

# Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

## Robert Altman reminisces a jazz memory

For his 31st film, director Robert Altman revisits his birthplace, Kansas City, at the peak of its vitality in 1934.

Located at the crossroads of America, Kansas City thrived under the rule of city bosses and organized crime.

Gambling and prostitution were officially illegal, but freely available; and a new kind of jazz played 'round the clock in the raucous clubs around 18th and Vine.

While the rest of the country was mired in the Great Depression, Kansas City not only prospered, it swung.

The action in *Kansas City* occurs over the course of two days in 1934, on the eve of municipal elections.

The Democratic political machine of boss Tom Pendergast gears up to get out the votes, using violence when necessary. Virtuoso jazz musician match musical wits in all-night "cutting contests" at the Hey Hey Club.

And scrappy Blondie O'Hara, portrayed by Jennifer Jason Leigh, simulating the tough-talking broads of her silver screen idol, Jean Harlow, kidnaps wealthy Carolyn Stilton (Miranda Richardson), the laudanum-addicted wife of an advisor to President Roosevelt.

Blondie's plan is to swap Carolyn for her small-time thief husband Johnny O'Hara (Dermot Mulroney), who has been captured by big-time

gangster, killer and club-owner Seldom Seen (Harry Belafonte). Johnny has affronted Seldom by robbing one of the kingpin's favorite gambling customers; worse, he has infuriated Seldom by committing the crime in blackface. Johnny is being held in the basement of Seldom's Hey Club, where the music-loving gangster moves to the jam session going upstairs.

While Seldom considers just how to dispose of Johnny O'Hara, Blondie O'Hara carts her captive, the genteel, opiated Carolyn Stilton, all over Kansas City. One she tracks down Henry Stilton (Michael Murphy) and gives him the terms of his wife's ransom, Blondie must keep Carolyn out of sight.

Inseparable for two days, these two very different women begin to understand one another as they head towards an inevitable, transforming conclusion.

Says Leigh of Blondie's outlandish plan to swap the kidnap victims, "She thinks of it as a trade because she really doesn't live in the real world. Her whole life has been informed by the movies. With Blondie, everything is a 'you're with me, you're against me' kind of thing."

Altman gives histake on Blondie's devotion to Johnny, "Her fascination for him is almost a sickness."

Kansas City was a great town for

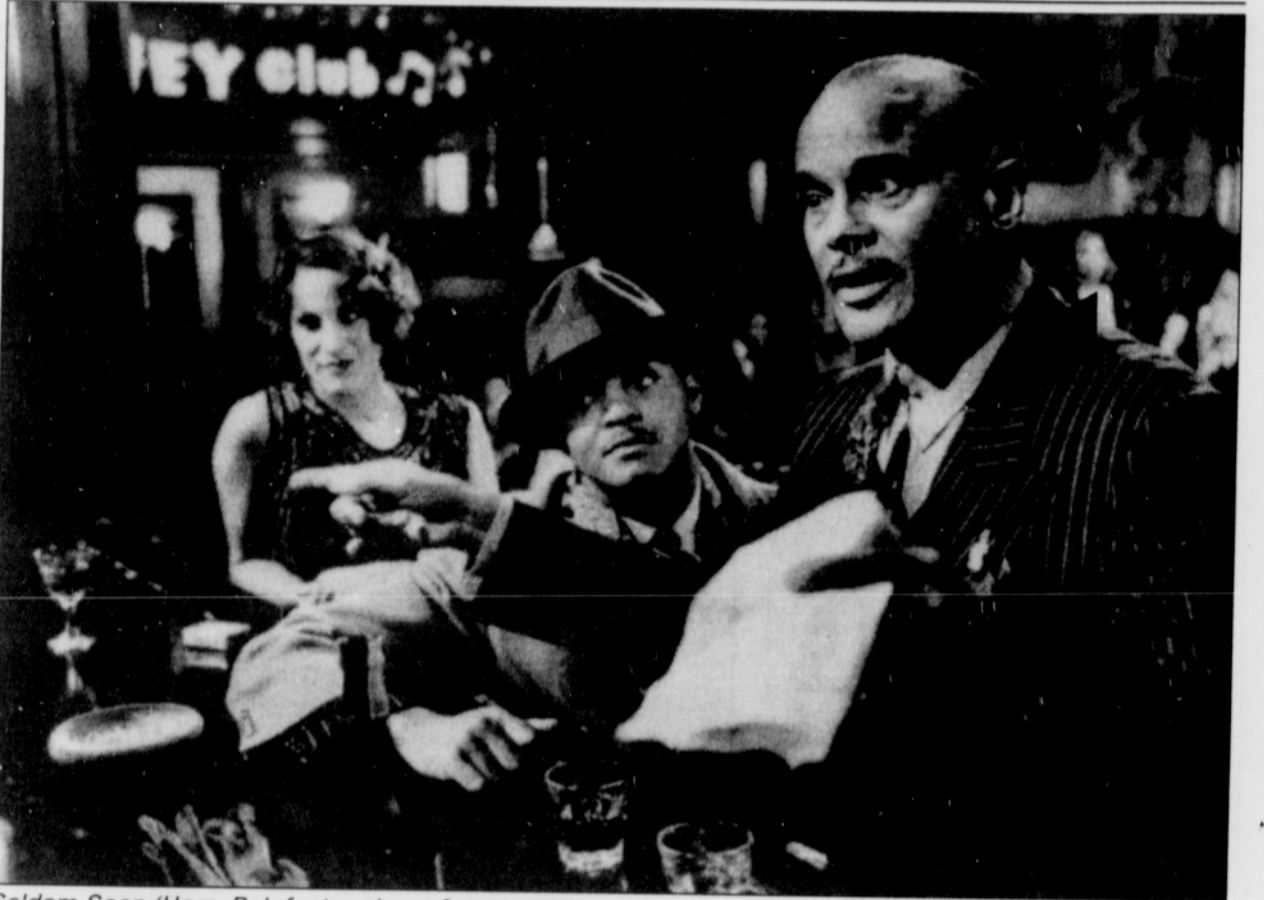
music, with plenty of clubs and a flourishing red light district that paid musicians well. Altman's first exposure to jazz came when he was a child. "I had a black maid, Glendora. When I was eleven, Glendora sat me down in front of the radio and said, 'Now, listen to this. This is the best music there is.' It was Duke Ellington playing 'Solitude.' I remember every note of it." By the time he was fifteen, Altman was frequenting the city's jazz clubs.

Altman describes the milieu, "The jazz clubs weren't segregated, they sold drinks to anyone anytime. White people could go there, but they didn't very often. Movie theatres were a different story; black people had to sit in the balcony, whereas white people could go anywhere they wanted. In Kansas City they often boasted about not being segregated, but Missouri was a Southern state like the others. The attitude was paternalistic, something like, 'Here, we treat our Negroes real well.'"

*Kansas City* contrasts the emotions provoked by the film's dual kidnappings with the exhilarating jazz of the all-night jam sessions, while being surrounded by the beauty, violence and joy of a unique time in American history.

A cinematic riff on race, class, power and addiction, Altman calls *Kansas City* "a jazz memory."

"While the rest of the country was mired in the Great Depression, Kansas City not only prospered, it swung."



Seldom Seen (Harry Belafonte, above foreground) in "Kansas City," produced and directed by Robert Altman. Is it Belafonte's comeback? Photo by Eli Reed

## R.E.M. signs monster contract

Warner Bros. Records said Sunday it renewed its lucrative relationship with influential rock band R.E.M. by signing a contract reported as being the largest in music history.

Terms were not disclosed in the label's statement, but the Los Angeles Times reported it was worth \$80 million for five albums and included a \$10 million signing bonus.

The Athens, Ga.-based quartet has just delivered the last of the six albums covered by its existing pact with Warner Bros., and over the last two weeks had been courted by major labels, including DreamWorks SKG, Capitol Records and Sony Music, the paper reported.

The deal eclipses pop singer Janet

Jackson's estimated \$70 million contract with Virgin Records, signed in January.

"We are grateful that R.E.M. recognizes their home at Warner Bros. Records, here and around the world, where their work and they are loved and respected," Russ Thyret, chairman and chief executive officer of Warner Bros. Records, said in a statement.

"We enjoy our relationships with R.E.M. at every level and look forward to building on them in the years to come," he added.

The band told the company of its decision to remain in the fold by sending a telegram that read: "We've always said we'll only do this as long as

it's still fun, and right now it feels like we're just getting started, so let's keep going."

R.E.M. originally signed to Warner Bros. in 1988 after building a strong following with several releases on the now defunct IRS Records label.

Their next album, "New Adventures in Hi-Fi" is due out September 10. Their most recent album, "Monster", was released in 1994 and supported by a world tour.

R.E.M. was formed in the small college town of Athens, Ga., about 70 miles east of Atlanta, in 1980 by guitarist Peter Buck, now 39, singer Michael Stipe, 36, and bassist Mike Mills and drummer Bill Berry, both 37.

Since then, the band — still made up of the original four members — has sold more than 30 million albums and won four Grammy awards.

According to the Los Angeles Times, the contract also includes a \$20 million royalty advance on future sales of its Warner catalog.

The band is also guaranteed an estimated \$10 million advance per album and a top-tier 24 percent royalty for each record sold. As is standard practice, the cash advances will be deducted from royalty payments to the band.

The deal is important for Warner Bros., the largest record company in the U.S., which has been distracted by messy management restructuring over

the past few years.

Many artists were worried that the label, whose roster includes Eric Clapton, Green Day and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, would lose its reputation as a nurturing environment.

In order to help fend off concerns, the label has written big checks to keep influential acts happy.

It reportedly signed Neil Young, who sells a fraction of the albums that R.E.M. sell, to a \$25 million deal that included a \$5 million signing bonus.

An industry source told Reuters the contract was fairly priced. "Based on the kind of money that R.E.M. generates, Warner will certainly make their money back," he said.

But Thomas White, an artist rights

## Audience poll hit & miss

a picture as their first choice for each weekend. But a straw poll of marketing executives and researchers indicates widespread frustration that, despite a formidable database, the ability to predict a film's appeal isn't improving.

One recurring complaint is a lack of consistency: "Jack" opened on Aug. 9 to considerably less business than tracking had predicted. Con-

versely, "Striptease" opening last month drew much larger audiences than research had anticipated.

Film awareness studies, which are conducted by independent market research companies, generally ask a random sampling of Americans a series of specific questions: "What films are you aware of currently in theaters or about to be released?" "Based on everything you know about

film X, would you say you are definitely interested or definitely not interested in seeing it?" "What is your first choice among films playing this weekend?"

"First choice is increasingly important because of the volume of films in the marketplace," says New Line president of marketing and distribution Mitch Goldman.

"It can give you a pretty good idea

whether a picture's going to survive its first weekend. It can affect where you advertise and when you advertise. But you give you a pretty good idea whether a picture's going to survive its first weekend. It can affect where you advertise and when you advertise. But you should always remember that it's a guide, not a rule — and definitely not a foolproof system."

## Art at risk

Galleri 8 celebrates the A.C.L.U.'s Uncensored Month with an Uncensored Wall of art rejected by galleries due to its content, together with an audience response area. Also, Portland artist Diane Wastson shows new works called "Private Selves" and Canadian artist Robert Meister shows his new collection.

Summer Galleri hours are Thursdays & Fridays 2 pm-6pm Saturdays 12-4pm. For questions and reviews call 224-7876.

expert, said he thought the contract price was inflated. "These kinds of deals are hazardous to labels. It makes no real economic sense, except to maintain appearances and keep the name connected to the band," he said.

## Seniors, get set for expo

Seniors and their families can swing to the hits of a bygone era Saturday, September 7 as the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra takes the stage at the KeyBank Oregon Senior Expo.

The event will be held at the Oregon Convention Center in Portland.

The Dorsey Brothers, performing on the main stage at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., are possibly the most notable name from the Big Band era.

The 12-piece orchestra plays the music made famous by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, who had hits both together and while on their own from 1938.

In addition to the exhibits and entertainment, seniors may take in up the nine different seminars being held throughout the day including topics on computers, finance, health and more.

Highlights include "Fall Gardening Tip with Ed Hume," "Essential Grandparenting" by Dr. Lillian Carson, author of the book by the same name, "The ABC's of PC's," "Don't Get Hammered by a Contractor," presented by the Contractors Board and "Why Take a Bus When You Can Take the Supercoach," presented by America Tours.

## Mysterious women on the scene at the crimes



Carol O'Connell's *Killing Critics* (Putnam) begins with a discreet murder, but quickly connects with a much more brutal crime. As NYPD sergeant Kathleen Mallory probes into the murder she discovers that the ghosts of the past will not be still. And the formidable Kat Colorado, "the quintessential female P.I." (*Booklist*), comes to the aid of a childhood friend in Karen Kijewski's latest thriller, *Honky Tonk Kat* (Putnam), set against the backdrop of Nashville's country music scene. In the age of talk-show mania, and crazed paparazzi, it's hardly unusual to hear of a celebrity being harassed by an overzealous fan. But when superstar country entertainer Dakota Jones begins receiving threatening letters, then finds dead roses on her bed, she fears it's not the work or your run-of-the-mill kook. At Dakota's urging, Kat joins her friends tour to investigate the case.

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