

theartsdesk Q&A: Tim Lawrence

Interview with the biographer of cult genre-traversing musician Arthur Russell

By, Joe Muggs



Tim Lawrence - disco historian and Arthur Russell's biographer

Tim Lawrence is an author and academic, whose musical studies have led him from the dance scene of the 1990s to researching New York's disco scene – his *Love Saves the Day* was the first and remains the definitive history of the music, history and politics of disco – and then to the singular figure of Arthur Russell. A cellist, singer, songwriter, producer, composer and electronic artist, Russell existed both within and without disco and many other scenes in a period of cultural ferment in New York when many of the sounds that form the fabric of popular culture were being first created.

Russell is in many ways the very definition of a modern musician; traversing genres, exploring technology, latterly finding a diverse audience naturally via the internet and the networks of club scenes; however his most creative period was in the 1970s and early 1980s, and he died of AIDS-related illness in 1992, a full decade before the rest of the musical world would catch up with his methods and diversity.

Lawrence's biography of Russell, *Hold on to your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene 1973-1992* not only traces Russell's life from his cornbelt upbringing in Oskaloosa, Iowa via Iowa city then the San Francisco of the late 1960s to settling in the fertile artistic community of an otherwise depressed and broken 1970s New York, but documents that fascinating community in immense detail. Speaking to him, as with reading the book, it's clear that his relationship to the late singer, and to the network of people around him, has become one of strong affection and admiration.

JOE MUGGS: *How is the launch of this book going?*

TIM LAWRENCE: The reception's been great so far. The launch in New York couldn't have been better. Sukhdev Sandhu at NYU asked me to speak at an Arthur Russell conference, which was a real privilege. The conference was held in October and turned out to be a special combination of intellectual inquiry and emotional expression. Chuck and Emily, Arthur's parents, came over from Maine, where they spend part of the year, and they came with Arthur's sisters and other members of the family. It was especially good to meet Chuck and Emily. They'd put so much into this book, sharing their memories, letters and photos, and it was always a regret that I hadn't managed to travel to Oskaloosa, Iowa, where they live, as it'd have been good to get to know them and the town better than turned out to be possible. There were certainly moments during the writing of the book when we needed to deal with some quite tricky issues, especially around the explicitness or some sections of the book, which were inspired by Arthur's songs and life [Russell was openly gay]. But I felt we came through those exchanges quite strongly, and that was confirmed when we met at the conference. Otherwise, the conference was this bundle of energy, with younger musicians, researchers and fans mixing with musicians, vocalists and composers who had worked with Arthur. Arthur was always set on reaching across the generations with his music, and the conference felt like it was a small realization of that goal.

After the conference we all headed over to the Housing Works bookstore in SoHo to this event that was curated by Peter Gordon, the leader of the Love of Life Orchestra and a close friend and collaborator of Arthur's. Peter chose the setting and it was perfect – all wood and books and high ceilings – so it was very warm and acoustically vibrant. A couple of hundred people showed up for the evening, which featured a range of musicians playing Arthur's songs. As with the conference,

there was this interesting mix of older collaborators – people like Steven Hall, Ernie Brooks, Peter Zummo, Joyce Boyden, Peter Gordon himself, and so on – mixing with younger musicians, including Arthur's niece and nephew. It's difficult to pick out highlights from the event, but the duets of Alex Waterman on cello and Nick Hallett on vocals were extraordinarily gorgeous. It was the first time I've heard someone do a cover of an Arthur song and think that it sounds as good as Arthur's effort, if not even better. And I found that quite reassuring, but it confirmed this idea that Arthur's songs could translate – that his songs could enjoy a life beyond Arthur's own very distinctive interpretation. I think everyone in the room felt something very resonant and profound unfolded that night. The fact that I happened to read a couple of passages from the book, with Peter Gordon backing me on keyboards, seemed almost incidental. We all left that room on a real high. Other than that, there's just been a lot of very positive interest in the book. The Wire and a whole bunch of other magazines have given the biography a very positive write-up, which is always nice, of course. But I've been more struck by the responses of early readers who've torn their way through the book. As with some of the reviewers, these people are saying very hyperbolic things about the book – about it being a compelling book they couldn't put down, or the best biography they've ever read, or even a book that captures Arthur in its approach to his life. It's massively rewarding to hear these things – I can't pretend otherwise. *Does the [blog you're writing](#) help with that – both with linking people together and keeping your mind on the book?*

Well, it's just part of the landscape of promoting a book really nowadays. I created the blog when I published my first book, [Love Saves the Day](#), with the intention that the site would be a way of keeping the book alive after the initial flurry of reviews died down. Since then the site has taken on a life of its own. Inevitably I started a blog at one point, but ended up more or less discontinuing that when I found it was causing me unnecessary trouble – most notably, I was saying things that people I was working with didn't expect me to say. But I thought I'd create a new blog for the book because there are so many people who are into Arthur – who really have this emotional affinity with this music and life – and it struck me that it would be good for them to be able to get all of the information about the book in one place. So I post reviews of the book on the blog, and I'm also keeping posted about various Arthur events there, including two readings and music performances that are coming up at Donlon Books and the ICA in London. The blog has also enabled me to bring in other bits and pieces

about Arthur, including sometimes quite personal stories told by other listeners who are willing to go public on their affinity with his music and story. It's as if this little or perhaps not so little community of admirers has formed, and while Arthur is very sadly not around to enjoy this quite surprising wave of recognition that he's now receiving, the admirers are taking heart from being able to get to know each other and exchange information.

And where do you think the appeal of Arthur really lies? Was it maybe this ability you mention to conceal quite artistically profound subject matter in these innocent-seeming songs?



I think his appeal lies in his willingness and ability to work with complexity. Put simply, that meant he would follow his ear. In reality, that meant he would work across several genres at once, and would also explore what would happen if different aesthetic approaches within these distinctive genres were blended together – because Arthur was ultimately interested in connection, not separation. Beyond that, and as you suggest, Arthur could also express quite a complex range of

emotions and ideas in a single piece. By that I mean that it's possible to listen to any number of Arthur's recordings and think, wow, this idea is beautiful because it's so simple and pure, and yet at the same time that recording will probably contain no discernible structure, will feature Arthur's voice travelling in all sorts of unexpected leaps and directions, and with chord transitions that are equally startling. So he keeps all of these things in play.

I'm loathe to use the word genius, because it suggests that creativity is singular and comes from within an individual, whereas I believe quite strongly that creativity is almost always a collective act: that it's something that happens between individuals. In this sense the individual doesn't really exist; the individual is always in relation to something else. And I think this is true for Arthur, because although people often call him a genius, one of the things about his life that really struck me while I was researching the book was his absolute dedication to collaboration. This is really what he did with almost his entire life; he sought out other musicians and spent time playing with them. But if we're not going to use the genius word to describe Arthur, then I can maybe say that what was extraordinary about him was the way he was able to work on so many sounds and projects simultaneously, to the extent that he really never seemed to look to close down a possibility. If a possibility presented itself to him, Arthur would almost invariably follow it. It was this openness to possibility that led Arthur to record in several different genres or scenes at the same time, and he ended up doing this as much if not more than any other downtown musician –and this in a period when cross-generic expression was becoming really quite common.

What you say about the profound and the innocent combining at the same time in Arthur's music is true, not just lyrically but also musically. David Mancuso has a real way with words, and when I interviewed him for the book he described Arthur as being (and I'm quoting roughly) “Dylan and Coltrane rolled into one.” For me that quote captures the way Arthur could express an innocent, almost earthy simplicity with startling and perhaps thought-through complexity. Even if you listen to some of the seemingly simple songs he wrote for cello, it can be hard to discern a structure, notes go off at tangents, chord sequences are unexpected, and there's always Arthur's unusual sense of rhythm, which is about him striking unlikely beats. And yet despite this, there is something beguilingly simple about the piece as a whole. He manages

to bring all of this off in so many recordings, and ultimately that makes it very appealing to listen to.

Was that surface simplicity, the gentleness that was there, maybe mistaken for his music being “soft”, not having the edge or wildness of other experimental music?

I don't think I entirely agree that his work did all seem gentle. The original [24](#) → [24 Music](#), which includes the pre-remixed version of “Go Bang”, moves very close to distortion: not in the heavy metal sense, maybe, but it's there. And if you think about his orchestral pieces, quite often they would just disintegrate after two or three minutes, or if all was going well then after five minutes, because the musicians found it very hard to play this material and stay on top of all the improvisational elements that Arthur encouraged – because improvisation is great, but if several musicians plus a score are involved it can easily break down. Also his disco recordings really weren't obviously gentle at all. His first twelve-inch single, “Kiss Me Again”, wasn't clean and simple in any way; it started off this thing that we now call “[mutant disco](#)”, which was a phrase initially coined by Ze Records. “Kiss Me Again” was recorded around the time when Chic were reigning supreme and when disco had become this very highly produced sound. But for the “Kiss Me Again” session he brought in two drummers and two bass players and asked them to record in this rather discordant way so the drums were clashing and dragging, and bass players were developing this distorted harmony. Even the original “Is It All Over My Face” – the male vocal version, not the Larry Levan remix version, which ended up being quite smooth and dreamy – the original “Is It All Over My Face” was also quite raucous and full of clattering percussion and discordant voices.

Maybe Flying Hearts recordings get close to what you're suggesting and evoke this sweet and innocent Arthur, and with that line-up there was a concerted attempt to sound like a Fleetwood Mac. But no, the thing is he would follow his ears, and they led him into this gentle and contemplative territory, but just as often they led him into this quite wild and unpredictable music. So I don't think Arthur set out to be innocent and smooth, and ultimately it's incredibly hard to categorise Arthur's music in any way. If there is one thing that's consistent it's his determination to steer clear of aggressiveness. He's not always sweet or simple, but there's nothing in his music that sounds aggressive. You could say that came from his Buddhist faith, but I tend to lean towards the idea that Buddhism offered him a framework that matched his personality, which was in many respects shaped before he became a Buddhist.

There's this other great tension in talking about Arthur Russell, that some people love having him as an obscure cult figure, while others see this great loss that he never became famous. Do you have a sense of where he stood in relation to this?



Again, the thing was he reacted to the situation he found himself and just followed the infinite possibility of music. When he went into the studio with Hammond [John Hammond II, one of the most influential producers and talent scouts in US music industry history] and Hammond told him that he wanted him to be the next Dylan or the next Springsteen – two artists Hammond had championed, and two artists who were totally recognisable and simple – Arthur didn't show up solo with his guitar, which is what Dylan and Springsteen had done with Hammond. Instead he turned up with this eclectic and highly unusual line-up that included pop/rock musicians as well as composers from this bohemian, avant-garde downtown scene, and they started playing this really unusual-sounding music. Looking back, it seems as though Arthur just sailed past this opportunity to establish himself as the next Bob Dylan. But my sense is that he didn't go into the studio that day thinking that he wanted to deliberately do something that Hammond wouldn't get. He never thought "I'm missing an opportunity here to do what John Hammond wants me to". Instead he would have thought, "when John Hammond hears what I'm doing here with all these musicians, it's going to blow his mind". He thought John Hammond would get it and see that this could be the next style of great, transcendent pop music. He had his own criteria for success.

He always seemed to want to learn, which maybe was another thing that attracted him to the monastic discipline of Buddhism; do you think that was part of what made him insistent on moving on constantly rather than doing what was asked or expected of him?

I always think of the record “Go Bang” in relationship to this - it's an incredible record, and one that I've listened to so many times. Steve Knutson at Audika told me that when he [Steve] used to work at Tommy Boy, all of his colleagues would go, “Oh, Arthur Russell, he made one great record, Go Bang, but he hasn't made anything like that since.” But Arthur would have thought, “I've produced that record once, why would I want to do it again?” It's striking that Arthur really never repeated himself. He was just interested in exploring new combinations, often with new musicians, although he was also incredibly faithful and would develop these very long-term relationships with musicians as well. But again, he wasn't interested in repetition and this was clearly destructive in terms of his career. He just was not able to repeat himself in the way that is demanded of a popular musician.

Was this destructive to other people, too? It almost sounds like flightiness, did it frustrate those around him?

The person who meets that description best was Ernie Brooks, who wanted to work as a pop/rock musician - that was the life he really wanted. There were these two occasions, with the Flying Hearts and the Necessaries, where Ernie tried to keep Arthur in this standard band lineup, and in both cases Arthur stuck with it for a relatively short period of time and then went “look, I can't just do this”. But Arthur and his relationships were interesting, because he always surrounded himself with these fascinating musicians, and he struck up very close relationships with them, both musically and emotionally and sometimes both. I remember that when I was writing the book there was a point when I was trying to do this rather crass reading of which musician he was working with the most at any given moment, because I wanted to work out who he “preferred” and who ended up getting left out. I'd been interviewing Steven Hall and Ernie Brooks about this, and Ernie said, “Look, I never remember one occasion when Arthur was not available to record music. He was always there, he was always willing, he would never say no.” So you cannot begin to describe that sort of relationship as destructive, because he really lived for these collaborations. He only had one period of working solo, one solo album, and even then during the period he did *World of Echo*, he was working on other projects too. But for the rest of his life he was only interested in playing music with other musicians, and these intense relationships lasted many, many years.

The only thing that didn't work out - that was arguably destructive - was that he didn't become famous. That wasn't because he didn't want to become famous, or didn't want to make lots of money; he wasn't materialistic but he quite liked the idea of making lots of money, and he would always say that if he made money he'd give it away to his friends. He also liked the idea of being famous not because he had this fragile ego and needed public recognition, but because he liked the idea of his music being listened to by lots of people. In this respect he challenged the avant-garde mentality that is grounded on its music being unpopular with the general public, which in some respects is what makes the music avant-garde. Arthur ended up making quite a lot of quite avant-garde music, but he never aimed for it to be avant-garde, and a lot of his lyrics are intentionally anthemic.

In the end it didn't work out because he just couldn't repeat himself. This was why he couldn't stick with these pop/rock bands, because they required a very focused type of musicianship - you had to be willing to stick with one group of musicians, to go on the road, and to just push one sound on a succession of albums - this is basically what rock demands. But it was impossible for someone like Arthur to work within that kind of setup because he would always be wanting to do new things and work in this open way, and this was his commercial undoing. The labels would flirt with him, they'd give him a contract, and then they'd say "you've got to become recognisable, there's got to be an Arthur sound." There were even times when someone would suggest to him that he keep the same pseudonym from one twelve-inch single to the next in order to become more recognizable, and he replied, "I will not be defined". That is kind of a definition of freedom. He was prepared to sell fewer records to get that kind of freedom – and what's incredible is that he is now selling all these records precisely because he insisted upon having that freedom. Arthur ended up embodying all of these different styles, and that's become very fashionable, which makes Arthur a visionary in a way.

You say he was willing to sacrifice fame for freedom – but did you ever get the sense he regretted this at any time?

Yes, definitely. There was this composer Jon Gibson - he played with Steve Reich and Philip Glass and was an important composer in his own right - and he bumped into Arthur shortly before Arthur died, and Arthur said to him - I'm paraphrasing here - "I didn't get as far as I wanted to - I failed to make it." I don't think Arthur went around telling

everyone that, but there was clearly part of him that felt he hadn't achieved what he wanted. He died in 1992 and his last release was "Let's Go Swimming" in 1987, so that meant he had gone five years without releasing anything. Now for a lot of that period Arthur deliberately avoided wrapping up this quite important commission from Geoff Travis at Rough Trade because he felt that if he ended that recording it would mark a finite ending to the possibility of recording. But clearly by 1990, 1991, he sensed that his recording life was coming to a close, because he was sick and the world was closing in around him, and he felt that he had fluffed it, and that too many opportunities had been missed.

Arthur's ending is a sad one, because his story ended on this incomplete note, but at the same time there is beauty there, because there is so much in his life that was inspiring and engaged and incredibly humane. For the longest time Arthur didn't tell any of his fellow musicians that he had AIDS because he didn't want them to compromise the way they would relate to him. He wanted to go on being a normal musician for as long as possible, inasmuch as we can think of Arthur as being normal in any meaningful way. Even when he was quite seriously sick, he would lug his keyboard and cello up and down this pretty merciless stairwell where he lived on East Twelfth Street, or he would go to visit friends in San Francisco and lie on the beach and make recordings of the ocean, or he would compose new songs for his boyfriend Tom Lee while they sat on the sofa wondering what was going to happen to them. Right up to the end Arthur would interact with his friends and the world in which he lived in this very profound way. Even though Arthur recorded this music that could sound unfinished and even careless, there was nothing careless about the way he went about the recording of these songs, or his life more generally. He could have fun and be silly, but he was deadly serious about having fun and being silly.

Arthur also understood that although he didn't break through as a recognized name, there was a chance or even a likelihood that his work would eventually be understood and appreciated. He told his close friend and collaborator Steven Hall that he thought his music would only be recognized ten years after its time, and that turned out to be more or less true. Arthur died in 1992, and his big moment of recognition began in 2004, so it took 12 years, not ten, but he was basically right. And so he did achieve what he wanted to achieve, only it happened 12 years late. And now his music is doing what he wanted – its taking people on

this journey. He's taking these people from the world of dance music and the world of leftfield indie rock and all these other worlds and he's drawing them in by giving them something that they can relate to immediately, and once they're in he leads them on this whirlwind tour through disco, through off-beat electronic pop, through this uplifting rock, through this minimalist orchestral music, and through this sparse cello dub that nobody has yet replicated, and he's demonstrating the connectedness of these worlds, and therefore the universe. It's taken the digitization of music and the opening up of people's listening habits to prepare the way for Arthur to be accepted. Before people tended to listen to one genre and one genre only, but now it's become standard for people to say their taste is eclectic, because downloading and burning and file-sharing has made eclecticism so easy and obvious. Arthur got to this point long before digitization and the internet changed the way most people listen to music, and he did it in a way that wasn't casual, as i-Pod culture can be, but in a way that was always socially embedded, always, as I said, serious. I think this explains the current fascination with Arthur. He has confirmed who we have become, and at the same time he's still ahead of us, because the way he did eclecticism was so much more developed. How could anyone not want to write a biography about a person like that?

Tim Lawrence's blog for Hold on to your Dreamshttp://www.timlawrence.info/arthur_russell/2009/Hold-On-to-Your-Dreams-blog.php

A film, *Wild Combination: a Portrait of Arthur Russell*, is available on DVD.

Picture credits: above - Arthur Russell in an Iowan cornfield, July 1985. Photograph by Charles Arthur Russell, Sr. Courtesy of Audika Records. / below - Still from Phill Niblock's video, Terrace of Unintelligibility. Courtesy of Audika Records.