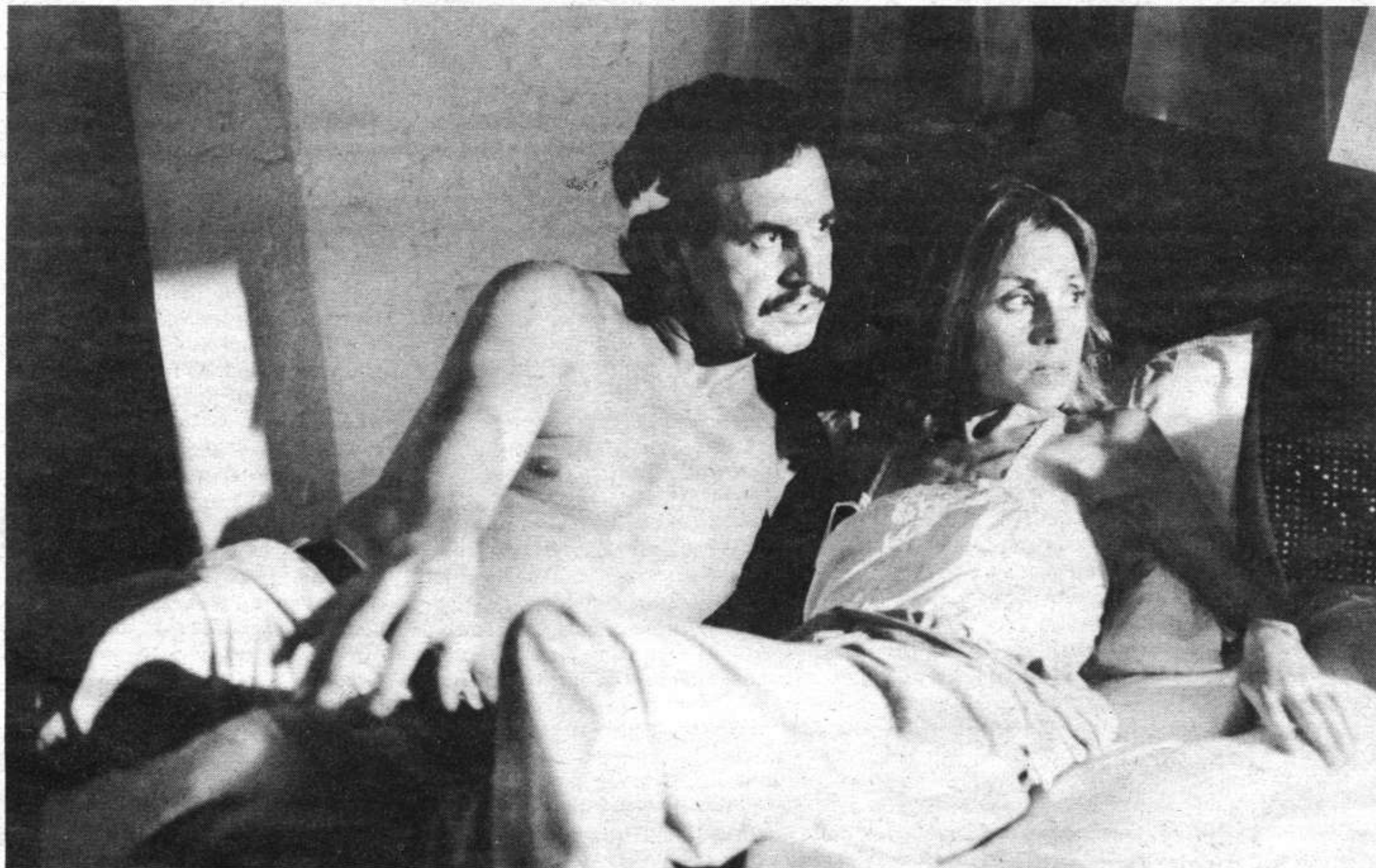


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Doesn't love always find a way in Hollywood? And so a "perfect couple" mated by a Betamax ends up eating olives at the Hollywood Bowl.



Paul Dooley and Marta Heflin in Altman's *A Perfect Couple*: a most felicitous surprise

## Love on a Betamax

Diane Jacobs

**A Perfect Couple**  
Beekman, Forum, Paramount,  
Gramercy

Every once in a while someone I think I know well surprises me with a gesture of which I'd never supposed them capable. That one can be similarly, pleasantly, caught off guard by an artist is confirmed this week by the arrival of *A Perfect Couple*, a latest and most unusual Robert Altman film. Altman is a director whose work I've followed enthusiastically — winning sometimes at ambitious mistakes like *Quintet*, but always applauding the doggedly personal vision that has brought us some of the most outstanding American films of this decade: *Brewster McCloud*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Nashville*, *Three Women*. Altman, who's made 14 unique films in nine years (and in almost as many genres) is clearly a versatile and prolific director; and yet, I didn't think he could bring off a romantic comedy. A satire at the expense of romance, yes. This he managed deftly, if not with much profundity, in *A Wedding*. But a romantic comedy demands warmth and an eagerness to suspend the cynic's disbelief that I would not have anticipated from the debunker of the Wild West (in *McCabe and Buffalo Bill and the Indians*), of the moral shamus (in *The Long Goodbye*), of the country music industry (in *Nashville*); from a filmmaker who has never wasted sympathy on anything as ephemeral as passion or romantic love.

*A Perfect Couple* is thus a most felicitous surprise. After the wintry (in look and spirit) *Quintet*, it's a breath of spring: slightly giddy and as benevolent in spirit as the similarly loose-ended *California Split*. It is not, I hasten to add, a perfect film or a conventional romance. Sometimes its romantic comedy conven-

tions and Altman's peculiar strain of absurdism don't mesh. There are no stars, and the lovers — a pale, almost waifish rock singer somewhere in her late 20s and an older, solid, undistinguished-looking businessman — have only a slight story line and a computer dating service to bring them together. Still, theirs is a buoyant romance of sorts, and along with Altman's usual satirical jabs at love in general and at American love in particular, *A Perfect Couple* displays bemused good humor and even a trace of wonder at it all.

Altman's third film in seven months, *A Perfect Couple* is as much about the mating of symphony and rock music as of boy and girl. The plot involves a skein of the sort of comedic incidents Preston Sturges might have strung together in the '40s; all set to music and punctuated with realistic details, Altman style. In *A Perfect Couple*, matches are made not in heaven or hell, but on a Betamax machine at a computer dating service called Great Expectations. Each prospective lover poses for a video interview and then rifles through the files of Great Expectations in search of a tape that pleases him or her.

Thus, Alex (Paul Dooley) — a lonely middle-aged scion of a Greek patriarchy — discovers Sheila (Marta Heflin) — a singer for a rock group called Keepin' 'Em Off the Streets. Alex's sister Eleousa (Belita Moreno) is cellist with the L.A. Symphony, and for a first date Alex escorts his computer date to hear Eleousa and her orchestra outside at the Hollywood Bowl. Quickly, formula events begin happening. It rains. The sun roof on Alex's Cadillac won't shut, and they get drenched. Sheila whimpers that she'll catch cold, and she does. She won't let Alex into her loft, but enjoys the good-night kiss at the door. They arrange a second date, and each thinks the other has stood him/her up.

As Altman's camera cuts from Keepin' 'Em

Off the Streets' rehearsals to Alex's father conducting a recorded symphony, from Sheila's omnipresent rootless friends to Alex's omnipresent traditional family, Alex and Sheila keep trying to find neutral territory. Competition rears its ugly head, and there's a nice bit where two suitors turn up at Sheila's loft with identical yellow roses (purchased from the same entrepreneur selling love on the corner). Alex is a determined courtier, but routine factors mitigate against a happy ending: Sheila's hip, he's straight. Sheila's used to the musician's life, where a pregnant lesbian is nothing to bat an eye at; Alex lives in the bosom of a xenophobic Old World family. As in a Sturges or Leo McCarey comedy, every time love is about to conquer circumstance, a new obstacle materializes. When Alex and Sheila try getting together at her place, the band comes home or the lesbians snuggle down next to them. When they opt for his bed, the family marches in *en masse* to declare her a whore. The matter seems hopeless, but the music feels hopeful. They love each other — doesn't love always find a way in Hollywood? And so a "perfect couple," mated by a Betamax, ends up eating olives at the Hollywood Bowl, enjoying a joint concert (staged for the movie) by the symphony and Keepin' 'Em Off the Streets.

Much of one's reaction to *A Perfect Couple* depends on how one responds to the music. I enjoyed both the symphony pieces, composed and conducted by Tom Pierson, and the pleasant, upbeat tunes rendered by Heather MacRae, Marta Heflin, and Keepin' 'Em Off the Streets regulars Ted Neeley and Tomi-Lee Bradley. Tom Pierson's original orchestral concerto and the energetic rock music make a nice contrast. Neither is so inspired that it overpowers the other — like the hero and heroine, they're both very likable.

Altman's casting is, as always, idiosyncratic, but here it's a bit uneven. Paul Dooley, who was wonderfully gruff as the truck driver father-of-the-bride in *A*

*Wedding*, is even better as the awkwardly passionate Alex, caught between legitimate feelings for his family and the yen for a life of his own. Belita Moreno is also quite extraordinary in the small role of Alex's musician sister. Marta Heflin gives a convincing but in no way outstanding performance as Sheila; she never evolves into anything more intriguing than a fragile woman in love, and I kept wishing Altman had selected one of the more idiosyncratic members of his gifted repertoire — Shelley Duvall or Sally Kellerman — for the role.

*A Perfect Couple* is an ambitious film that wants to blend a realistic texture and a modern absurdist tone in a paean to musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* and off-beat romantic comedies like *The Lady Eve*. It wants to be wry, exhilarating and touching, and frequently is. Although Altman insinuates a number of "real" events — notably, productions by the two musical groups — *A Perfect Couple* is no more realistic than *Brewster McCloud* or *Nashville*. We get the feeling that a particular conversation or meeting is authentic, but rarely does an Altman scene feel lifelike. On the contrary, he uses his ever-ambulatory camera to stress a Brechtian distance between art and life. His actors stammer or mumble, not so much to seem like "real" people as to dispel the cinematic magic — to let us know that we're spectators trying to distinguish what these actors have to say.

This sort of phenomenon works extremely well in *A Perfect Couple*. There's a particularly strong scene where the half-naked Sheila pulls herself together to flee from Alex's disapproving family. She mutters a lot and then screams, apparently extemporaneously, "You're the freaks!" The scene has an unrehearsed, almost a *verite* look until Altman's camera intrudes with a tight, arched shot of the Greek family. There they are, at the top of a staircase, as ghoulish as a Goya portrait of the royal family, and clearly an artist's subjective impression.

*A Perfect Couple* has its share of Altman "types," and some are bound to cavil at the stuffy Greek family, particularly the snide brother-in-law played by Henry Gibson. I enjoyed these caricatures, not as tenable people — I don't for a moment believe any of the lot, save Alex and Eleousa, are related — but as absurd prototypes. Interestingly, *A Perfect Couple* is the first Altman film in which romance has triumphed over family loyalty and where Americans have seemed more open-minded than foreigners. Still, I found the wrong-headed foreigners more vivid than the sketchily developed members of the band.

What is most rewarding about *A Perfect Couple* is its whimsical treatment of love: so common it can be found on a Betamax, so timid it can be scared away by a cold. But once set in motion, it is undefinable, self-assertive, and curiously resilient. The Greek family tries to snuff it out, the band unwittingly chases it out of bed, it seemingly has no place to go so it tiptoes into the Hollywood Bowl. There's a moment in the middle of the film where a computer date candidate tells the video machine, "The only way I remember being in love is there was a lump . . ."; and as his lip sags, Altman cuts to Sheila, who looks seasick. Their expressions tell us that romantic love, which often begins with a stomachache and ends in ulcers, is scarily, excitingly platitudinously out of our control; and *A Perfect Couple* is Altman's ungrudging tribute to it.