

The Great American City

Nashville: a collection of images

I recently spent three days at the home of a friend in Hartford, Connecticut, a typical New England city, I suppose, if there is such a thing. I enjoyed the stay, but found that as a Southerner, I was a novelty. My friend's family and neighbors quizzed me about my homeland as though I were a visitor from Tibet or Upper Volta. "Don't people like butter in the South?" I was asked after requesting dry toast for breakfast. "I'll bet they don't have places like this in Tennessee," another native Hartfordite commented as we drove through a particularly pleasant area in the Berkshire Mountains (which, I should add with my own regional bias, hardly rival the Smokies in beauty). They do, I replied, but the view is usually obstructed by a continuous string of '57 Chevys mounted on blocks alongside the road.

The trip confirmed my suspicion that many people in the United States see the South as an aberrated appendage rather than an intergrated part of the nation. To them it is a foreign region, a curio country where strange people speak an unknown language, eat grits and fried chicken, wear overalls, and spend the day sitting on the back porch with guitar and fiddle, pickin' and grinnin'.

So when I first went to see Robert Altman's new movie

Nashville in New York, I expected it to have the same incredulous tone usually found in travelogues. "It's hard to believe that people actually do these things, but they do," the film would tell me as I watched the antics of characters all resembling either Minnie Pearl or Junior Samples. After all, Nashville is undoubtedly the capital—the apotheosis—of

cinema

by Alan Murray
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Nashville

Directed by Robert Altman. Produced by Paramount.

this cryptic kingdom which my New England friends mysteriously refer to as "The South."

Fortunately, I was wrong. Altman's *Nashville* is not a journey into the unusual, but a study of those things which are most fundamentally American. And his characters are not comic exaggerations; they are frighteningly tangible people. *Nashville* comes alive, not just an idiosyncratic Southern capital, but as, in Altman's own words, a metaphor for the entire country.

In Hartford they are, I am sure, skeptical about Altman's choice of Nashville as the Great American City. "Why not Boston," they ask, "or Schenectady, or, for that matter, the Insurance Capital itself?" But, as Howard K. Smith announces to the world in *Nashville*, Tennessee has sent its electoral votes to the winning presidential candidate in every election but one over the past 45 years. Connecticut can hardly claim the same. Country music king Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) is apparently more in tune with America than my New England friends suspect when he sings, "We must be doing something right to last 200 years."

In formulating this American metaphor, Altman by no means ignores Nashville's idiosyncracies. From the opening credits, which are fashioned after a K-Tel Country Hits record advertisement, to the closing scene, where hundreds of locals sing "It don't worry me" in front of the city's pretentious imitation of Athens' Parthenon, everything is delectably Nashvillean. But Altman keeps the peculiarities in perspective: significant accomplishment in an industry that is almost universally prone to exaggeration. The quirks do not dominate, they merely provide a delightful trimming. As one New York critic noted, Altman views the city not as an outsider looking in, but as one who has lived his entire life in Nashville. He treats each scene, and each of his principal actors, with exquisite sensitivity and marvellous humour, and the result is a collection of truly beautiful, accurate, unexaggerated film images.

But, alas, a collection of images doth not a movie make. The images, however beautiful individually, must hold together. The fact that all occur in the same city is hardly a satisfactory cement. Nor does the fact that each of the 22 principal characters has, at some point in the film, some sort of contact with each of the others, provide sufficient unity: in many cases this contact is no more engaging or significant than a

coincidental brushing of pant legs in a crowded hallway. There are too many disconnected plots, lacking any significant unifying theme. Too many ends hang loose... Why, for instance, does the young run-away with the guitar case, a relatively minor character, shoot country queen Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley)? The act is not only totally unsuspected, but also totally unsubstantiated by anything we know about the character from the early parts of the movie.

The more fanatic Altman fans answer my query with another unanswerable question: "Why did Arthur Bremer shoot George Wallace?" The counter-example, however, is irrelevant. As many people have said before, apparently unheeded by Altman and his fans, art is not real life. The world can afford to let ends dangle, but art's responsibility is to tie up these loose ends. A work of art must be self-contained; it must embody a complete universe. As art, *Nashville* is a failure.

But I cringe as I write that last line, for even though *Nashville* ultimately fails, it is a breathtaking piece of film. Each scene is moving as well as entertaining, and the two dozen country songs, most of which were written by the actors themselves, complement the action perfectly.

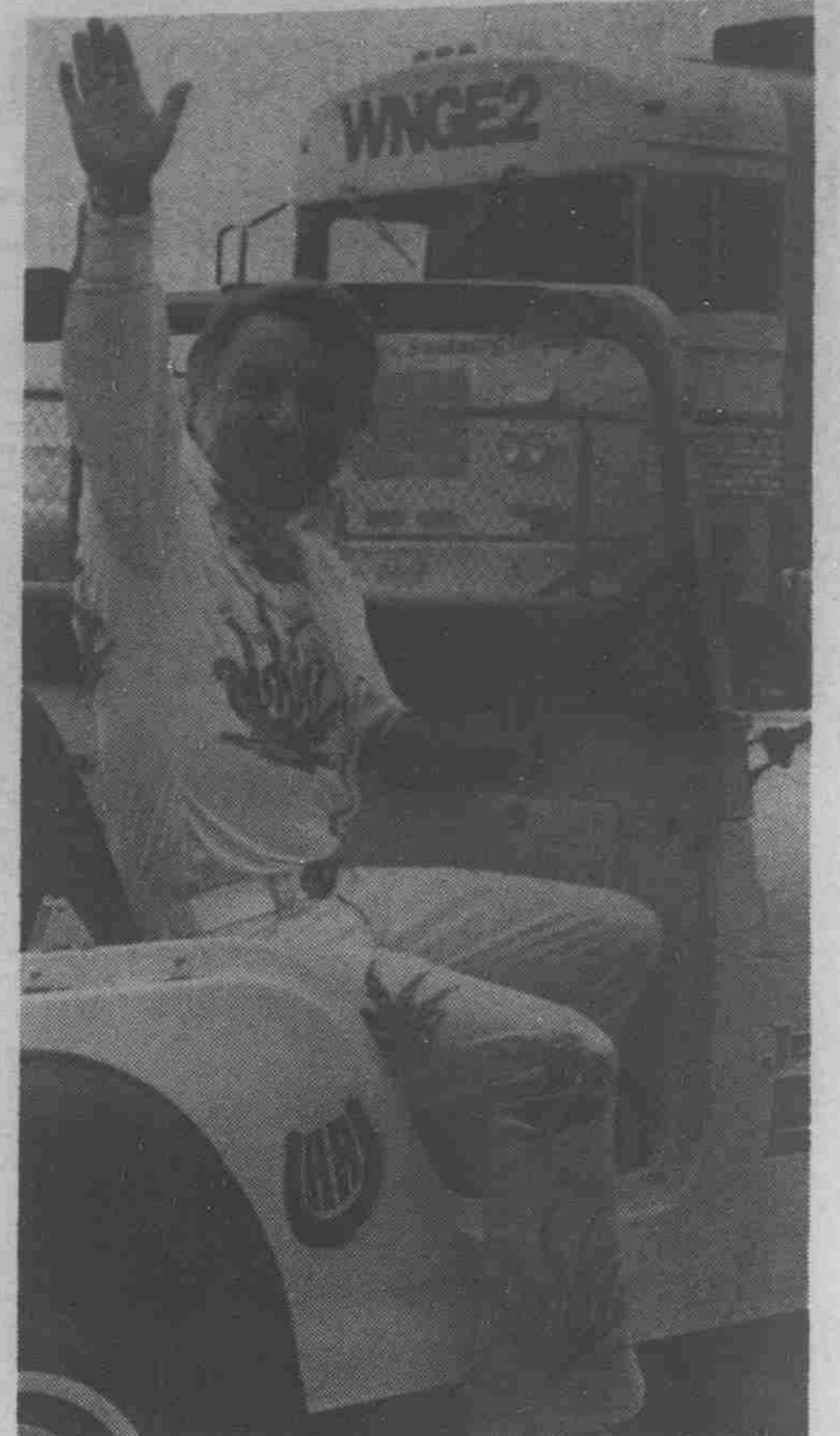
Big names are conspicuously absent from the cast (due, partly, to the demands of a budget approximately one fifth the size of those given to such double disasters as *Earthquake* and *The Towering Inferno*), but the movie gains far more than it loses from this economy. The best performance in the film is given by a screen debutante, Ronee Blakley, who plays Barbara Jean, the dazzling star of Nashville music. Blakley wrote most of her own songs, and also completely rewrote a scene in which she suffers a nervous breakdown on stage in front of thousands of unsympathetic fans.

The script originally called for her to faint, but Barbara Jean had already fainted once in the film, and Blakley thought the repetition might be ineffective. She stayed up the night before the filming of the scene and wrote her own soliloquy in which, instead of fainting, she regresses into a series of jumbled anecdotes about her childhood and is eventually led off the stage, still talking, by her distraught husband. Altman filmed it as she wrote it, and the result is the most poignant moment in the movie.

Altman gave all his actors similar freedom to interpret their characters. It is this democracy, apparently, that enticed them to work for him at such low pay. They obviously made the best of the situation: they are all totally convincing.

Nashville establishes Altman's genius as a director, as a creator of beautiful images with a perfect unity of sound and scene, and most of all as an empathetic imitator of the atmosphere and tone of an actual place. Is it, perhaps, too much to ask that he also be able to create a coherent and significant storyline? Many critics would argue that all of these qualities have not been fully integrated in an American film since Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, and Welles had a definite advantage in that he was dealing with a single character. Perhaps both the imagistic and literary demands of a unified film are too much for one director.

These questions are left to future movie-makers. In the meantime, go see *Nashville*, if for no other reason than to see a beautiful bit of Americana, southern-style.



Country music king Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) waves to fans: "We must be doing something right to last 200 years."



Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley), verging on a nervous breakdown, tells stories from her childhood to an unsympathetic audience. Blakley, a screen debutante, wrote this scene, as well as most of the songs she performs.

Seven theatres to open

Seven new movie theaters will open in the Chapel Hill area this fall.

Now under construction in Chapel Hill's NCNB Plaza, the triple theater Ram Cinema will premiere with "Give 'Em Hell Harry" on Sept. 19.

Also, Carroll's Cinema, a four theater complex at Durham's new South Square Mall, plans to roll its first reels sometime in November.

Recycle The Tar Heel

A Whole Lot of Bookshops...

The Bargain Bazaar!

One of the our most popular "shops," where the eagle-of-eye can pick up a crisp new copy of a hard-cover book (lots of picturebooks, too, as well as an occasional recent best-seller) at a handsome savings over the original price (most titles cut to half, many even lower!) Fresh titles are added often, watch for 'em.

The Paperback Gallery!

Thousands and thousands of titles, mostly reprints, most at merciful low prices. Many new titles now appear only in paperback editions, including quite a batch of color-packed volumes on everything from building your own cabin to eating great food to needlework and more. You'll find lots of serendipitous surprises up on the second floor!

The Children's Bookshop!

"You have to be crazy to stock thousands of children's books," they said. "They'll never sell." Our customers must be pretty odd, all right. They love this area of the shop as much as we do—whether for just reliving a bit of their youth or for picking out special treats for that special young'un. All the old and the modern classics, plus the pick of the new crop! Enjoy!

The Old Fashioned Bookshop

Somehow, away back then, it was decided that an honest-to-goodness bookshop ought to offer a large general stock of both new titles and as much back-stock as it could cram in, should have a staff of knowledgeable, helpful folks, and should give real service—in helping select a book, giftwrapping it (for free), ordering up books not in stock (at no extra charge) and in staying open days, nights, weekends, bad weather and good.

We like to think we're about the best around at fulfilling these obligations, and we will be delighted if, should you spot a flaw here or there, you would let us know. We do miss a title now and then, or take on a dud, but we also do our best to earn and deserve your respect and your custom.

- Downtown Chapel Hill (next to the Varsity Theatre) and
- University Mall (on Estes Drive)

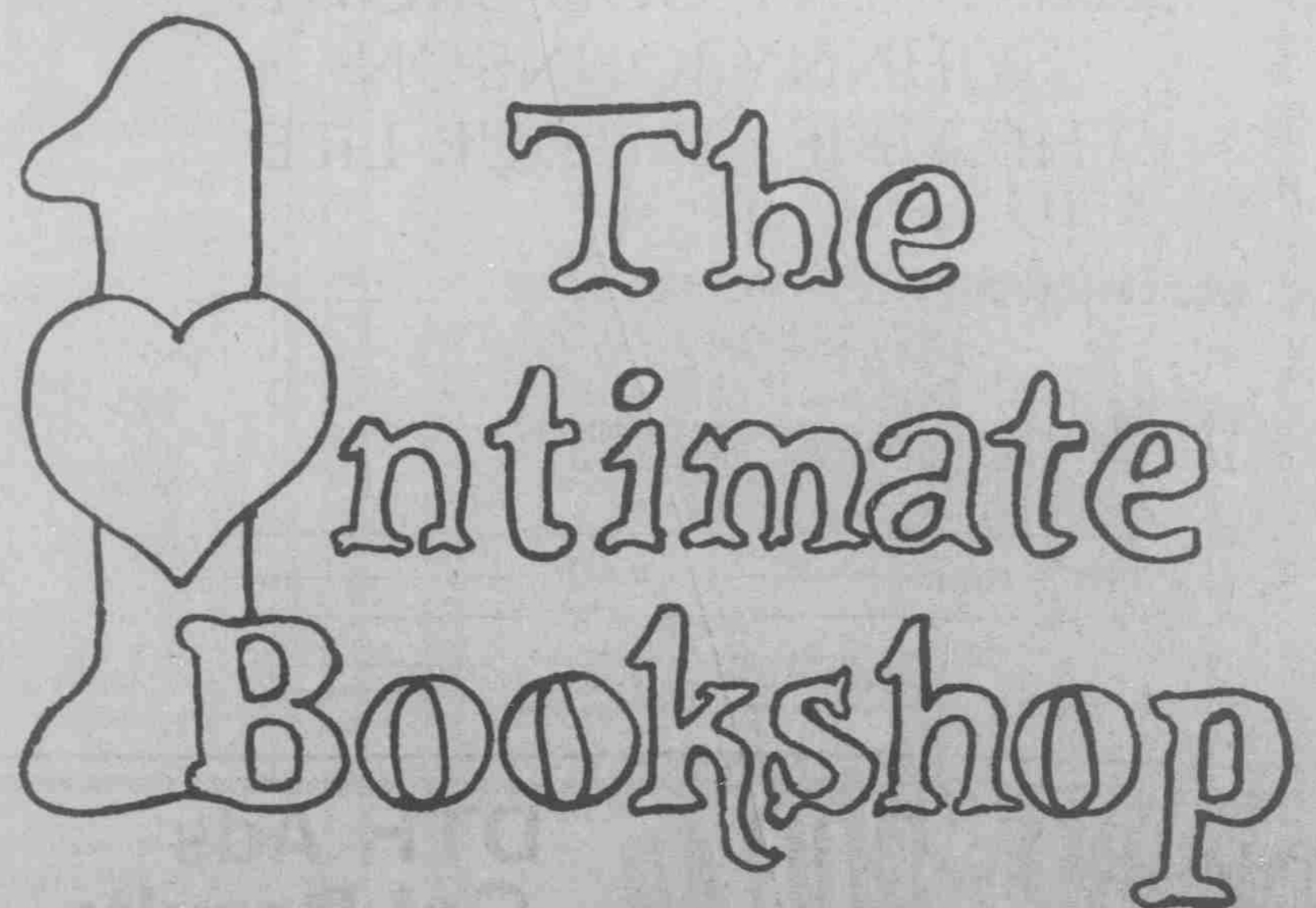
The Art Gallery

On the mezzanine of the shop at the Mall, you'll find a genuine Picasso or two, works by Miro and Chagall and others, including democratically-priced works by fine young artists; signed original prints and collectors' wildlife art, too. CUSTOM FRAMING—the area's biggest choice of frames and mattes, and expert and tasteful design to go with it.

Textbooks? We-ell-ll...

Old-timers will find that the textbook department downtown has given way to an expanded Children's Bookshop. But we do, still, stock course books for those faculty members who, for various reasons, prefer to order the books through the Intimate. Reference works, outlines, dictionaries and supplementary reading, too.

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