

WILD COMBINATION is the stunning new documentary by Matt Wolfe about the troubled life of American cellist, singer and disco composer Arthur Russell.

Although rarely filmed and barely written about, in the '70s and '80s maverick composer/producer Arthur Russell was one of the most unique, enigmatic figures on New York's downtown disco scene. Ahead of its time and practically indefinable, his music filled the NY dance floors with a whisk of Indian, African, reggae, jazz, and funk rhythms. But Russell himself remained an enigmatic, near mythological figure, lost somewhere between his ambitions to be both pop-star and avant-garde rebel. "Like a lot of people, I only discovered Arthur's music through the re-releases a few years ago on Rough Trade and Soul Jazz Records: *Calling Out of Context* and *The World of Arthur Russell*," explains filmmaker Matt Wolfe, whose debut documentary *Wild Combination: A Portrait Of Arthur Russell* serves up a

bittersweet tribute to Russell's story. "A friend described to me a 'gay disco auteur, who wore farmer's plaid shirts and rode the Staten Island Ferry listening to mixes of his own cassettes.' That image really intrigued me and when I heard Arthur's music I became obsessed." Fusing rare archive footage, evocative recreations and commentary from Russell's boyfriend, his parents and fellow artists like Alan Ginsberg, composer Philip Glass and indie singer Jens Lekman, *Wild Combination* explores Russell's extraordinary, blurry songs and the emotional undertow of their delicate, awkward lyrics. "He brought significant edge, conceptual prowess and humour to disco," says Wolfe. "Songs about kid's birthday parties like *Go Bang* or the feeling of walking down the street in a new pair of sneakers in *Tell You Today*.

Those songs transcend the genre of disco. I appreciate Arthur's childlike quality—his effervescence and optimism, which is a refreshing anecdote to cooler cynicism and irony. When he sings 'Calling All Kids, Calling All Kids... Grown-ups are crazy!' I think he really believed that." As his dance tracks begin to reappear everywhere from art shows to T-Mobile commercials in recent years, Russell's cult has continued to grow. But with his death from AIDS aged just 40 in 1992, much of his work would never be finished. "His perfectionism was at times self-defeating and during his lifetime he was virtually unknown," says Wolfe. "But since his death, I think music listeners have become more open-minded and sophisticated. The crossing of genres and styles that's so fluid in Arthur's

music sounds totally contemporary. I think his audience continues to grow and I sense the film is helping expand interest in his music." Jonathan Crocker

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Images from *Wild Combination* courtesy of Plexifilm

Matt Wolfe's Top 5 Dance Tracks

1. The Fall *Totally Wired*
2. The B52s *Dance This Mess Around*
3. The Breeders *Cannonball*
4. Can I *Want More*
5. Talking Heads *Pull Up the Roots*

