

Good Vibration

The cosmic dance-floor of Arthur Russell

BY AMY TAUBIN

"His ambition was to write Buddhist bubblegum music."

—Allen Ginsberg

"He had to be the funkiest white boy I ever saw."

—James Brown backup singer

Lola Love

"He's one of the greatest songwriters ever, greater than the Beatles."

—Ernie Brooks, musician, formerly of the Modern Lovers

These assessments of Arthur Russell—none of them hyperbolic when measured against his musical genius and personal charisma—are made in *Wild Combination*, Matt Wolf's finely tuned biopic of the composer/vocalist/cellist. Born in Iowa farm country

in 1952, Russell and his cello arrived in New York in the early Seventies by way of a Buddhist commune in San Francisco. He moved into a building on East 12th Street where Ginsberg and Richard Hell were among the tenants, and soon found his way into the burgeoning downtown New Music scene, much of it centered at The Kitchen. At the time the prevailing mode of avant-garde music, from Philip Glass (another Russell admirer) to Glenn Branca, combined minimalist strategies with overwhelming volume, repetition, and extended durations, while a similarly aggressive stance dominated Punk/New Wave. But Russell's music was distinguished by

its "wild combination" of an extremely fragile sound anchored to a rock-steady inner pulse and deep, unflinching connection to the harmonics of the universe. (That includes the disco songs that he wrote and performed under multiple pseudonyms; Dinosaur L, for example, is credited with the deliciously danceable, ebulliently eccentric, instant classic "Go Bang.")

Wolf, a gay activist and filmmaker, first heard Russell's music in 2004, when some of the recordings that had had limited pressings in the composer's lifetime (he died of AIDS in 1992) were re-released. The filmmaker's research led him to Russell's longtime lover and partner, Tom Bell, and to his parents, who still live on their Oskaloosa farm, as well as to many musician colleagues (who testify to his brilliance and his difficulty with collaboration) and the



Wild Combination travels chronologically from Russell's Oskaloosa childhood (he adopted his mother's instrument, the cello, and brought home books by John Cage and Timothy Leary), passing quickly over his San Francisco Buddhist and acid-influenced late adolescence, to focus on his 20 years of music making in New York. A touching epilogue details the friendship that developed in the aftermath of Russell's death between his lover and his supportive, heart-broken parents, who remain perplexed at having brought such a strange, magical person into the world. Wolf's best strategy is to fill the soundtrack with Russell's music and allow it to be the stuff of everyday life, rather than imposing stylized visuals on it. The vast expanses of Midwestern landscape that punctuate the film suffice to suggest the origins of the space within his sound.

The last time I encountered Russell, whom I knew from my involvement with The Kitchen, was in 1991 on the downtown C train. As was his wont, he handed me his headphones so I could listen to a few seconds of the tape that he had probably just recorded. Then he asked me if I knew any filmmakers who might want him to write a score. I said that I couldn't think of anyone worthy, which was true but a bit cavalier. It wasn't until after he died and I had seen *My Own Private Idaho* that I realized how perfectly Russell's music would have meshed with Gus Van Sant's vision. □

Wild Combination screens at *The Kitchen* on May 15.



sound

dedicated indie-record guys who are attempting to distribute some of the 1,000-plus audiotapes he left behind, most of them recorded solo in his home studio.

With these interviews plus fragmentary video recordings of Russell performing live, Wolf has fashioned a remarkably affecting and informative portrait that serves as a remembrance for those who knew him and a seductive introduction for potential fans. Since the 2004 re-releases, myriad websites devoted to Russell have appeared, many of which relate to him as an emo precursor—a ridiculously limited though not entirely incorrect assessment.