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By BILL WYMAN

Many reviewers have commented already that Robert Altman's *Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* is a good movie created out of a bad play; there's a lot to be said for that feeling. The armchair Freudianism reeks; some rather turgid lines stick in the throats of one or another of the characters; it's hard to see how the playwright, Ed Graczyk, visualized on stage the skillful seques of time and mood Altman achieves on screen. But Altman, ever the *enfant terrible* of the American cinema, working on a single set with a small but strong ensemble of women, squeezes every ounce of worth out of the play and adds something more. The result is exquisite.

There's a strong argument to be

sand castles, that "the important thing is the *process* of making films." But *Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* avoids some of the weaknesses of other Altman films. It isn't crass, like *Buffalo Bill*; it isn't too far out, like *Images*; he doesn't feel obligated to hang the whole affair on a tragic or tragicomic ending as in *Nashville* or *A Wedding*, and *Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* is paced; it breathes easily, like the best of Truffaut. And, like the cluttered potpourri of the 5 & Dime itself, there's a nostalgic air of regret overshadowing even the vicious plot turns.

The nostalgia, of course, is right there; it's the 20-year reunion of the Disciples of James Dean, a 1955-vintage Texas fan club. Right outside of town is the unseen but ever-present ruins of Riatta, the mansion that ruled over Rock Hud-

Come Back to the 5 & Dime



Sandy Dennis — "holding it all together."



Cher — "left over from Sonny and Cher."

Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean

and Altman keeps it consistently on the screen — particularly one beautiful shot of her next to a hollow porcelain mask of the 20-year old screen hero. And in trademark Altman style, the camera is on her face again as other people speak.

Cher, surprisingly, is good. She still has some leftover vestiges from the Sonny and Cher Variety Hour present and (remember Carol Burnett in *A Wedding*) in the close-ups, but watch her in the back ground.

Karen Black gives the kind of performance that requires one to go back and reassess her earlier work. The cozy side-long glances from *Family Plot* are present here, but underneath is an almost pitiful long-

ding, there is such a concentration on achieving an overall feel that it can be said charitably a certain sacrifice was made in terms of consistency of message. The script of *Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* is at best a novelty and at worst an exploitation on the scale of *Beatlemania*, but underneath it all we find the message. Altman's subject is always America, and in the last scene of *Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, we see a classic Altman juxtaposition: Karen Black, who of all the Disciples was able to escape the Texas small town trap, takes her place next to Dennis and Cher to sing along to "Sincerely" in a mock McGuire Sisters routine.

But she does it gingerly, ambivalently, and we have to question why she would come back. It's a bittersweet view of America of the same sort we saw at the end of *Nashville* — was the shouting crowd a symbol of American crassness or indomitability? — and in *Three Women* in the Millie Lammoreaux character (remember the "dinner party" with pigs-in-a-blanket?) Altman can be devastating but he's so damn touching, so unfailingly humanistic, that he's like a moth that keeps battering itself against the intransigence and intolerance of America — it's no accident that all his heroes are misfits. And as the camera moves away from the three misfits singing "Sincerely," we get an echo of the disembodied voice rising out of the dusk in the last scene of *A Wedding*: "It's so sad when it's over."

made that *Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* is Altman's most measured, fully realized movie — at the very least, this film is one of the more worthy efforts to come down the pike in the last dozen years. Altman is one of but a handful of American directors — Coppola, for example, is another, though I'm beginning to have my doubts — that can make a solid claim to auteur status; he's sometimes enigmatic, sometimes innocently open, sometimes straightforward, sometimes irritatingly schizophrenic, but no one feels when seeing an Altman film that the result on the screen is the product of a consumer package wrapped up by a studio. There are, of course, dangers inherent in that approach — Altman has become somewhat notorious for his remark that making films is like making

Bittersweet view of America

son's half-million acres in *Giant*. The plot is interesting, even fun, but ultimately just too hard to swallow and not worth repeating here. There's a lot more emotion though — love, and hate, and just-below-the-surface sexual feelings — than I can remember in an Altman film. And the acting! — You've seen the ads; Sandy Dennis, Cher and Karen Black (Great, I had thought sarcastically, my three favorite actresses), but the actresses of *Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* are so adept, so moving, so heartwrenching in their prosaic surroundings that you kind of wish they could all be given one big academy award.

Sandy Dennis is the glue that holds it all together. She seems at first to be the same stammering, cringing wife of *The Out of Towners*, but as *Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* continues, it's evident that she has demons — demons that were half-hidden away until the reunion of the Disciples. Then she begins to snarl — and cringe, and weep and scream. Altman keeps the camera on her for extraordinary amounts of time; we watch her face twitch, her eyebrows rise, her lip curl. Then we concentrate on her eyes; and the crowd's feet lining them. She has all the parochialism and ignorance of small-town America wrapped up in her face.

ing by the now-sophisticate to reach back and become a part again of her hick beginnings.

Jimmy Dean, *Jimmy Dean* can only give ammunition, however, to the critics who consider Altman a master stylist but unforgivably weak on elements like form and content. The charge is somewhat unfair. I think, in light of his systematic blasting of any number of American film genres — the western in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, the gangsters in *Thieves Like Us*, the detectives in *The Long Goodbye*, the romance in *A Perfect Couple* — yet it's true that in his most prominent films, like *Nashville* and *A Wed-*