Saint Arthur

*Travels Over Feeling. Arthur Russell: A Life*, Richard King (Faber)

Arthur Russell has become a kind of cult saint in the music business. Like Nick Drake (the only comparison I can think of) he had a certain level of success in his lifetime – some critical acclaim, live work, records, famous friends – but died young; in Russell's case as an early victim of AIDS. Over the next few decades more and more of his archive has been released: albums gathering up 12" disco singles under various names, recordings of solo cello and effects, 'rock' (in the widest sense) bands, ensemble work, demos and live recordings, not to mention a highlighting of his work with the likes of Talking Heads, Philip Glass and Allen Ginsberg. There was also a documentary film, *Wild Combination*; a wonderful 2017 biography by Tim Lawrence, *Hold On to Your Dreams*, that situated him as part of the New York downtown music and club scene; and Matt Marble's quirky *Buddhist Bubblegum: Esotericism in the Creative Process of Arthur* *Russell*.

In the light of Lawrence's wonderful volume, I was quite surprised to see this announced on the Faber list, but it's a very different kind of work. It's basically a coffee table book, with lots of images of lyrics, concert posters and leaflets, snapshots, scores and album covers, interspersed with snippets of interviews from Russell's colleagues and friends. There is, it has to be said, little content-wise that's new here, biographically or critically, especially the latter, and whilst it's always fun to see ephemera from the musicians you listen to, I don't know how many times I will return to this book.  
  
It's all very warm-hearted and friendly – no-one seems to have a bad word to say about Russell himself – but you long for someone to admit they got fed-up waiting for a track to be finalised instead of endlessly remixed and reworked; for Geoff Travis of Rough Trade Records to admit he was way too lax in waiting for a musical/financial return on his long-term investment; for Russell's partner to admit he was occasionally angry about supporting him as he composed, recorded and partied; for anyone to suggest that some of the more recent posthumous releases have been (how shall I put this?) scraping the barrel a bit. And, of course, a bit of militancy and anger about how the AIDS epidemic was originally ignored and allowed to decimate a community.  
  
I'm sure Arthur Russell was a nice guy, and I love a lot of his music, but there is so much left to explore: his musical intersections, networks, hybrids and crossovers; his curation of events and bands; his influential encouragement and musical generosity; his Buddhist beliefs; the strange, seemingly contradictory, genres he was involved in: disco, contemplative, contemporary classical, rock, and avant-garde. (Also, why he found little in punk or post-punk to engage with. I mean imagine Arthur Russell playing with Tom Verlaine!)

If this book gets anyone to listen again, or for the first time, to Arthur Russell, then it will have been worthwhile, but it's a shame that it's come to this: glossy, expensive, illustrated, musical tourism. Personally, I'd like some more well-curated music from the extensive archives, and some critical and contextual debate.

Rupert Loydell

(540 words)