

BLAKE ZIDELL & ASSOCIATES

WILD COMBINATION

A PORTRAIT OF ARTHUR RUSSELL



A film by Matt Wolf

**Produced by
Ben Howe, Kyle Martin, and Matt Wolf**

71 Minutes. USA. (HDCAM, Dolby LtRt)

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CAPSULE SYNOPSIS

WILD COMBINATION is director Matt Wolf's visually absorbing portrait of the seminal avant-garde composer, singer-songwriter, cellist, and disco producer Arthur Russell. Before his untimely death from AIDS in 1992, Arthur prolifically created music that spanned both pop and the transcendent possibilities of abstract art. Now, over fifteen years since his passing, Arthur's work is finally finding its audience. Wolf incorporates rare archival footage and commentary from Arthur's family, friends, and closest collaborators—including Philip Glass and Allen Ginsberg—to tell this poignant and important story.

SYNOPSIS

WILD COMBINATION begins in the bucolic landscape of Oskaloosa, Iowa. Chuck and Emily Russell remember their precocious son Arthur's early inspirations. As a teenager in the 1960s, Arthur was obsessed with Timothy Leary, John Cage, and Beat poetry. Clashing with his parents' Midwestern conventionalism and inspired by these figures' counter-cultural imaginations, Arthur ran away from home. He joined a Buddhist commune in San Francisco, and he met his lifelong mentor and collaborator, Allen Ginsberg. Allen described Arthur as "delicate, exquisite-minded, youthful, and at the same time oddly reticent." The two collaborated on a number of recordings. But when the commune tried to take away Arthur's cello, forcing him to secretly play in a closet, he followed his greater musical ambition, and he joined Ginsberg in New York.

Arthur began working with Philip Glass and other composers in the avant-garde music world, specifically at The Kitchen, where he became musical director in 1974. He composed melodic orchestral music and absorbed the vanguard ideas of the new music scene. Simultaneously Arthur discovered the liberating social and aesthetic possibilities of underground discos. Under the guise of various monikers—Dinosaur L, Loose Joints, Indian Ocean—Arthur produced playful and eccentric disco records that became hits of the pre-Studio 54 era.

The rules and codes of established genre didn't apply to Arthur. The serialized patterns of minimalist symphonies resonated with the repetitive rhythms in dance music. Likewise, the utopian social settings of the early discos were like the Buddhist commune Arthur had once known. With childlike innocence and fun, Arthur ambitiously explored all of these possibilities.

He fell in love with his boyfriend Tom Lee, and the two moved in together in the East Village, next door to Allen in a building populated by poets, musicians, and artists.

But despite Arthur's musical talent and ambition, he was often tempered by self-defeating career choices and alienating perfectionism. It seemed that Arthur was creating a kind of utopia, where the absorbing process of making music was his life. Finishing his work was a secondary concern. Collaborators moved on to new projects, career opportunities passed, and Arthur began working alone in his apartment. What resulted was perhaps his most fully realized body of work, "World of Echo." These transcendent solo cello-and-voice songs were like intimate diaries that fit somewhere between lullabies and art songs.

It seemed that popular success was within Arthur's reach: He believed these diverse musical projects would reach a wider audience. But the devastation of AIDS cut Arthur's career short. When Arthur died, he was puzzlingly lost in obscurity.

(Continued)

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His 1992 obituary in the Village Voice read, “Arthur’s songs were so personal that it seems as though he simply vanished into his music.”

But now fifteen years after Arthur’s death, his music is being rediscovered. In the past five years, Arthur has developed a significant, international following. A new generation has discovered Arthur.

With a visually experimental form, WILD COMBINATION brings to life Arthur’s descriptively rich and emotionally direct music. The film explores the compelling cultural history of New York in the 1970s and ‘80s, the experience of being gay and confronting AIDS, and the cathartic process of making art and pursuing popular success at a time when those goals were mutually attainable. Intimate interviews with Arthur’s family and collaborators, rare archival materials, and an engrossing visual language bring his music to life and give long overdue attention to this groundbreaking artist.

DIRECTOR’S STATEMENT

Before I even heard Arthur’s music, I was intrigued. My friend described a long forgotten gay disco auteur in a farmer’s plaid shirt, obsessively listening to mixes of his own music on the Staten Island Ferry. That image alone was enough, but when I heard the emotional intensity and the complex beauty in Arthur’s music, I was obsessed.

Coming from an experimental filmmaking background, my first instinct was to expressionistically render Arthur’s music —on the Staten Island Ferry, by the West Side Piers, or in cornfields.

I found an address for Arthur’s former partner Tom Lee online and I wrote him, requesting permission to possibly use Arthur’s music in an experimental film.

Months later, Tom called and I went to meet him in the same East Village apartment that he shared with Arthur, where Allen Ginsberg once lived next door. I was so inspired by Tom—his openness, generosity, and the connection he still feels to Arthur—that it occurred to me that this film could be much larger than I initially imagined.

As I spoke to Ernie Brooks, Steven Hall, Arthur’s parents and many others, I recognized the need for a biographical film, which would explore the legendary cultural history Arthur was a part of as well as the emotional and personal stories imbued in so many of his songs.

Rather than producing an encyclopedic or definitive film that reconstructs Arthur’s entire musical trajectory, I chose to make a portrait. I retraced Arthur’s footsteps on the Staten Island Ferry and I ran through cornfields with a VHS camera. I interviewed Tom Lee in the small apartment where Arthur once obsessively worked and I met Chuck and Emily Russell in Arthur’s idyllic childhood home. These experiences helped me imagine Arthur’s point of view and enabled me to form a deeper interpretation of his music.

In the process of making the movie, I learned things from Arthur about being an artist and pursuing it at all costs. Arthur struggled: he created obstacles for himself and he frustrated his collaborators and loved ones. But I think, unlike many other people, Arthur was able to connect to a primal place of childlike innocence and fun. I love going there with him.

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FEATURING (in order of appearance)

Chuck and Emily Russell
David Toop
Allen Ginsberg
Ernie Brooks
Steven Hall
Peter Zummo

Philip Glass
Tom Lee
Will Socolov
Bob Blank
Lola Love
Steve Knutson
Jens Lekman

CREDITS

DIRECTOR
PRODUCERS

Matt Wolf
Ben Howe
Kyle Martin
Matt Wolf
Philip Aarons
Shelley Fox Aarons
Mark Lewin
Jody Lee Lipes
Lance Edmands
Kyle Garner
Polari Pictures
imofilms

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
EDITOR
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER
PRODUCED BY
IN ASSOCIATION WITH

DIRECTOR'S BIO

26-year-old filmmaker Matt Wolf was recently named one of the 25 New Faces of Independent Film by Filmmaker Magazine. He moved to New York when he received a full-tuition fellowship to attend NYU's film school. *Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell*, which premiered at the 2008 Berlin Film Festival, is his first feature film. *Wild Combination* is screening widely in film festivals and museums (Edinburgh, Karlovy Vary, MoMA, ICA London) and being released theatrically by Plexifilm in September 2008. The film has been acclaimed in numerous publications, including *The New York Times*, *Film Comment*, *LA Times*, *Village Voice*, *Artforum*, *Variety*, and *Screen International*. Matt's short films, including an experimental biography of the artist and AIDS activist David Wojanowicz, have screened in numerous film festivals, art spaces, and universities worldwide. Currently, Matt is directing videos for *The New York Times* and a series of short documentaries for The Sundance Channel.

www.mattwolf.info

www.arthurrussellmovie.com

THE NEW YORKER

LET'S GO SWIMMING: ARTHUR RUSSELL'S GENTLE REVOLUTIONS

by Sasha Frere-Jones, March 8, 2004

This story begins, as many good ones do, with a gay man from Oskaloosa playing cello in a closet in a Buddhist seminary. It ends with a gentle and brilliant musician dying in New York long before his time. In between, the cellist, Arthur Russell, wrote orchestral music, produced disco hits, and recorded a body of solo cello-and-voice songs that fit somewhere between lullabies and art songs. The structural sprawl and harmonic flux common to what has come to be called “intelligent dance music” (a phrase Russell would have hated) and the songs of rock bands like Wilco and Radiohead characterized his music from the start.

An English label called Soul Jazz has just released “The World of Arthur Russell,” a collection of Russell’s dance-music productions; and a New York label, Audika Records, has issued “Calling Out of Context,” a collection of unreleased songs. Russell’s work is stranded between lands real and imagined: the street and the cornfield; the soft bohemian New York and the hard Studio 54 New York; the cheery bold strokes of pop and the liberating possibilities of abstract art. Arthur Russell didn’t dissolve these borders so much as wander past them, humming his own song.

Before his death, from AIDS, in 1992, at the age of forty, Russell collaborated and studied with so many lights of the avant-garde world that his résumé reads like an eagerly overdrawn backstory note for a movie character—“Right, right, I move to New York and I meet all the big artists! Robert Wilson, Philip Glass, Vin Diesel! Downtown is crazy!” As a teen, Russell, already a trained cello player and pianist, left Iowa and joined a Buddhist commune in San Francisco. Somewhere between living in the commune (where he had to hide his earthly cello playing) and two music conservatories, Russell met and worked with the poet Allen Ginsberg.

Russell arrived in downtown New York in 1973, at the age of twenty-two. He moved into an apartment building on East Twelfth Street. Ginsberg donated electricity through an extension cord. The punk musician Richard Hell lived in the same building, and the composer Rhys Chatham shared a room with Russell for a time.

“Arthur kept up with pop music, but he didn’t care about fashion,” his longtime partner, Tom Lee, recalls. “He wore T-shirts and jeans. He cut his hair on full moons, which is when he liked to go into the studio. He was self-conscious about his acne scars.”

“After he went to New York and when he came home, he was always completely immersed in his music,” his mother, Emily Russell, says. “He kept pieces of paper and score sheets in his shirt pockets—he always liked shirts with two pockets—and no matter where he was he would stop what he was doing and jot down notes or words.”

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Russell found the downtown disco the Gallery and met the d.j. Nicky Siano. The music instantly made sense to Russell. Disco's repetition and layering were, after all, not so different from Buddhist chants or Philip Glass's looped ostinatos. Russell entered New York's Sun Dragon studio in November of 1977 with Siano and a group of professional musicians, including David Byrne, on guitar. A year later, the song "Kiss Me Again" was released, under the band name Dinosaur, on Sire Records, the company's first dance twelve-inch single. It is the most conservative of Russell's dance recordings but possibly his best. After asking, "Am I woman? Or a slave?," the singer Myriam Valle spends much of the song repeating, "Oh baby, oh baby, here we are again," as the music decides not to be wherever here is. In the course of more than twelve minutes, phrases emerge and wrap around each other: Peter Zummo's gorgeous trombone motif, Russell's pizzicato cello theme, and a growing drone of loud, dissonant guitars which falls out of time with drums as it ends the song. When the smoke clears, genre is just a memory.

"The World of Arthur Russell" does not include "Kiss Me Again," but it does include the song that established Russell in the dance scene. "Is It All Over My Face" was produced with a club d.j. named Steve D'Acquisto and released in 1980. The imposing Ingram Brothers, veteran players of dance-music sessions, were hired as the rhythm section, but the singers were three unknown dancers D'Acquisto and Russell had met at David Mancuso's private club the Loft, then on Prince Street. One of the singers, Melvina Woods, repeats, "Is it all over my face? You've caught me love dancing," which is fairly unimposing, as chants go. The music vamps around two root notes, rolling along and picking up hitchhikers: a small piano phrase, a bit of vocalese, a conga part. It's a step down from the catharsis of "Kiss Me Again," but the sweet and playful mood is of a piece with Russell's body of work. Russell's idea of Nirvana had little to do with gravitas or asceticism. Charm and restraint gild his careful repetitions and variations.

Russell's recording sessions were a departure from the average hit-making process: they were closer in principle to jazz than to pop or dance. Musicians received brief instructions, rehearsed equally briefly, and then played for as long as felt right. Tapes from these sessions were then edited and recombined to make multiple records, a practice common to Jamaican pop forms like dub reggae. Russell often mixed songs more than ten times, highlighting different instruments each time, seeing infinity in an inch of tape. Patient business partners and label owners paid for these sessions, hoping for pop products to sell, not avant-garde experiments. It is to Russell's credit that they are somehow both.

Questions and Answers with Matt Wolf about *Wild Combination*

What misconceptions or exaggerations exist in the public mind about this Russell, who was, as the film illustrates, a very complex person?

I think there are a bunch of tropes or clichés about the “forgotten genius,” a kind of Picasso mythology surrounding numerous cultural figures who were significantly recognized after their deaths. I’m not sure it’s important to classify Arthur as a genius or to mythologize his obscurity. I think in the film you’ll find that the biographical elements help explain why Arthur didn’t become famous like some of his contemporaries. As the writer and musician David Toop said, “He clearly wanted to be successful, and he had very few of the attributes which help you to make it in the entertainment industry.” Arthur had shots and opportunities to reach a wider audience, but for many reasons, it didn’t happen. That being said, I think Arthur was always looking toward the future, and that his music had a futuristic quality to it. It doesn’t surprise me at all that he found an audience decades after he was making work.

Do you think of Russell differently having completed this undertaking—conducting the interviews, digging through the footage?

Absolutely. It’s funny to work on a project about somebody who is no longer around to speak about himself. I feel a deep sense of knowing or empathy for Arthur based on all of the things people have told me. But at the same time, I feel a kind of reservation or concern about being fair and considering how all of these things might make Arthur feel. It’s as if I have a relationship with this person, whom I unfortunately never knew.

Talk some about the process of making the film. Most Arthur fans have always thought that there was a lack of documentation, especially video of him. How did you find all this stuff?

When I started making the film, I didn’t think it could hold a feature length precisely for this reason: I didn’t think enough visual material existed to bring Arthur to life.

This ended up being a productive challenge and forced me to creatively imagine different ways to represent Arthur and his music. We shot a number of things with actors in VHS and Super 8—in cornfields, on the Staten Island Ferry, by the West Side Piers—that were mysteriously evocative of Arthur. It was almost like fake archival material. We also did a number of stylized recreations of interiors and objects from Arthur’s life. I think the lack of archival materials ended up helping me develop a more interesting visual language.

Archival research is sort of like a treasure hunt. And we were lucky. We found amazing new stuff. There aren’t hundreds of hours of Arthur talking to the camera, in fact there is nothing like that. But I think the rarity of the material makes what we do have even more special.

What was your impression of Arthur’s parents? Did you recognize some way in which Oskaloosa might have influenced him?

I was so inspired by Arthur’s parents Chuck and Emily. They met as kids and have lived in Oskaloosa, Iowa for their entire lives. Chuck in particular is a real character and has an incredible

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sense of comedic timing, which I think you'll find in the film. But both Chuck and Emily possess a kind of worldliness and wisdom that is very inspiring, and must have affected Arthur. I definitely think Arthur felt an immense connection to the landscape and iconography of Iowa, particularly corn. In the film there are a number of photographs that Chuck took of Arthur in cornfields or by tractors.

In the film you make great use of visual artistry to accompany the music. A number of these images evoke childhood and play, both directly and indirectly. Can you speak to this? What about Arthur makes these natural reference points?

I'm glad you see that in the film—it's a major goal of mine to bring out this thread of childlike experience and play. I think that's one of the most significant reasons that I connect to Arthur and his music. There's a kind of insistent clinging to childhood and the energy, optimism, and joy of that period. Sometimes Arthur sounds like a little kid, or conveys feelings with the sincerity and simplicity of a child. And other times he sings directly about it, "Calling All Kids, Calling All Kids... Grownups are crazy!" Part of me thinks Arthur truly did believe that grownups are crazy!

Why do you think Arthur could never put an end to his tracks? Does perfectionism alone justify such a struggle?

I can relate to this struggle; it was painful to finish my film, but it was time. When you're making something out of nothing the possibilities are endless. I think a way of coping is to engage in a process. Arthur was deeply and methodically connected to his process. Sure, there was a fair mix of neurosis and self-defeating paranoia mixed in. But I think he was in love with making music. It wasn't always about finishing.

Your past films have dealt with issues of gay identity and being gay in America. While Arthur's homosexuality is certainly only one aspect of a complex individual, what connection do you see, if any, between this film and any overarching topical interests you have as a filmmaker?

I hope people regard *Wild Combination* as a queer film. A major connection I feel to Arthur is that he was gay. And I chose to make the love story between Tom Lee and Arthur central to the film. But on the other hand, the film isn't about gay culture. I would say that Arthur and Tom didn't have that kind of primary connection to a gay community or culture. But as a filmmaker, yes, I am interested in gay biographies and gay cultural figures from this particular era. And Arthur's story is an extension of these interests.

Why does Arthur's music and persona continue to be so captivating to so many, more so now than perhaps even during his lifetime?

I think Arthur's music is intensely, viscerally personal. You feel close to the person singing and, at least for me, that resonates emotionally. There's tremendous beauty in Arthur's music, and there's so much different kinds of material. Not only do people want to experience more of Arthur's music for these reasons, I think they desire a deeper connection or a fuller sense of the artist. It is a bit of a cliché to value art that has a timelessness to it. But I think Arthur's work is like that—you can be in any time or place listening to this, but at the same time the legendary periods—underground disco, the avant-garde, CBGB—in which it was all made are fascinating. I hope people continue to discover Arthur's music for many more years.