



ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Kansas City

Part of Robert Altman's 1990s comeback, but made directly after the catwalk wobble of *Prêt-à-porter* (1994), *Kansas City* is a tale of jazz, kidnapping and gangsters set in the eponymous Missouri city during the 1930s. It's his second musical city movie, but where *Nashville* (1975) is shot through with cynicism about the country music capital, *Kansas City* is dyed with affection. This was Altman's own hometown and the film takes place in 1934, when the director would have been an impressionable nine-year-old.

The plot is some complicated business in which Jennifer Jason Leigh's hard-nosed Blondie O'Hara kidnaps a politician's wife in order to bribe said politician (Michael Murphy, who often plays Altman's politicians) to help free her husband from the clutches of ruthless (and exquisitely monikered) gangster Seldom Seen (Harry Belafonte). What makes *Kansas City* swing, however, are the many downtime moments of nightclub bands playing the music that made the city a cradle of jazz in those smoky days.

Sam Wigley, bfi.org.uk, 18 June 2021

A contemporary review

'Kansas City here I come!' These are the words of Big Joe Turner's classic rhythm and blues song 'Going to Kansas City', and it's also the mission of filmmaking elder statesman Robert Altman in this homage to his hometown. Set in a colourful 30s world, in which the city is an oasis for the political party bosses, gangsters and jazz musicians who ran the show, *Kansas City* is trademark Altman, a series of interconnected episodes all linked to one central theme: the uses and abuses of power.

The film centres on the evolving relationship between two social opposites, telegraph operator Blondie O'Hara (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and her rich, laudanum-soaked hostage Carolyn Stilton (Miranda Richardson). They wander in and out of situations: the after-hours telegraph office at the railway station from which Blondie wires Carolyn's politically powerful husband, a bar where vote-rigging is being organised by Blondie's sister's husband (Steve Buscemi), a home for unmarried African-American mothers, and a cinema featuring Blondie's role-model Jean Harlow in *Hold Your Man*. But the main point to this journey – other than for the two women to discover they have a lot in common once they get past their surface antagonism – seems to be to spin out the suspense as to whether Blondie's ploy will save her captive husband Johnny (Dermot Mulroney) from the vengeance of black gangster Seldom Seen (Harry Belafonte).

Yet the mundanity of the Blondie-Carolyn relationship by contrast elevates our awareness of the film's real virtue: its outstanding music. In 1934, *Kansas City* was a conservatory for jazz, especially the big bands of Count Basie, Jay McShann, and Bennie Moten. From these groups come many of the figures who would later become jazz legends, including Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins and Charlie Parker (each of whom appears as a character in the film). It was the pervasive wide-open lawlessness of this town that supported the creative environment, and it is this larger environment that Altman's film tries so hard to capture. Using many of today's top young jazz musicians –

Joshua Redman, Christian McBride, Nicholas Payton, Cyrus Chestnut – as some of the original jazz greats, the many musical scenes jump with a rhythm that leaves the rest of the film searching for a pulse. Because here, the multiple stories that Altman is so famous for weaving, are curiously uninvolved. In fact it would not be a calumny to say that *Kansas City* seems like an elaborately constructed excuse for some great musical performances. Hollywood has long maintained a sub-genre of film that uses jazz as a cipher with which to explore America's racial politics. Films like *Young Man with a Horn* (1949), *All the Fine Young Cannibals* (1960), *Paris Blues* (1961), and *A Man Called Adam* (1966) recreated the jazz milieu to engage, directly or indirectly, with the racial undertones of the idiom. More recently, films like *'Round Midnight* (1986), *Bird* (1988), and *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), have likewise foregrounded race and culture in American society, but more overtly. Altman's *Kansas City* easily fits into this latter attitude. The racial politics of the 30s are mostly explored through the gangster character Seldom Seen. His Hey-Hey Club is a nexus which suggests that the city's colourful flavour is rooted in a perverted racial co-existence. Harry Belafonte is excellent as Seldom Seen ('but often heard'). He is a menacing presence who circles the room, smoking cigars, carrying his money around in a cigar box, and dropping words of wisdom in long lectures about the political situation. 'White people are consumed with greed,' he says to his captured white criminal Johnny O'Hara, who has tried to rob one of Seen's best gambling customers. He goes on to explain to Johnny that the Great Depression was because, 'Y'all couldn't get enough.'

Seldom's embrace of black political leader Marcus Garvey and his critique of the establishment are powerfully conveyed, especially with the music of a 'Coleman Hawkins' versus 'Lester Young' cutting contest playing behind him. But the action is elsewhere, in gangster and election-rigging subplots and whenever Seldom or the music is absent you feel the loss. It is indeed the music that keeps *Kansas City* alive. When Altman's *The Player* was released in 1992, many thought that this 70s Hollywood maverick had finally returned to form after a long hiatus. *The Player* was a provocatively satirical look at Hollywood's underbelly made from Michael Tolkin's wry script that made us realise how much we missed Altman's light touch with acerbic material. With *Short Cuts* in 1993, his ability to juggle multiple narratives and many characters was again transfixing, and seemed to suit the mood of the Raymond Carver stories it was based on. Yet the more ad-hoc *Prêt-à-porter* in 1994 lacked any real insight and *Kansas City* continues that film's pattern of aimless filmmaking.

Out of the corrupt party politics of the Democratic bosses, the predictable self-indulgence of the wealthy liberals, and the blonde ambitions of O'Hara and her pathetic husband Johnny, fed by Hollywood, Altman weaves the tapestry of a city life that is long gone. But unlike *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, *MASH*, or *Nashville*, Altman's finest movies, *Kansas City* never gathers its threads together. Nevertheless, Altman remains one of the few independent voices in a sea of repetitive Hollywood mediocrity. Films such as *Kansas City* at least attempt to focus on real people rather than computer-generated fantasies. And besides, any film that uses jazz as its source – America's highest art form – can never be given too much attention. For these things only, Altman and *Kansas City* are to be praised.

Todd Boyd, Sight & Sound, December 1996

KANSAS CITY

Director: Robert Altman
©/Production Company: CiBy 2000
Production Company: Sandcastle 5 Productions
Executive Producer: Scott Bushnell
Producer: Robert Altman
Co-producers: Matthew Seig, David C. Thomas
Associate Producer: James McLindon
Unit Production Manager: David C. Thomas
Production Accountant: Gwendolyn Everman
Location Managers: Wendy Gray, Rick Cowan, Greg Ovard
1st Assistant Director: Stephen Dunn
Script Supervisor: Carmen Soriano
Casting: Elisabeth Leustig
Screenplay: Robert Altman, Frank Barhydt
Director of Photography: Oliver Stapleton
Camera Operator: Robert Reed Altman
Additional Camera Operators: Eric D. Andersen, Joseph Mandacina
Focus Puller: Tom Lohmann
Chief Lighting Technician: Larry Prinz
Key Grip: Anthony T. Marra II
Stills Photography: Eli Reed
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Sam Barkan
Editor: Geraldine Peroni
1st Assistant Editors: Keiko Deguchi, Sheila Macdowell
Production Designer: Stephen Altman
Art Director: Richard L. Johnson
Set Designer: Dawn Brown, Thomas R. Stiller
Set Decorator: Susan J. Emshwiller
Assistant Property: Ron Licari
Costume Designer: Dona Granata
Women’s Custom-made Clothing: Dale Wibden
Costumes Shop Head: Karen Naser
Key Make-up: Micheline Trépanier
Key Hair: Aldo Signoretti
Title Desigr: Robert Dawson
Titles/Opticals: Pacific Title
Colour Timer: Mike Mertens
Conductor: Butch Morris
Negative Cutter: Inc. Sunrise Film
Music Recording/Mixing: Eric Liljestrand
Stage Crew: Eric Johnston
Production Sound: John Pritchett
Boom: David M. Roberts
Re-recording Mixers: Matthew Iadarola, Gary Gegan
Supervising Sound Editor: Richard King
Dialogue Editor: Jim Matheny, Michael Haight
Effects Editor: Patricio Libenson
Stunt Co-ordinator: Greg Walker
Research: Laurene Hirschberg
Jewelry Consultant: C. Jeanenne Bell
Special Thanks to: Alan Rudolph, Stanley Tucci
Dialect Coach: Carla Meyer, Elizabeth Himelstein
Dobermans Supplied by: Frank Inn

Cast

Jennifer Jason Leigh (Blondie O’Hara)
Miranda Richardson (Carolyn Stilton)
Harry Belafonte (Seldom Seen)
Michael Murphy (Henry Stilton)
Dermot Mulroney (Johnny O’Hara)
Steve Buscemi (Johnny Flynn)
Brooke Smith (Babe Flynn)
Jane Adams (Nettie Bolt)
Jeff Feringa (Addie Parker)
A.C. Smith (Sheepshan Red)
Martin Martin (‘Blue’ Blue)
Albert J. Burnes (Charlie Parker)
Ajia Mignon Johnson (Pearl Cummings)
Tim Snay (rally speaker)
Tawanna Benbow (Rose)
Cal Pritner (Governor Parker)
Jerry Fornelli (Tom Pendergast)
Michael Ornstein (Jackie Giro)
Michael Carozzo (Charlie Gargotta)
Joe Digirolamo (John Lazia)
John Durbin (gas station attendant)
Gina Belafonte (Hey-Hey Club hostess)
Nancy Marcy (telegraph operator)
Buck Baker (train station agent)
Dorothy Kemp-Clark (Mrs Bruce)
Edward Pennington (Governor’s Parker’s butler)
Robert Elliott (Lazia man)
Marlon Hoffman (Lazia man)
Patrick Oldani (Lazia man)

Hey-Hey Club musicians:
James Carter, Craig Handy, David Murray, Joshua Redman (tenor saxophones)
Jesse Davis, David ‘Fathead’ Newman Jr. (alto saxophones)
Don Byron (clarinet/baritone saxophone)
Olu Dara, Nicholas Payton, James Zollar (trumpets)
Curtis Fowlkes, Clark Gayton (trombones)
Victor Lewis (drums)
Geri Allen, Cyrus Chestnut (piano)
Ron Carter, Tyrone Clark, Christian McBride (bass)
Russell Malone, Mark Whitfield (guitars)
Kevin Mahogany (vocalist)

USA/France 1996
115 mins

Print courtesy of the Robert Altman Collection at the
UCLA Film & Television Archive

ROBERT ALTMAN: AMERICAN OUTSIDER

Nashville Continues from Jun
Vincent and Theo Sat 3 Jul 11:20; Tue 13 Jul 20:30
Prêt-à-porter Sat 3 Jul 18:05; Mon 19 Jul 17:40
The Player Sat 3 Jul 20:40; Mon 12 Jul 17:45; Wed 28 Jul 20:30
Short Cuts Sun 4 Jul 11:30; Sat 17 Jul 19:30
Kansas City Sun 4 Jul 15:20; Thu 15 Jul 17:40
Cookie’s Fortune Tue 6 Jul 14:50; Wed 7 Jul 20:40; Tue 27 Jul 17:40
McCabe & Mrs. Miller Tue 6 Jul 18:10
3 Women Thu 8 Jul 20:30
The Gingerbread Man Fri 9 Jul 20:40; Sat 17 Jul 17:50
Dr T & The Women Sat 10 Jul 15:00; Mon 26 Jul 20:30
Gosford Park Sun 11 Jul 15:20; Sun 18 Jul 18:20; Fri 23 Jul 14:30
The Company Tue 13 Jul 17:50; Sat 31 Jul 11:50
A Prairie Home Companion Sun 25 Jul 12:00; Sat 31 Jul 17:50

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