

wild combination

An Intimate Portrait Of Arthur Russell



Sixteen years after the premature death of the obscure cellist and disco producer from Oskaloosa, Matt Wolf's revelatory documentary *Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell* buzzes with the gravitas of a heart-felt homage to a true avant-garde hero. Wolf's experimental biography puts Russell's life and music into an illuminating context of cultural importance that, paradoxically, Arthur managed to avoid during his lifetime.

A former gay activist and director of experimental shorts, Wolf might seem an obvious choice to take the helm, but like many others, Wolf had not heard of Russell until the re-releases of his music in 2004. "A friend described a gay disco auteur from Oskaloosa, Iowa, who wore farmer shirts and obsessively rode the Staten Island Ferry listening to tapes of his own music," he explains. "That image alone really inspired me. The music then got me obsessed."

Despite the prodigious legacy of music that the prolific, perfectionist left behind (over 1,000 tapes, 40 of which were different mixes of the same song), the comparative paucity of recovered archival footage, forced Wolf into more innovative filmmaking techniques. Recreating impressionistic and atmospheric scenes like those of Russell on the Staten Island Ferry or the bucolic shots of the Iowa cornfields of his childhood, Wolf adds another layer of insight to the already

visceral and personal intensity of Russell's music. "I needed coverage to make all the stories and anecdotes come to life", he explains. "If archival material illustrated what was being said, we were in luck. And if ideas were abstract or inaccessible in archival material, we created material that was evocative of the past or of Arthur's aesthetic and personal point of view; developing a visual language inspired by and responsive to Arthur's music."

Emotionally bound and brought to life by interviews with friends, parents and collaborators, Wolf describes his shift of intentions for the film, "Initially I was sure I wanted to make an experimental film, but on speaking to Tom Leem, Russell's partner whose connection to Arthur seemed so real and alive, I realised that I should be creating an emotional as well as visual experience." It is exactly this attuned sense of intimacy that lies Wolf's film in so perfectly with Russell's music.

Wild Combination is an appropriately reverent and compelling salute to the life and music of an enigmatic farm boy whose pioneering obsession with exploring and pushing the parameters of sound produced a legacy on such a scale. There is still plenty left untapped that will no doubt continue to be posthumously mined.

Text Melissa Osborne

Wild Combination is set to screen at Edinburgh Film Festival in June