



## Wild Combination: A Portrait Of Arthur Russell

DIR MATT WOLF 2007. 72 MINS

About 30 minutes into this absorbing documentary, Philip Glass describes how Arthur Russell “felt in his bones that he was destined to have a larger audience... that his music had the possibility of being popular in the sense that popular music is.” Yet, as Matt Wolf’s portrait demonstrates, Russell lacked the necessary social and psychological characteristics to make this leap. By incorporating rare footage and comment from family, friends and collaborators, Wolf reveals his protagonist’s penchant for hitting self-destruct. Russell’s perfectionism would often spiral into paranoia and conflict, his immersion within the music making process providing a convenient means of avoiding the limelight with which he was largely uncomfortable.

Other aspects of Russell’s contradictory nature are also highlighted. While his parents tell of his difficult adolescence growing up in Iowa, his longterm partner Tom Lee suggests that the two of them might have made their home in the Midwest had Russell not died of AIDS in 1992. Oddly, the film skips over another apparent paradox, that of a man writing and dedicating songs of devotion to the lover to whom he is being unfaithful. It may be that Wolf is guilty of viewing his subject through

spectacles of the rose tinted variety, or simply that he wanted to avoid upsetting some of his participants for what occasionally feels like a love-in. But, this minor quibble aside, *Wild Combination* remains an extremely compelling story of one man’s artistic vision and achievement.

Russell’s wonderful music is rightly pushed to the fore, with Wolf chronologically running through his trajectory from ‘Buddhist bubblegum pop’ to his intensely emotional pieces for cello and voice, by way of composition and disco. Wolf’s use of expressionistic imagery – the Staten Island Ferry, where Russell would endlessly listen to mixes of his own music, alongside the cornfields of Iowa – help convey the complex beauty of Russell’s creations. Wolf also offers a series of invaluable insights into a remarkable musician who lived and spoke mainly through his transcendental music. The film ends as it began, with Russell’s loving parents, Chuck and Emily, reminiscing fondly about the son they barely knew and speculating about where his music could have taken him. As Chuck recalls Arthur’s last words to him, he begins to cry while simultaneously laughing out loud. Yet another contradiction, but one that perfectly encapsulates the essence of Russell’s short life.

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