

ARTFORUM

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Best Films of 2008

Amy Taubin: *Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell and Patti Smith: Dream of Life.* Together these two fragile documentaries recall the music that once defined “Downtown.”

Stuart Comer: Wolf’s inspiring film provides a long-awaited road map to the life and work of the gifted musician Arthur Russell, who eloquently articulated the contradictions of the late twentieth century before his premature death in 1992.

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Artforum Diary

Swimming Upstream

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Left: *Wild Combination* director Matt Wolf and coproducer Kyle Martin. Right: Musicians Nick Hallett and Alex Waterman. (Photos: Dawn Chan)

Is any genre more despicable, more dependably hollow, than the rock documentary? The avalanche of peripheral figures; the unflagging unanimity of praise; the dull, paradoxical insistence that “you had to be there” (if we had to be there, why watch now?); the turgid arc, from humble beginnings to sound-barrier-shattering innovation; the undistinguished archival footage, presented onscreen like an unveiling of the Dead Sea Scrolls?

So all credit to Matt Wolf, whose documentary on the downtown cellist and disco auteur Arthur Russell, *Wild Combination*—which had its raucous New York premiere at the Kitchen last Thursday—turns out to be one of the genre’s few incandescent exceptions to the rule. Russell, who died of AIDS in 1992, is hardly an easy subject, but his story begs recounting. Its archetypal reach—a young, acne-scarred teenager leaves behind the bullies in his native Oskaloosa, Iowa, cello in hand, for a Buddhist commune in the orbit of Haight-Ashbury, before arriving in New York and being adopted by everyone from Allen Ginsberg to Philip Glass—seems familiar, but Wolf’s film reveals Russell to be anything but typical.

A genuine obscurantist, even when making the disco hits (as Dinosaur L, Loose Joints, and Indian Ocean) that underwrote most of his varied and abstruse career, Russell left behind thousands of hours of recorded material and scant documentation of any other kind. Wolf stitched together his portrait from a handful of VHS tapes provided by Russell's longtime partner, Tom Lee; interviews with a few select friends and family; and his own impressionistic takes (Iowa cornfields, the wake of the Staten Island Ferry) on the artist. The result is an intuitive, remarkably personal love letter—to Russell, to Russell's enduring and happy relationship with Lee, and to Russell's parents, whose understanding of their difficult child is given equal weight alongside the musician's own unnerving achievements.



Left: Tom Lee. (Photo: Dawn Chan) Right: A still from *Wild Combination*.

As Wolf pointed out before the screening, the documentary was particularly suited to its locale: In the '70s, Russell was the Kitchen's music director. It was not uncommon to find him there, alone, playing Bach to an empty room, or, as shown in some grainy footage included in *Wild Combination*, an eerily circular and incantatory composition about an unloved dog to a room half-full of mystified observers. The Modern Lovers' Ernie Brooks, a longtime collaborator who is featured in the film, ruefully noted afterward that there were "five to six times the number of people" in attendance for Wolf's homage to Russell "than were ever at his shows." To see what little footage Wolf includes is to understand why: Russell sits uncomfortably on a metal chair, or stands indifferently with his cello, his voice cracking and going in and out, his instrument crackling with distortion behind him, simultaneously self-conscious and disconcertingly unreserved. "Who knows what this guy is up to," reads a Warner Bros. memo dated 1979 and featured in the film. "You figure it out."

The next two nights of the Kitchen's "Let's Go Swimming: A Tribute to Arthur Russell," were an attempt at just that. Friday saw an ensemble performance of Russell's album *Tower of Meaning*, originally conducted by the radical pianist-composer Julius Eastman and played by a loosely organized coterie of young disciples. Saturday was devoted to interpretations of Russell's songs and to "The Singing Tractors," an open-structure composition directed by Russell's longtime collaborator and friend the trombonist Peter Zummo. Worn out by the intensity of *Wild Combination's* raw peek into Russell's work, I skipped Friday but returned Saturday to see his old friends—Brooks, Zummo, and the percussionist Bill Ruyle—pay their respects.

Nat Baldwin, a fit twenty-eight-year-old bassist sharply reminiscent of Russell (if, say, Russell had played a bit more basketball), began the night with the composer's "A Little Lost," brought back to the light with Soul Jazz's 2004 reissue *The World of Arthur Russell*—the record that also sparked Wolf's productive obsession with the artist. The Spinanes' Rebecca Gates, the Hidden Cameras' Joel Gibb, and New York avant-gardists Nick Hallett and Alex Waterman then took turns with Russell's material. Wolf's act had been a kind of magic trick, a vivid conjuring of the absent artist; the tributes were more melancholy, their remove suggesting the finality of Russell's departure. A ragged, noisy, seven-person take on "The Singing Tractors" ("The situation was often confused, but the notation is extremely elegant," noted Zummo's wry liner note) brought him back, a bit. It was anarchy, but anarchy always was Russell's mode.

— Zach Baron