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Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell

[Plexifilm]

Lou Reed – Berlin

[Miriam Collection]

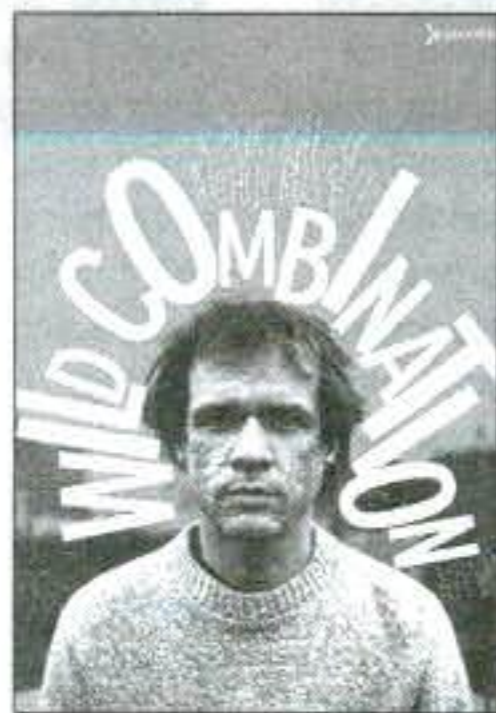
Anyone who mythologizes the glory days of East Village bohemia will watch *Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell* with a frog in their throat.

Sympathetic enough to count as a fan's hagiography, this modestly mounted documentary details the life, death and artistic evolution of Arthur Russell – one of the most remarkable figures to emerge out of the 1970s downtown New York music scene. An Iowa farm boy turned avant-everything cello player, Russell was a child of the corn whose impulsive teenage escape to San Francisco landed him in hippie Buddhist communes and on a recording session with Allen Ginsberg, who features the musician on his 1971 *First Blues* album.

Later, Russell would move into Ginsberg's East 12th Street apartment building and continue writing hundreds of songs, articulating his passions in a keening, emotionally nuanced voice and experimenting with percussive loops and electronic effects that transported his compositions beyond genre.

Russell, whose severe acne and burgeoning homosexuality marked him as an outsider in the Midwest, blossomed in the polymorphously perverse Manhattan of the 1970s. He befriended seemingly everyone, including David Byrne and Philip Glass,

with whom he collaborated, and was the musical director of the Kitchen, back when SoHo was an artist's free zone not an outlet mall. As Matt Wolf's documentary recounts, through interviews, sound recordings and grainy archival video footage, Russell was not only prodigal but prolific. He embraced the nascent disco movement, creating



revolutionary dance tracks, and may well have been the first East Villager to sport a trucker cap because, well, he was from Iowa. Those rural roots are emphasized in poignant conversations with Russell's now-elderly parents, for whom his homosexuality came as a shock and

whose 1992 death from AIDS, at age 40, they accepted with surprising grace – welcoming Russell's lover, Tom Lee, into their lives. If *Wild Combination* never really manages to give us a complete portrait of Russell, it will whet appetites for his music, which is as at

once as unique, and as contemporary, as ever.

Lou Reed was already a legendary character by the time Russell got to Manhattan and against strong, largely self-inflicted, odds has managed to outlive his legend. He's settled into the cranky seniority of downtown bohemian royalty, a leathered, weathered icon who gets by on the occasional concept album without having done anything that mattered in maybe 20 years. *Berlin*, an adored/despised 1973 concept album that mattered a lot, got the big-band treatment Reed had originally intended

in 2006-7. Failed country-and-Western songwriter, bazillionaire crockery smasher and shockingly successful filmmaker Julian Schnabel brought his crew to the St. Ann's Warehouse, near the Brooklyn waterfront, where these concerts were staged.

Reed's song cycle about star-crossed junkies is gorgeous gutter opera, and the Hal Willner all-star version is not without its rhapsodies. With ringers like Steven Bernstein in the brass section, seminal glam era guitarist Steven Hunter back in the fold, vocalists like Sharon Jones and Antony (... and the Johnsons) Hegarty, a children's choir, and original album producer Bob Ezrin conducting, it's all somehow sublime. Only Reed shifts on the parade. Even Bob Dylan at his most obliterated has more regard for his poetry. Lou only looks happy when he shuts up and plays the guitar. But Schnabel is even worse, hijacking the stage to burble on about his Yiddische mother, and foisting his daughter Lola's superfluous Super-8 movies on the audience. Feh! —*Steve Dollar*

The Beach Boys and the Satan

[Zeit Media Limited]

Cockamamie corollary documentary from German TV that presents the Beach Boys in the context of dark vs. light. Midway through concert footage and interviews with Brian, footage of Sharon Tate's murder coverage and relatively uncirculated crime scene police photos are inserted, posing a stark polarized contrast to Wilson's sun-and-surf foundations. Included are interviews with Kim Fowley, Greg Shaw and crime writer John Gilmore, providing some yin-and-yang to the tag team family gathering, as Apollonian Wilson retreats into seclusion while Dionysian Manson relocates to the desert. Though condensed with lots of band facts

overlooked, Manson gets less camera time but more interesting presentation. It's just a weird Euro-version of the American 1960s. —*David T. Lindsay*

Savage Streets

[BCI/Deimos]

While 1982's *Vice Squad* remains the sweltering pinnacle of punk-ass depravity during the waning wild west years for LA's revenge epic cycle, director Danny Steinmann (*Friday the 13th: A New Beginning*) gave Linda Blair her most deliriously resilient role as a girl-gang leader chasing down gang-bangers who raped her kid sister, played by Linnea Quigley. Tires are slashed, faces are gashed, there's a ballyhooed shower catfight, a bride-to-be thrown off a bridge and big hair with bad attitude all 'round. Armed with a crossbow, Blair is believable as the teenage vigilante even though the role was originally written with Cherie Currie in mind. Which isn't all that hard to see since Blair's leather zip-up jumpsuit is right out of a Suzi Quatro fantasy. —*David T. Lindsay*

Simon, King of Witches

[Dark Sky Films]

Not to be mistaken for some low-budget horror movie, looking more like John C. Holmes than Maurice Evans on *Bewitched*, Andrew Prine begins with a soliloquy: "My name is Simon. I live in a storm drain." Even a delusional warlock has more scruples than the twisted, hedonistic hipsters of the time. Selling sacred talismans, he's arrested for vagrancy after a dalliance with the DA's daughter, but finds hustlers and dopers see him as something of a counter-culture hit-man to settle scores and save them from their own misdeeds. He even sees through Wicca and tries to "liberate" the subservient men! It's the first time that I'd ever heard mention of "priapsia" as a life-threatening condition – nowadays it's a medical breakthrough, if it lasts more than four hours! A great attack on all that hippie crap, this movie would make the perfect compliment for an evening of '70s viewing along with *Electra Glide in Blue* and *DeathMaster* with Robert Quarry.

—*David T. Lindsay*