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Rewind: Tim Lawrence on “Go Bang #5”

Posted: November 8th, 2010 | Author: [Finn](#) | Filed under: [Features](#) | Tags: [Arthur Russell](#), [Dinosaur L](#), [Francois Kevorkian](#), [Interview](#), [sounds-like-me.com](#), [Tim Lawrence](#) | [No Comments](#) »



In discussion with [Tim Lawrence](#) on “Go Bang #5” by Dinosaur L (1982). The work on your book on Arthur Russell, “Hold On To Your Dreams”, has probably made you quite an expert on his works, but when was actually the first time you heard “Go Bang! #5”? Was it the song as a single, or did you hear it in the context of the whole “24 – 24 Music” album?

I first heard François Kevorkian's remix of "Go Bang! #5" when I bought the "Spaced Out: Ten Original Disco Funk Grooves" back in 1997. I was living in New York at the time, and being a bit of a house head, had been quite resistant to buying so-called "disco classics". By then I had already heard Todd Terry's sampling of Lola Blank's crazed-girl-on-helium rendition of the "Go Bang" lyric, which appeared on "Bango (To The Batmobile)," a 1988 house track. I only got to hear the version that appears on the "24 → 24 Music" album – which is titled "#5 Go Bang!" – later on.

Arthur Russell was responsible for a whole lot of outstanding music.

Why did you choose "Go Bang! #5" over other of his songs? What makes it so important for you?

The first thing I should probably say is that "#5 Go Bang!" appeared on an album by Dinosaur L, not an album by Arthur Russell. Of course Arthur (if I can call him by his first name; at times I feel as though I know him, even though we never met) was the key figure behind Dinosaur L, and pulled all of the appearing musicians together. But Arthur was dead-set on the idea of collaboration, and believed that the relationships he formed with other musicians were meaningful, so he introduced different names for the different line-ups he formed.

Why is "Go Bang" so important? That's the record that I've always thought his most complete, inasmuch as it seemed to capture Arthur's utopian desire to combine the various sounds of downtown New York – disco, punk/new wave, loft jazz, and the post-minimalist form of compositional music known as new music – in a single piece of music. The record also combines complexity and simplicity; it contains scores of ideas, yet never relinquishes the centrality of the groove. I like all sorts of music, but I particularly like music that manages to combine these elements. I could have also opted instead for "Kiss Me Again", "Platform On The Ocean", the "World of Echo" album, "This Is How We Walk On the Moon". "World of Echo" is an extraordinary piece of work, "Kiss Me Again" gets better by the listen. But "Go Bang" is the one that stands out, especially in terms of dance floor dynamics, plus Arthur was happy with the "Go Bang" turned out, whereas he hated the final mix of "Kiss Me Again" and seemed to feel awkward about the obscure quality of "World of Echo".

Did you have the instant impression that this would be a pivotal track for yourself, just as it probably has been for a lot of others?

As I mentioned, I was a real house head why I first heard “Go Bang”, and I remember listening to it during a period when I was finding it pretty difficult to get into any seventies music at all (despite the repeated efforts of Stefan Prescott and Joe Claussell, who sold me records at Dance Tracks in New York). Back then I felt that the live drums of disco lacked the propulsive dynamism of house music’s electronic beats, and I also thought that the sonic framework of disco was conventional in terms of structure and instrumentation when compared to house. But “Go Bang” was organized around a groove that anticipated the decentered structure of house, and it also contained a series of jazz-oriented solo workouts and alien sound bites that surpassed anything I’d heard in house. I also recognized the Lola Blank sample from “Bango (To The Batmobile)”, and needed less than half-a-second to work out that Todd Terry had effectively pillaged the vocal from a record that contained a hundred more ideas than his own. So “Go Bang” opened me up to a whole new field of music, and even a new way of listening, and it did so more or less immediately.

“Go Bang! #5” is certainly not the usual dance floor song. It is very complex, and structured differently to a lot of music played in clubs at the time it was originally released in 1981. How would you describe what Russell and his musicians did? What makes the sound of “Go Bang! #5” so unique?

First of all, Arthur brought together an unusual mix of musicians into the studio to record “24 → 24 Music”. Julius Eastman, Peter Gordon, Jill Kroesen and Peter Zummo came from the compositional scene, but appreciated disco, funk and jazz, and were interested in moving beyond the institutional and conventional limits that came with most forms of composition. The Ingram brothers, a family of well-known session musicians from Philadelphia, had a background in disco and funk, and were brought in to create the rhythm section as well as deliver additional parts. Rome Neal was an amateur percussionist who played the shekere when he danced at the Loft. Ed Tomney and Denise Mercedes were new wave guitarists who Arthur had worked with in different contexts. And Lola Blank was a gospel-trained

vocalist who had recently toured with James Brown. In short, the outlook was promising from the start.

Arthur presented his musicians with scores, but instead of insisting they follow his outline, he instructed them to use the music to veer off into a series of improvised jams. “Arthur came in with this road map, but then had five different pieces going at once”, the engineer Bob Blank told me when I was researching the biography. “He had one of those lateral brains that could hear across all this different material”. Following the session, Arthur took the tapes, fed them through two 24-track tape machines, and started to chop, change and combine the tracks in order to create a set of songs for the album. In fact Peter Gordon told me that he didn’t have any memory of Arthur walking into the studio and telling the musicians to record a track called “Go Bang”, plus a bunch of other songs. Rather, Arthur engineered a series of instrumental takes and overdubs, and then generated songs like “Go Bang” out of them. The central role of the tape machine and the studio led Arthur to title the resulting album “24 → 24 Music”, which was short for “24-Track Tape Machine → 24-Track Tape Machine Music”.

Arthur, then, was a composer who had lots of ideas, and he wrote these ideas down on paper. But he also believed in the skill and originality of his co-musicians, so he created an environment that allowed them to improvise and bring in their own ideas, because he believed that music would be better – more inventive and more dynamic – if it was developed collectively and with an element of spontaneity. He also thought that music was at its most interesting when it included hybrid influences, so his musicians were drawn from a variety of backgrounds, with Arthur committed to the idea of helping them getting along, or at least spark of some interesting sounds. At the same time, Arthur also wanted to explore the outer-limits of studio technology, and to see what would happen if he played a game of existential hide-and-seek with the recorded material. Along with the skilled input of Bob Blank and (on the twelve-inch remix) François Kevorkian, these elements help begin to explain the complex, unusual content of “Go Bang”.

How do you place the song in the frame of the album “24 – 24 Music”?

Was it the session highlight or rather another part of a coherent listening experience?

I think the song is the highlight of the album, but as I've just mentioned, it wasn't pre-planned, but instead grew out of the session and Arthur's playful approach to the studio. The track is definitely the highlight of the album, but it's still very much part of the album, which generated this danceable mash-up sound that included Jill Kroesen's discordant vocals, rattling percussion, and creaky guitar lines – all cut or trimmed back by François for the twelve-inch. Other elements that are central to the twelve-inch version – Peter Zummo's opening trombone motif, Lola Blank's topsy-turvy vocal, and Eastman's orgasmic vocal – are unused or much more subdued on the album version. So while the François remix was and remains a momentarily successful dance floor mix, the album version is less direct, less streamlined and less coherent, which somehow makes it a more evocative of the musical chaos that was unfolding in downtown New York across the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Of course I have to ask you if you prefer a particular version of “Go Bang! #5”. Was it the album version, the seminal mix François Kevorkian did, or even the previously unreleased mix done by Walter Gibbons? Or all together?

I love the François mix and I love the album version. The twelve-inch is more geared up for the dance floor, and both David Mancuso and Larry Levan selected the record again and again. “Go Bang” was quite simply one of the biggest records to break in downtown New York in the early 1980s, and it's still going strong today. But David also respected the album version hugely, and he continued to play the album version in the early part of the evening after the twelve-inch came out. In fact David tried out the album version at a party in London a few years ago, and the response was incredible. In a strange way the album version now sounds more contemporary than the remix, in part because it's been played a lot less often and therefore sounds fresher, and in part because dance producers have been trawling the early 1980s in their attempt to develop a discordant aesthetic, and the album version sounds more typical of that moment than the smoother-sounding remix. In a strange loop of historical circumstance, then, the original recording of “Go Bang” has come to encapsulate the discordant groove that has

become so incredibly hip in recent years. I wonder what Arthur would have made of it all.

Given its experimental nature, why do you think “Go Bang! #5” caught on so quickly with the scene then? Was it the perfect record to continue where the music of the classic disco era collapsed at the end of the 70’s? Did it offer something that club music needed then?

The record was perfectly timed. DJs and dancers had become tired of disco; too many producers had moved into the genre, and too much of the material they were producing was derivative and unimaginative. Few of them would have given their vocal support to the backlash against disco, because the movement was oozing homophobia and racism, but a number have commented in interviews that they’d also become thoroughly tired of disco. They were ready for fresh, interesting sounds, and “Go Bang” offered them precisely that. ZE Records released an album titled “Mutant Disco” in 1981, and that’s also what “Go Bang” offered – a mutant form of disco that injected new ideas into dance. In a way all of Arthur’s dance records were mutant – indeed all his music was mutant, even when he wanted to record something that was more recognizable. He was an ideas person, and thought that dance music needed to get away from its obsession with studio slickness in order to reconnect with the organic dance floor.

Do you think DJs like David Mancuso or Larry Levan supported and utilized “Go Bang! #5” to direct the club soundtrack of the early 80’s in a particular direction they preferred over other possibilities, or was it just an extension of an adventurousness in the booth they pursued anyway?

In the early 1980s there was very little appetite among DJs and dancers to hear just one kind of sound. People had been battered by the disco monolith and they wanted choice. David Mancuso (who thought of himself as a musical host rather than DJ) and Larry Levan happened to be at the head of this curve, having pursued a pluralistic, panoramic, inclusive approach to DJing throughout the 1970s (with Mancuso beginning in 1970 and Levan in 1974). But between 1980-84, most DJs were playing a broad range of sounds, in part because no sound had emerged to dominate in the way disco had. That would change in 1985, when house broke out of Chicago, and rap started to become harder. Of course the great thing about “Go Bang” was that it didn’t

simply fit into a DJ set that moved around different sounds; it embodied range in its very make-up.

If you put “Go Bang! #5” in the context of the disco tradition, how much is disco actually a part of it, and how much stems from the things going on musically in the experimental side of New York’s downtown scene? Did Russell pave the way, or were such developments already in full swing when “Go Bang! #5” arrived?

The foundation of the record is disco, or an uptempo R&B version of disco, because it features the Ingram brothers. Then again, I’ve never really believed that disco is definable in any coherent way. There are recurring elements that appear across many disco records, but beyond a basic four-on-the-four bass beat, nothing is core to disco – so a disco track doesn’t have to have a vocal, it doesn’t have to feature a string section, it doesn’t have to include a break, it can be rhythmically or rhythmically simple, and so on. Originally the disco coinage simply referred to the kind of music that was being played in Manhattan’s discotheques and private parties during the early 1970s, and so the term worked as an umbrella for all sorts of sounds – soul and funk, as well as Latin, African and European imports. “Go Bang” grew out of that tradition; the tradition where a record was a disco record if it worked in a discotheque (or a private party). Beyond that, yes, there were elements that were recognizably disco, such as the rhythm section, but there were also a number of more experimental elements, and these grew out of the downtown compositional and jazz scenes. Arthur very much pioneered the introduction of experimental elements into dance, and he was also very influential in developing the exchange between compositional music and new wave. He was a natural when it came to boundary crossing. It never occurred to him to do anything else, because why should anyone choose to restrict their freedom?

I think it is interesting that a lot of danceable records like “Go Bang! #5” did not surface until the classic phase of disco had ended. Do you think there was no interest in such approaches to disco before that, or did the musicians decidedly wait to express a certain guilty pleasure until their target sound was officially over? What did it take to connect the disco and post punk scene on a bigger level?

Record selectors such as David Mancuso and Larry Levan were always drawing on a broad range of music. They played at parties that would last for ten or twelve hours, sometimes even longer, and there was no way they were going to play regular disco for the whole night. David has told me in interviews that disco was fine, and he played quite a lot of disco, but that disco was never more than one slice of the pie. So when he and Larry started to play “Go Bang”, it was entirely in keeping with the way they had always played records. As for the conditions required to bring disco and post-punk together, well, these are massive historical questions, but in short, it required punk and new wave fans to lessen their cultural and aesthetic hostility to dance music. I don’t know if dance DJs had to move so far in the other direction, because many 1970s spinners grew up with rock and loved rock, but they would only play rock if it was danceable, so they really needed to wait for mid-1970s punk producers to get over their antagonism to polyrhythm and the body, and to start producing music that was edgy *and* danceable.

As Russell was involved with both club and art contexts with “Go Bang! #5” and also other songs, what role did he play in either context? Was he the odd one out or did he fit in?

Do you mind if I ask you to read *Hold On to Your Dreams*? I’m just kidding, but really, these are enormous questions, and I feel like I’m doing you and Arthur a disservice with these truncated answers. Anyhow, in short, Arthur was a bit of a strange fish from a young age, and didn’t assimilate easily into social situations. He could be awkward and goofy, as well as shy. But he was also inventive, open-minded, and committed to collaboration, and as a result he ended up playing an influential role in the dance scene and the compositional scene. He played a major role when it came to introducing rock elements into the compositional scene, and he was a major figure when it came to stretching dance beyond the tired formula of disco. Figures in those scenes tended to think of him as being odd and even unnecessarily contentious, but the power of his ideas and the energy with which he pursued them were undeniable.

Does it even make sense to actually separate Russell’s music in different backgrounds, or is he is all the same as dancer and as songwriter? Are his productions in either fields equally important?

No, it doesn't really make sense to separate Arthur's music according to genre because that's not how he saw his music. At times he wanted to make that sounded conventional, so the Flying Hearts, were supposed to sound like a conventional pop band, and not like some kind of exploratory amalgam, for example. But generally speaking Arthur was interested in exploring sounds, and seeing what happened when different combinations were tried out. It wasn't that he woke up in the morning and thought to himself, "Hey-ho, this morning I'm going to try to do something different". Trying out novel approaches and combinations was simply what he did.

As for the question about his productions, I think Arthur's importance lies in his wider approach to music making rather than any set of recordings. But with regard to those recordings, it's clear that his early dance releases – from "Kiss Me Again" through to "Go Bang" – were influential at the time of their release, and none of his other recordings had anything like the same kind of quantifiable impact. Since then, other dance-oriented recordings such as "Let's Go Swimming" and "Treehouse/Schoolbell" have added to the impression that Arthur was at the cutting edge of mutant disco, and that's been confirmed in the "Disco Not Disco" compilations and so on.

Beyond his dance output, Arthur's instrumental/orchestral pieces have had a mixed impact. There's no question that "World of Echo" is a stunningly original and beautiful album that didn't do well when it was originally released, but it's been pretty successful as an Audika re-release. The same applies to the "Instrumentals" album, although the pieces on that remain somewhat fragmentary and slight. I know that some people think that "Tower of Meaning" is Arthur's finest work, but to my ears it sounds like a relatively conventional piece of slow-moving minimalist music – it's the only Arthur release that doesn't sound like it was recorded by Arthur, at least to my ears. Then there's Arthur's wonky electronic pop, which Audika compiled on "Calling Out of Context", and which Philip Glass included in the latter part of the posthumous album "Another Thought", which was released in 1992. "Calling Out of Context" stunned everyone because it demonstrated that Arthur could appeal beyond the dance audience. All of the material on the album sounds incredibly contemporary – and it's probably reasonable to say that all music that survives the test of time is important.

I always thought that Russell was also a very gifted lyricist. Although he did not write too many lines for most his songs, nearly all of them stuck. What do you make of his lyrics in “Go Bang! #5” and other of his songs?

Arthur was very much a poet, and as Peter Gordon told me in the first interview I conducted for the book, this side of Arthur has been very much neglected. Arthur was close with the Beatnik poet Allen Ginsberg, who was a neighbor, and Arthur and Ginsberg exchanged music and poetry lessons with each other for quite a few years. Arthur’s ability as a wordsmith is ultimately stunning. He showed a consistent ability to come up with seemingly simple but ultimately durable lines. The lyric “I wanna see all my friends at one go bang” remains the best description of the dance floor I’ve ever heard, while the lyrics of “Is It All Over My Face”, “Pop Your Funk” and “You’ve Gotta Be Clean on Your Bean” were fully of sly and playful innuendo. Arthur’s lyric writing is even more developed and stunning on the songs that ended up appearing on “Another Thought” and “Calling Out of Context”. And when you see them printed on a page, as they are in the sleeve notes to those albums, you also begin to appreciate his skill as a vocalist, because many of the lines just don’t seem to scan, but when you listen to the music, Arthur sings them effortlessly.

There were also other downtown artists exploring their love for disco but coming from another background, from New York’s no wave scene for instance. What other music from there would you rate as highly as Russell’s?

I’ve always liked ESG and can listen to their music repeatedly, but their range doesn’t compare with Arthur’s. The same applies to Liquid Liquid – their music is singular and compelling, but it’s quite easy to recognize. I like the music that ZE put out, but I don’t rate any of it like I rate “Go Bang”.

As Arthur Russell also worked with other likeminded artists, would you say these collaborations were necessities and he rather preferred to work on his own, or did he actually seek out to collaborate?

No, his collaborations were absolutely central to his work, and he made a point of releasing his music under artist names that reflected these line-ups, and not under his own name. Arthur’s movement from Iowa to San Francisco

to New York, and within New York from uptown to downtown, was very much motivated by his desire to surround himself with more and more musicians – with more and more collaborators. There were lots of opportunities for that in San Francisco, and the Manhattan School of Music was supposed to be a great place to work with some of the most prestigious tutors in compositional music, but it was in downtown New York that Arthur discovered this amazing cauldron of musical activity across compositional music, new wave, disco and eventually hip hop. He decided to live there precisely because he loved to work collaboratively. That doesn't mean that Arthur's individuality can't be heard on any of his recordings; it just means that he expressed himself while working with others. The only real exception to this is the album "World of Echo", which was a solo effort.

Todd Terry sampled "Go Bang! #5" for "Bango", as he did with other of Russell's songs, like "Treehouse" for example. And there a legions of other electronic artists referencing his music and citing him as influence. Did he open doors for what was to come musically after his untimely death?

I don't know there legions of electronic artists who sampled Arthur. Roger Sanchez sampled "Is It All Over My Face" early on, and there was some awful cover of the same song a few years ago – I won't bother to dredge the name out of the gutter. There have also been some interesting reworkings of tracks like "Kiss Me Again". Overall, though, I think that dance people get more out of Arthur than samples. Quite a few DJs, for instance, wrote to me after they read the book and talked about how much they loved not just his music but his approach to making music, which demonstrated its infinite potential, and also how there were times when just listening to Arthur's songs helped them through a really difficult period. I don't know if Arthur resonated so forcefully around the time of his death, because house music was in full swing at that moment, and for quite a while house didn't seem to allow for embrace of anything that didn't display an electronic four-on-the-floor beat. After all, DJs were into programming that way, and dancers wanted to keep the adrenalin running. But for a whole load of reasons house started to become less urgent and important towards the end of the 1990s, and the Arthur re-releases started to come out just when producers were beginning to look to the early

1980s for ideas. So I don't think Arthur necessarily opened doors for what was to come after he died, but something like 12 years later he became incredibly relevant, and he's gone on to be a key figure for all sorts of people, from Twitch to the DFA guys.

Why do you think “Go Bang! #5” would remain a classic until this day? Is it people finally discovering his music after years of it flying under the radar, or is it just the material that is necessary to reach such a status?

“Go Bang” was never under the radar – or at least the François remix wasn't. I think it's survived because it works on so many levels – it's got drive, it's got drama, it's got polyrhythm, it's got a series of extremely unusual vocal parts, and it's got instrumental complexity. If you think about key tracks in any range of genres, it's usually quite easy to find other tracks that have mimicked that sound and run with it to the point where the original starts to sound boring. But that just didn't happen with “Go Bang”. Nobody has ever made a record that sounds anything like it, and it still sounds incredibly fresh. We cherish it because it's so absorbing, and also because it's one of a kind.

Do you see any comparable successors to Arthur Russell's legacy in music, or was he in a league of his own? The genius that does not appear too often?

I don't know about the idea of the genius, and I don't think Arthur believed he was one, even if some of his friends thought he was. Arthur was just into playing music in quite a humble way, and trying to get goods sound by himself and, above all, with other musicians. He was just open to the idea of working with people and with sound. There are so many other people who approach music in the same way, and whether or not we think of them as being geniuses, I think the point is that music is always allowing for people to express their complexity, often in interesting social combinations. That said, there's no doubting that Arthur holds a special place in my heart. I relate to what he did in so many ways.