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BY BILL STAMETS

Opening this weekend on the local art-house circuit:

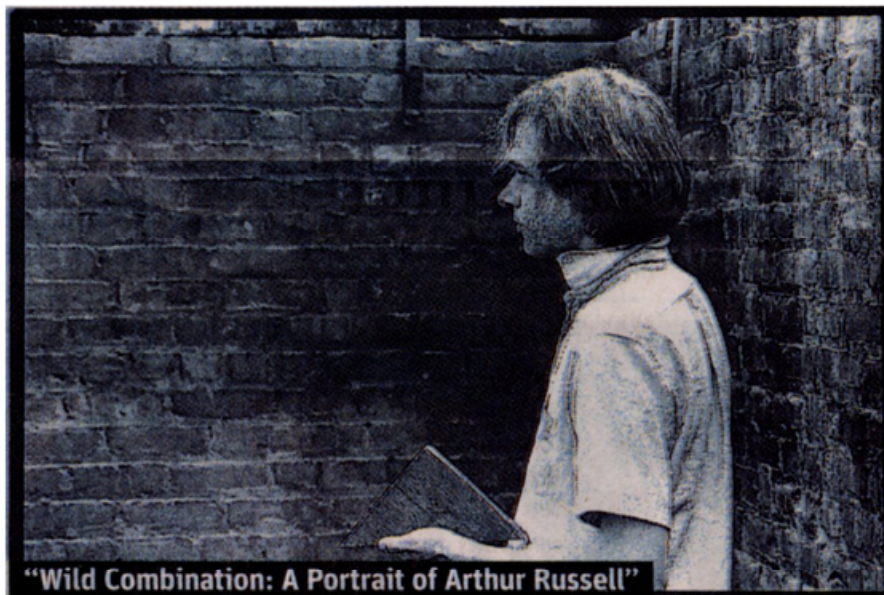
'Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell' ★★★

Filmmaker Matt Wolf offers an artful profile of Arthur Russell, sampling the output of the prolific musical artist, who died of AIDS in 1992 at age 40. Here, Wolf plays visual accompanist to 27 of Russell's remarkable compositions.

Wolf uses an interpretive style of documentary-making. He incorporated fictional characters into two earlier shorts about David Wojnarowicz, the artist and AIDS activist, and Andrew Cunanan, the killer of fashion designer Gianni Versace. For "Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell," his first feature, Wolf shoots in VHS and Super-8 for "stylized re-creations" of Russell's boyhood in Oskaloosa, Iowa, and his later avant-garde scene in New York City. "It was almost like fake archival material," says Wolf in his press notes.

Interviews with Russell's parents and longtime lover Tom Lee supply personal insights. Russell's collaborators in the '70s and '80s included poet Allen Ginsberg, composer Philip Glass and rocker David Byrne, although his dad did not get the more experimental stuff. "I call it music you can't tap your foot to."

Russell's musical curiosity even led him into disco, but Wolf's film favors soulful songs where Russell accompanied himself on cello. Shots of passing cornfields and closeups of rippling water are among the lyrical visuals Wolf creates with cinematographer Jody Lee Lipes and editor Lance Edmands. "Arthur loved echo," recalls music critic David Toop. "He was able to use this sense of oceanic formlessness but make his own shapes with it." Wolf evokes that sound with a cinematic echo.



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