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SURFING THE WAVES OF POPULAR CULTURE
BY MICHAEL GILTZ & FRIENDS

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Robert Altman Is Dead

Robert Altman died today at 81. But as far as Hollywood was concerned, he was also dead back in 1980 after his ill-fated "Popeye" flopped. Suddenly, one of the most famous directors around simply couldn't get any of his films made. Altman retreated to a series of very low-budget films -- many of them adapted from plays -- that were decidedly un-Altmanesque. No overlapping dialogue, no huge cast of characters, no interlocking storylines. "Streamers" tackled gays in the military, "Come Back To The Five and Dime, Jimmy dean, Jimmy Dean" gave respect to Cher, "Secret Honor" was a riveting one-man show about Nixon that gave Philip Baker Hall the role of a lifetime, "Tanner '88" (a collaboration with "Doonesbury's" Garry Trudeau) was ground-breaking and all too prescient), and "Vincent & Theo" proved he could reach out again to a wider audience. Those films would be a nice career for most people; for Altman, they are practically a footnote. But they also hit theaters when I was in high school and college so they were my first introduction to him. It's sort of like coming through the sidedoor -- like falling for Springsteen via "Nebraska" -- but I wouldn't have it any other way. Obviously, you should watch "Nashville," "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" and many others. Personally, I didn't feel "Short Cuts" captured what I loved about writer Raymond Carver and "The Player" seemed a bit toothless. For me, Altman's late career masterpiece is "Gosford Park," a gem set on a British estate that gets better every time I see it. When he lost Best Director and Best Picture to Ron Howard and "A Beautiful Mind," I knew Hollywood was never going to give him an out-and-out win. "Gosford Park" was an Anglophile's dream, bursting with brilliant performances, a solid hit and very funny with a shattering finale. What more could he do? (I wouldn't have minded if he lost to Peter Jackson and "The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring.") So thank goodness Hollywood gave him an honorary Oscar last year. It turned out to be just in time. R.I.P. and I hope there's pot in heaven or he's gonna be angry.



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