

# MOJO

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Arthur Russell:  
Buddhist bubble-  
gum music.

## Cello gold

A warm, insightful documentary traces beguiling apparition Arthur Russell. By Stevie Chick.

### Wild Combination



PLEXIFILM

DUE TO the scant availability of interview footage with *Wild Combination's* notoriously shy subject, Arthur Russell seems ghostlike even in this documentary dedicated to his short life and voluminous works; there, but not there. Director Matt Wolf, nevertheless, evokes the late composer/cellist assuredly: through the words of his family, friends and peers, still photographs and flickering passages of live performance, and, most of all, his music, Russell haunts every frame.

There was always something spectral, something haunting about Russell's music, this quality uniting a body of work that embraced such divergent strands as avant-garde composition, introspective and fragile folk song, and ecstatic, trance-like early disco. Born and raised in the rural wilds of Iowa, Russell was a sweet-hearted, acne-scarred misfit, curious about drugs and alternative lifestyles, and consumed by music. At 16 he moved to San Francisco as the Hippy Age dawned, starting a journey that would draw him to New York City, and the subterranean poetry and experimental music scenes. Of seeing Russell perform for the first time, occasional collaborator Allen Ginsberg recalls, in footage from Russell's funeral, that he was "like William Carlos



disco first stirred. This breadth of creative focus perhaps both explains Russell's relative low profile during his lifetime, operating on the experimental fringes of underground art and music, and also why his music has developed such a swarming following in the years after his death. "How could one person work in all these different ways?" ponders musicologist David Toop, one of the movie's talking heads. "Not many people allow themselves the full extent of their complexities."

*Wild Combination* portrays a man alive with brilliant ideas – friend and early collaborator Philip

Williams, but he *sings*."

Russell thrived in New York, spending his nights working as musical director of *The Kitchen* – the Greenwich Village art space within the Mercer Arts Centre – or at David Mancuso's hedonistic and joyous Loft parties, where

Glass remembers Russell's dreams of composing "Buddhist bubblegum music". With Russell's positive diagnosis for HIV, the documentary shifts into more emotional territory, which Wolf handles with tender skill. Tom Lee, Russell's partner since 1980, paints the man behind the music as "the person I wanted to end every day with".

Most haunting is the footage of Russell, late in his life, already visibly ravaged by AIDS, but still able to pluck beauty from a cello, an echo pedal and his warmly unguarded voice. "His gifts were increasing, as his strength was leaving him," notes one friend, but the movie also traces the rebirth his music has enjoyed of late, thanks to the efforts of Steve Knutson of Audika Records, releasing unheard Russell music and curating his legacy from Tom Lee's vast collection of tapes. At the end, Lee discusses the comfort those cassettes give him today, smiling at the sound of Russell's voice, a fitting close for this exploration of ghostly magic.

