against the environment or public health could be treated in law as an antisocial organization that has lost its usual privileges. The tax code, for instance, provides a long list of allowances, exceptions and preferences that feed tens of billions into corporate balance sheets. When Congress revises the tax code, it could stipulate that no corporation will be eligible for such benefits if it has violated laws and regulations during preceding years.

This might be harsh medicine. But why should law-abiding taxpayers subsidize the lawless ones? The ethical choices facing managers would be set in a new framework that makes it easier for them to do the right thing – protecting the company's profits by obeying the law. Why should companies get tax credits for their R&D when they are simultaneously shrinking their American work force? Why should government pay for cleaning up problems generated by employers that failed to observe minimal obligations to their workers and communities?

As it stands now, in the name of fostering prosperity, Americans are helping to finance enterprises that do not reciprocate their loyalty. The debate about corporate power and democracy has to come from the people. Neither the media nor political parties nor, above all, the corporations that dominate our politics are going to face these questions. If the people do not raise these questions, they will not be raised at all.

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Altman

[Cont. from 86] reality with fiction. In other words, I made up seven or eight characters – or Garry Trudeau and me, we made up these characters – then we took 'em out and put them into real situations, and very quickly those people became very real. *The Player* could not have existed if I had not done *Tanner*.

How so?

Well, I think the whole idea of using real people – the way I use real celebrities and people – in connection with my fiction. And we did this in two ways: Julia Roberts plays herself, but she's playing Julia Roberts acting another character. And I never told anybody what to do. I didn't tell *anybody* what to do. I would never tell anybody what to do. I said, I have not the right to tell you what to do because you are not being paid as an actor, you have been asked to perform as yourself – to be yourself. How can I tell you how to be yourself? Only you can tell you, and it's probably the hardest part you've ever had to play. It was never my intention to try to write anything for them.

You're willing to give up a lot of control that other directors hold on to very tightly.

Oh, yeah, I insist on it. But then, I don't know if that's giving up control. I mean, I'm still filling the space. I'm letting them color the space. And I'm making my adjustments according to what happens.

And that, in itself, gives you pleasure?

Yeah. Because I'm doing something different. It's inescapable that everything you see of mine is going to have my vague shape, like a cookie-cutter, a gingerbread man, because all the material has been pushed through me. So it's going to have a vague resemblance.

Slightly rotund and fuzzy on the edges?

More than likely. It will be recognizable as my shape. But I am not there telling you what my thoughts are or my political ideas are. You will feel what they are, but mainly I'm letting everybody present themselves the way they want to present themselves.

Which is why 'Nashville' could be Julie Nixon Eisenhower's favorite film –

Absolutely.

And which is why Nixon lovers as well as haters can really like 'Secret Honor'?

Absolutely. Absolutely.

And which is why people who love Hollywood can love 'The Player' and people who despise Hollywood can love 'The Player'?

Absolutely. Because I didn't take "angle shots" at people, cheap shots. My only real diabolical move – in my closet I can say, "I got them" – is the agents. I took care of the agents in *The Player*, because there aren't any.

Although I'm not sure that someone who watched 'Tanner' who was a Republican –

and between you and Garry Trudeau, neither one of you is –

Oh, I couldn't have done it as well with a Republican candidate. But I don't think the Democratic candidates came off too well. You know why they didn't come off well? Because they represented themselves. And it's the same way all the actors in this picture don't necessarily come off in an aggrandized way, because they all played themselves. And I did that with a great deal of sympathy; I never tried to load the blocks on the thing. And, to me, I'm not making propaganda. I'm making a film. And the film is art. And I think art is truthful. But I think propaganda – whether it's positive or negative propaganda – is something that isn't true. But you're trying to make people think it's true. So I believe every dog should have his day. And I think that every time I see a character in any script I read or thing I'm gonna do, and I see this great guy, I think: Let's find all the bad things about him and show them. Or vice versa. A guy who is so rotten – does that mean that he can't kiss his wife goodbye when he goes to catch the streetcar?

You're naturally a contrarian.

Yes, absolutely. Why don't you show the hero having fear? It's not serving a cause I think I should believe in.

When you did 'Fool for Love,' you said you didn't care if it was the worst film ever made, you were going to do it for the opportunity to work with Sam Shepard, on a play he wrote, and have him in it.

[Resigned] Yeah, I said that. The idea of me making a film with the author of a play and the author playing a part, to me, was irresistible. And because I was in such a catbird's seat. And I thought it would be fun.

Cheerfully perverse.

Yeah, perverse and fun. It turned out to be not much fun at all.

You and Shepard had a tough time.

No, I didn't have too tough a time, and he didn't have a tough time. Any tough times we had, we gave ourselves. But I didn't like him very much, and he, I'm sure, didn't like me. He just wasn't a very nice person during that time.

And that's why it was no fun?

Yeah. He wasn't nice. He was very self-oriented. Kim Basinger was just terrific, I'm crazy about her. And Sam, I think, is very, very good in that picture. As good as I wanted him to be.

How did he end up feeling about the picture?

Oh, he would never say. I'm sure he hated it. We'd show the dailies, and he could come in whenever he got up – we'd work all night, and we'd look at the dailies in the morning. He'd come in late in the afternoon, and we'd run the dailies for him, and he'd only look at the dailies that he was in. And of course, all the flashback stuff, all the storytelling illustrations that I did, he, to this day – he says he never saw the picture, and he probably hasn't – he

didn't know what I was doing, nor did he care, that I was showing something different than what the characters were telling. And that, to me, that time warp in that picture, is what made that film so good. I just liked the picture very much. But Sam just wasn't very likable.

What's 'The Player' about, to you?

It's a movie about itself. It's a movie of a movie that's about movies. It turns on itself; it's an essay. I'm sure if we took the ad and said, "An Essay About Hollywood," nobody would go see it. But to me, it's an essay, a comment; it's a comment on itself, of itself, by itself — which makes it as bad as it is and as good as it is. It's probably a "bad" film.

Why do you say that?

Because it's about bad films. So it's a bad film the way the street people will say, "That's bad!" Meaning — that's good. Because it's about all the worst parts of our culture, all the worst parts of this art. And if it succeeds, unfortunately, if it succeeds, it will succeed for all of the wrong reasons.

And those are?

All the things that you would assume I abhor are the reasons why it will succeed if it succeeds as a film. In other words, it is a dilemma. I have created a dilemma. If people really like this film, they'll like it for the wrong reason.

I want to know what you think that reason is.

They'll like it for the ride, rather than

the content. Most people will see it because of the surprises in it, the discovery of the actors, the stars, the celebrities. It's just a film about itself.

One of the rich things about it is the way it shows how desire is manipulated by film, in that the audience for 'The Player' cheers itself and feels above and laughs at the "happy ending" that is provided by the film within the film [we sneer at it because it's so ridiculous], while in the film itself, you deliver us —

Exactly the same thing! Not disguised, even thinly.

Which we take great pleasure in.

Which you enjoy. That's right. The target for this film is the people watching it. The bad guy in the film is the audience. The heavy is the audience. Not the studio executive, not the people that play the game, but the audience.

Do you think you're being critical or condescending to the audience?

I don't think I'm being condescending. I think I'm pretty much presenting it the way it is, I'm sorry to say. I'm showing them something they haven't seen before, but they won't recognize it as that. They will recognize the wrong thing. Because what they are seeing is a very, very well constructed piece of work.

So, is it just the guile of artifice that's the thrill for you in making this?

It's just taking truthfulness about situations and molding it, so that while criti-

cizing its content or its morality, you're at the same time embracing it, and it seems to be okay. The best thing about this film is that it seems to have a very long aftertaste. And different people start getting the essay.

It's postmodern in that it's self-referential and ironic —

And it turns into itself, and it turns on itself.

— but isn't that a cul-de-sac, eventually?

It's spherical. It's enveloped. It's neatly wrapped up, like a little bag of shit.

And it chases its tail.

And its tail becomes its head. The pointed, thin end of it fans out and comes back and says, "This is the movie you have just seen."

Why is the audience the enemy?

Because the audience is the one that demands those kinds of movies.

Well, as you sit now at the Olympian heights of your sixty-seven years —

[Laughs] At the bottom of the crevice!

— how does your future look from there?

Oh, I'll get some more films made. Hopefully, I'll keep working. I have no agenda other than "one after the other."

Let's do a morbid thing — you write your own obituary. That's perverse enough for Bob Altman. What's your contribution?

I don't know that. I just know that whatever it is, I won't be satisfied. It'll be wrong. Whatever they say will be the wrong thing. No matter how bad or how

good, it will be wrong. But that's okay. I don't really much care. I don't think any of it makes that much difference. It's all gone, there's nothing to keep anyway.

You think truth is whatever gets the loudest applause?

No, I don't. I think that's the truth — but it's the other side of the truth. You're quoting Alan Rudolph now [laughs].

I know, but your name is on the picture. Burt Lancaster as Ned Buntline in 'Buffalo Bill and the Indians' says, "Even the least seasoned trappers will tell you, if you don't know what you're after, you're better off staying home." The funny thing is, that's contrary to the way you make films: You never know what you're after, but yet you don't stay home.

Because I'm very much like Buffalo Bill. And Buntline invented Buffalo Bill. He was criticizing Buffalo Bill, who went out and didn't know what he was going after. He's like most of those sad characters. Buffalo Bill is very special, very special. My Buffalo Bill.

Why is Buffalo Bill sad, and why are you sad? That's my last question.

He's a sorry, he's a sad person, because he tried to . . . he kind of . . . he was made up and grew to believe his legend, knowing it wasn't true, and consequently, in escaping that truth, he just became worse and worse and worse. He's a sad character. But that's because he assisted in his legend — he gave interviews. And yet he knew the truth all the time. ■

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