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Author(s)	Molly Haskell Andrew Sarris Molly Haskell Andrew Sarris
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A Critics' Duet on 'Nashville'

Molly: "This is a Chaucerian musical whose Canterbury is Nashville, and it helps to have a feeling for country music." Andrew (dubious): "Well, why don't you review it, then?"

BY ANDREW SARRIS & MOLLY HASKELL

We decided, for reasons that will become apparent, that the most appropriate way to review "Nashville" was through a dialogue between the boss critic and his first stringer. May we also suggest that since a lot of the pleasure of "Nashville" lies in discovering it for yourself and watching how it comes out, you avoid reading this or any other reviews of the movie until you've seen it.

Prologue: I (Molly) go to a morning screening which Andrew cannot attend. I come out dazzled, stimulated, exhilarated by the sheer talent on display, and relieved that the film is

Continued on page 81

A Critics' Duet on 'Nashville'

Sarris & Haskell/

Continued from back page

not, as I'd been led to expect, a put-down of redneck America (bein' Southern, I'm sensitive to such slights) or an exploitation of the country music scene to make easy political why-we're-in-Vietnam parallels. There's a little of both, a line too directly drawn from Dallas to Nashville (of which more later), but these elements are strongly modified, even redeemed, by the music itself, the true star of the film. It is after all, a musical, a Chaucerian musical pilgrimage whose Canterbury is Nashville, I tell Andrew, and it helps to have a feeling for country music.

Andrew (dubious): Well, why don't you review it then?

Molly (delighted): Okay.

There is a subsequent evening screening which both of us attend. From the brilliant opening credits—in which magazine-cover pictures of each of the major performers is flashed on the screen while a caller, jamboree style, announces them—I can sense that the audience is not "with" the movie the way they were at the earlier screening. They don't laugh at the jokes or dig the music. I glance at El Exigente, normally a big laugher. Finally he laughs uproariously. It is at a song rendered by Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson), "the King of Country Music" in Robert Altman's vision of Nashville. The song—"For the Sake of the Children"—is so artfully sincere in its hypocrisy that it serves as a primer for the Puritanism of the Bible Belt. . . . The film ends. We leave quickly and furtively, talking of other things. Outside.

Andrew (nodding, impressed): That was really something when Barbara Harris started scat-singing at the end as if she'd been a country singer all her life. Who would have thought she had it in her? And all through the picture she's just moping around, a rag doll that suddenly comes to life. What a finish!

Molly: But didn't you love the beginning, the electrifying and savage scene in the recording studio: Haven Hamilton is sitting on his throne, encased in glass, his emasculated Ivy League son and his mistress sitting in attendance, while he records one of those righteously jingoistic ballads (called "200 Years," lyrics by Gibson himself!) which is so absurdly irresistible. Then suddenly he interrupts the spell he himself has so carefully cast, to lash out crudely and brutally at the pianist, "Frog" (Richard Baskin, who arranged and supervised the music for the entire film). To me, this establishes the whole power structure and pecking order of the film, the steely grip of this slimy, fascinating little tyrant who presides over the folks here at home, and fans out yonder of country and western.

'Andrew: "So many Altman movies end with a ritualized death, not a Peckinpah slaughter, but a very selective sacrifice." '

Andrew: I like the very beginning and I like the very end, but I find a lot of the middle very ordinary. People have been telling me for weeks that the movie is very "novelistic," and I think I know what they mean. It's all these characters lurking in the background of one shot and then suddenly lurching into the foreground of the next shot. But for me "novelistic" is not just network, but nuance too. Altman has given star billing to 24 performers, but he's cheating on at least half a dozen of them. Bert Remsen as Star, for example, is one of the Altman regulars, but all he does here is chase half-heartedly after Barbara Harris. Or Jeff Goldblum as the Tricycle Man. He's more a visual figure of style than a character. And when you think about the link-up to "Easy Rider" and the Kennedys and the fact that "Nashville" turns out to be part musical and part murder mystery, then a great many figures in the background turn out to be suspects in some impending violence. But I'm not knocking the movie itself, just some of its advance critiques. I hate to go out on a limb after only one viewing, but "Nashville" strikes me as Altman's best film, and the most exciting dramatic musical since "The Blue Angel." And, like you said, it's the music that puts it over.

Tricycle Man Goldbaum—more visual figure than character

Molly: I think that the power and the theme of the film lie in the fact that while some characters are more "major" than others, they are all subordinated to the music itself. It's like a river, running through the film, running through their life. They contribute to it, are united for a time, lose out, die out, but the music, as the last scene suggests, continues. It diminishes them, as death itself diminishes us, and ennobles them. And it's the people who live and breathe country music who are finally less ridiculous, less hollow, than the "sophisticates" who condescend to them: Michael Murphy's advance man and Geraldine Chaplin as the bleeding heart BBC reporter.

Andrew: I think Altman and his script-writer Joan Tewkesbury try to have it both ways with the condescending characters played by Michael Murphy and Geraldine Chaplin. On the one hand, these two characters give us a lot of information, a lot of exposition. They keep the plot moving. On the other hand, they're presented as cruel, brutal, supercilious outsiders, and so they become easy targets for the audience. Geraldine Chaplin's snobbish snoop is the most irritating character in the whole movie (though I think that Shelley Duvall's L. A. Joan runs a very close second, and gives country music groupies a bad name besides). Michael Murphy's political PR man is something else again. He plays very much the same kind of role he played in "McCabe and Mrs. Miller." As much as any member of Altman's stock company, Murphy represents the malignant system. Still, I can't help wondering if there isn't a little bit of Altman in Murphy, a little of the same sharpness and cruel candor. It strikes me also that so many Altman movies end with a kind of ritualized death, not a Peckinpah slaughter, but a very selective sacrifice. Think about it—"A Cold Day in the Park,"

Continued on next page

Films in Focus

Continued from preceding page

"Brewster McCloud," "McCabe and Mrs. Miller," "Images," "The Long Goodbye," "Thieves Like Us," and now "Nashville." It is certainly a pattern, and I suspect that it is more a religious pattern than a political pattern.

Molly: True, they are often innocents, idealists, and—here—a neurasthenic, exotically feminine country music princess (incarnated rather than "played" by Ronee Blakley, herself a singer), a white-clad Ophelia whose psychic disorder is expressed in those odd, uncoordinated hand gestures. The idea of ritualistic tragedy is explicitly fostered in the setting of the last scene, a plaster of Paris temple that has given Nashville the epithet of the "Athens of the South." There is the tragedy, and then the catharsis, as life, in the form of song, resumes. Then there is the huge shot of the American flag, imposing a political conclusion that overloads the ending, and seems unsubstantiated. Even seeing the film a second time, and realizing how carefully the 'assassination' has been prepared for in parallel cutting and dialogue and images of violence, it still does not seem inevitable, at least not on the level of national sociopathology. The assassinations that we have lived through are both too specific and too elusive to be appropriated in the nightmare vision of any one artist.

But the fatalism does seem apposite on the individual, or religious level. As Blakley—whose character is apparently loosely based on the real-life country singer, Loretta Lynn—sings a song of lost innocence (and, did you notice, the sun that shines on her is actually blocked momentarily by a cloud?) we feel not so much that America was a paradise, now corrupted, but that each of us must experience his own personal loss of innocence, as we "outgrow" the roots, the family, the "folk heritage" that spawned us.

'Molly: "All the characters are subordinated to the music. It diminishes them, as death diminishes us, it ennobles them."'

As to the cruelty, yes, it's there, but it's constantly held in check by compassion and a kind of awe, an awe which confers dignity. And the best scenes combine all these elements: Haven Hamilton's barbecue party; and the scene in which Keith Carradine sings "I'm Easy" and consummates an affair with Lily Tomlin's voluptuously sane and moving Nashville matron over the heads of the listeners in a cafe, among whom are three of his former bedmates.

Andrew: Lily Tomlin and Keith Carradine are the real heart of the picture, the oddest of odd couples that make it take off; she, all soul, he all heel, but somehow with the right chemistry to make his song-seduction, "I'm Easy," work with the same flirtatious frenzy as Marlene Dietrich's "I'm Falling in Love Again." Tomlin and Carradine are marvelous, of course, and multi-faceted as characters. It's Carradine who makes the one anti-Vietnam crack, and Tomlin who mentions "Easy Rider," but just when you think you have them typed, they uncover another layer of feeling. I liked Cristina Raines as Mary, the odd girl out in several triangles, but cool and loving at the same time. She and Tomlin help counterpoint Carradine in the "I'm Easy" scene, and turn a smoky cafe into an arena of yearning sexuality.

A few points in passing: Since this is Nashville rather than Memphis, the blacks don't figure too prominently, but Robert Doqui as the streetwise Detroiter named Wade and Timothy Brown as the church-bred Southern country singer set up an interesting and potentially explosive contrast between two types of black adjustment to a white world, one surly and unyielding, the other relaxed and resigned. The old cutaway cliche of montage in the musical actually works to Altman's advantage in "Nashville" since most of his characters are either performing or attending performances. It gets a bit strange after a while. There are very few real extras. Altman has created his own world and called it Nashville. In "California Split," Elliott Gould and George Segal were surrounded by nobodies. In "Nashville" every nobody is a potential somebody. Altman even drags in Elliott Gould and Julie Christie as the real-life celebrities we know as Elliott Gould and Julie Christie. But Karen Black is simply stunning—not as Karen Black, but as the bitchy country singer Connie White. And all around the movie people are the authentic country music people, and a bit of authentic country, and Altman seemingly suggesting that we are all in one form of showbiz or another, and that it all ends badly, but not without the hope of regeneration. A very visceral movie, and it works, and I can't figure out why anyone ever thought it could be in trouble.

I'll tell you what, Molly, I'll do a blurb on it.

Molly (the unfranchised freelancer, sighing): No, you go ahead and do the review.

Andrew (sensing discontent in the ranks): I have a better idea. We'll do it as a dialogue.

Molly (taking what she can get): Okay.

And so we did. But we have only scratched the surface. □

Caucasian Concert

"Kavkazi," a concert of Oriental music from the Soviet Caucasus performed on traditional instruments, will be presented Monday, June 9, at 7 p.m. at the Donnell Library, 20 West 53rd Street. The program includes stories, songs, instrumental music, and dance, and will feature Jeffrey Werbock on kamancha, David Hykes on tar, and Robert Tennenbaum on gabal. Admission is free.

New World Concert

The New World Consort will present a program of "Music of Medieval Jewry" on Tuesday, June 10, at 8 p.m. at St. Stephen's Church, 120 West 69th Street. Admission is $3.