Tim Lawrence

Hold On to Your Dreams

Hold On to Your Dreams

Tim Lawrence

*Hold On to Your Dreams* is the first biography of the musician and composer Arthur Russell, one of the most important but least known contributors to New York’s downtown music scene during the 1970s and 1980s. With the exception of a few dance recordings, including “Is It All Over My Face?” and “Go Bang! #5,” Russell’s pioneering music was largely forgotten until 2004, when the posthumous release of two albums brought new attention to the artist. This revival of interest gained momentum with the issue of additional albums and the documentary film *Wild Combination*. Based on interviews with more than seventy of his collaborators, family members, and friends, *Hold On to Your Dreams* provides vital new information about this singular, eccentric musician and his role in the boundary-breaking downtown music scene.

Tim Lawrence traces Russell’s odyssey from his hometown of Oskaloosa, Iowa, to countercultural San Francisco, and eventually to New York, where he lived from 1973 until his death from AIDS-related complications in 1992. Resisting definition while dreaming of commercial success, Russell wrote and performed new wave and disco as well as quirky rock, twisted folk, voice-cello dub, and hip-hop-inflected pop. “He was way ahead of other people in understanding that the walls between concert music and popular music and avant-garde music were illusory,” comments the composer Philip Glass. “He lived in a world in which those walls weren’t there.” Lawrence follows Russell across musical genres and through such vital downtown music spaces as the Kitchen, the Loft, the Gallery, the Paradise Garage, and the Experimental Intermedia Foundation. Along the way, he captures Russell’s openness to sound, his commitment to collaboration, and his uncompromising idealism.


448 pp., 85 b&w illustrations, $23.95 trade paperback/ $84.95 library cloth
Cloth ISBN: 978-0-8223-4466-7
Publication Date: November 30, 2009

Publicity Contact: Laura Sell
lsell@dukeupress.edu or 919-687-3639

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
About Tim Lawrence

Tim Lawrence lives in London, where he leads the Music Culture: Theory and Production degree program at the University of East London. He is the author of Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979, also published by Duke University Press, and he is working on a history of dance music in the 1980s. Lawrence has written the sleeve notes for many albums and is a founding member of the Lucky Cloud Sound System, which puts on parties with David Mancuso of New York’s The Loft at the Light in London four times a year. His website is: http://www.timlawrence.info.

Also available from Duke University Press:

Opening with David Mancuso’s seminal “Love Saves the Day” Valentine’s party, Tim Lawrence tells the definitive story of American dance music culture in the 1970s—from its subterranean roots in NoHo and Hell’s Kitchen to its gaudy blossoming in midtown Manhattan to its wildfire transmission through America’s suburbs and urban hotspots such as Chicago, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Newark, and Miami.
528 pp. $25.95 trade paperback. ISBN 978-0-8223-3198-8

Tim Lawrence
448 pp., $23.95 trade paperback, ISBN: 978-0-8223-4485-8
Publication Date: November 30, 2009

Publicity Contact: Laura Sell, Duke University Press, 919-687-3639, lsell@dukeupress.edu
Praise for Tim Lawrence’s first book

LOVE SAVES THE DAY
Duke University Press, 2003

“. . . will surely stand as the definitive history of dance music’s early years.”—Joe Madden, Jockey Slut

“Tim Lawrence’s disco culture tome is one of the sharpest books on dance music to date, striking a balance between you-are-there club descriptions, socioeconomic analysis, and musical critique.”—Tricia Romano, The Village Voice

“Lawrence has documented the scene with a fan's affection and a scholar's thoroughness. . . . His interview subjects, veteran DJs and clubgoers all, best convey in their own words what it was like to be on the dance floor at the Loft, the Gallery or the Paradise Garage when the crowd—drenched in sweat, screaming and whistling, arms in the air—gave itself up to rapture.”—Tom Beer, Newsday

“[P]acked with detail . . . without turning dull; [Love Saves the Day] offers a non-hagiographic treatment of dance-music icons. . . and, perhaps best of all, Lawrence's riveting storytelling puts you deep in the proto-disco moment. . . Love Saves the Day not only gets dance-music history right--it refocuses that history to include those unjustly excluded from it.”—Ethan Brown, New York

“Lawrence provides the first really in-depth look at the key years when dance music emerged from the so-called underground into the mainstream. . . [His] original and deep research alone makes Love Saves the Day essential reading for anyone who wants to know the who, what and where of disco's earliest years and why a musical style came to symbolize and entire decade.”—John-Manuel Andriote, Lambda Book Report

“Lawrence has accomplished the seemingly impossible feat of cuing up every famed and arcane component of disco’s ethos and executing a narrative possessed by a seamless grace that’s comparable to the work of the legendary DJs who are duly chronicled. . . [A] most significant examination of this watershed period within our pop-cult heritage.”—Frank Halperin, Philadelphia CityPaper

“Lawrence’s astounding research and wide focus make this [disco’s] definitive chronicle so far.”—Michaelangelo Matos, CityPages (Minneapolis)

(over)
More praise for Tim Lawrence’s *Love Saves the Day*

“The book on club music in America—a massive volume that contains more information about the New York scene than we’d ever hoped to learn! The book fills in gaps that we’ve always been unsure of, and tells the full story of the evolution of New York dance in the 70s—going way past the hype!”—Dustygroove.com

“[A] fine, groundbreaking history filled with fresh information and thoughtful perspectives on the disco decade, the result of his hundreds of interviews and exhaustive research. Scores of photographs and signature discographies nicely complement the text.” —*Library Journal*

“[F]abulous reading, and this book looks destined to become a classic, opening up a whole lost world of night-time dance culture to generations for whom previously it was merely a rather imprecise legend.”—Bradley Winterton, *Taipei Times*

“This brilliant study of the birth of disco and the spawning of a million different subgenres of same is crucial reading for anyone who thinks they know their club culture. Because until you’ve read this, you might as well know nothing, nada, zilch.” —Susan Corrigan, *I-D*

“Essential reading for anyone interested in discovering the origins of DJing, clubbing, and the music we dance to.” —*Easy Jet Inflight Magazine*

“[A]s Tim Lawrence illustrates in *Love Saves The Day*, the story of disco is richer than its battered reputation lets on. . . . [A]n exceedingly well-reported history. . . . *Love Saves The Day* works as an eye-opening history of a movement that found a nation taking time out to dance.”—Andy Battaglia, *The Onion*

“The book is nothing less than revelatory, time-traveling to pivotal moments like the birth of beatmatching (and snark-baiting the bitchy, bitter jocks that fell off after failing to master the new technique) and describing the atemporal space of the dance floor itself. The book immerses to the point of excess - at times you want to set aside the quotes, throw on a boa, and set off in search of some sex, drugs, and ‘Soul Makossa.’ But the book’s broader implications—especially the missteps of the record industry and the pressures put upon art, leisure, and self-expression in a time of socioeconomic unrest (a nice bit of ‘unpacking,’ as we used to say in grad school) — make *Love Saves the Day* as timely as it is tantalizing.”—Philip Sherburne, *Boldtype*

“[T]o some, a respectful history of disco may seem as perverse as a paean to strip malls. Tim Lawrence’s *Love Saves The Day* boldly overthrows that story. . . . I, for one, won't be able to dismiss dance culture so quickly, and his book should become a fixture in the libraries of serious students of American pop.” —Philip Christman, *Paste*
KISS ME AGAIN:
THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF ARTHUR RUSSELL

CONFERENCE

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2009, 10 am – 6:45 pm

NYU Tisch Performance Studies
721 Broadway (at Waverly Pl.), Suite 612, NYC, 10003, Free admission

Panelists include Mustafa Ahmed, Bob Blank, Joyce Bowden, Ernie Brooks, Peter Gordon, Steven Hall, Steve Knutson, Elodie Lauten, Tim Lawrence, Tom Lee, Gary Lucas, Simon Reynolds, Will Socolov, and Peter Zummo
Plus a screening of “Wild Combination” with Q&A with filmmaker Matt Wolf

PERFORMANCES

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9
9 pm RECENT MEMORY
Steven Hall and Joyce Bowden sing the songs of Arthur Russell
At 169 Bar, 169 East Broadway, NYC, No cover

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10
7 pm – 9 pm SOLO AND DUO PERFORMANCES OF ARTHUR RUSSELL MUSIC
Performances by Joyce Bowden, Peter Gordon, Steven Hall, Nick Hallett, Rachel Henry, Alex Waterman, Peter Zummo and others
Book-signing for “Hold on to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene” with author Tim Lawrence
At Housing Works, 126 Crosby Street, NYC $10 admission to benefit Housing Works

10 pm – late DANCE PARTY WITH ARTHUR’S LANDING
At Public Assembly, 70 North 6th Street, Brooklyn $10 admission

Presented by Bloomfield College, New York University,
and the Centre for Cultural Studies Research, University of East London.
Organizers: Peter Gordon (Bloomfield), Tim Lawrence (UEL), Sukhdev Sandhu (NYU)

http://arthursymposium.blogspot.com  Info: Sukhdev Sandhu  ss162@nyu.edu
Hold On To Your Dreams: Arthur Russell And The Downtown Music Scene 1973-1992

Tim Lawrence
Duke University Press 1999 336pp

Such is the protean nature of its subject that no two readings of this sensitive and thorough biography seem likely to agree on what the truly significant aspects of Arthur Russell’s life or work might have been. A highly gifted cellist, composer and producer, Russell drew on a diverse range of models and forms in the headlong pursuit of his muse, creating a body of scores and recordings that evaded anything like the recognition they deserved at the time. It wasn’t so much that Russell didn’t fit into any specific box: it’s more that the existing boxes seemed far too inadequate to accommodate all the different compartments of what he was doing.

Here, for example, was a player of post-punk pop who was also commissioned to write the orchestral accompaniment to Robert Wilson’s production of Mephisto, a composer of fragile songs for cello and voice who also bashed out manic disco anthems such as “Is It All Over My Face?” and “Go Bang #5”.

Tim Lawrence presents more than enough evidence to suggest that Russell belonged to that unique line of wayward American composers, including Harry Partch, Charles Ives and La Monte Young, who placed personal vision and relentless innovation over easy acceptance. Russell’s life, however, was so finely meshed with its times that Lawrence can’t tell his story without also including several others, hence the subtitle linking Russell to a specific period in the musical life of one city. Between 1973 and 1992, New York City’s downtown music scene expanded to embrace the Kitchen and the Knitting Factory, the Dance Theater and the Paradise Garage, the Mudd Club and CBGBs, plus all points in between. Russell, however, seemed to fit everywhere and nowhere simultaneously: haunting each venue like a restless phantom. Interviewed at some length for the book, Philip Glass sums up this complex relationship with remarkable concision: “His music was quite unlike anything anyone else was recording. When I listened to Arthur’s music I heard the music of a cosmopolitan New Yorker living in the latter part of the twentieth century.”

In other words, Arthur Russell stood apart from his times as much as he was intimately a part of them.

Lawrence very convincingly presents Russell as an apotheosis of the baby boom experience. Born in the Midwest in the middle of 1951, just as the US birthrate was in mid-explosion, it wasn’t long before young Charles Arthur Russell left his small town roots behind in Davenport, Iowa for the hippy communes of San Francisco. By then he had discovered dope, Buddhism and the classical music of both East and West. One of his first professional gigs was as a backing musician for the poet Allen Ginsberg, who not only remained a lifelong friend but also claimed to have given Arthur his first gay sexual experience in a Connecticut motel room while on tour during the early 1970s. By then Russell had, like so many of his contemporaries, already left San Francisco for New York: a city of empty industrial spaces ready to be inhabited by a growing community of artists, musicians, club promoters and DJs.

Mixing with Glass and Wilson as elements of this emergent scene were Rhys Chatham, Peter Gordon, Robert Ashley, Laurie Anderson, George Lewis, Kathy Acker and Phil Niblock, to mention only a small handful; and the book skilfully weaves their experiences and ambitions together with those of its subject. As the author of the excellent Love Saves The Day: A History Of American Dance Music Culture 1970-1979, Lawrence is particularly adept at exploring Russell’s links with the New York club scene, detailing collaborations and remixes involving the likes of Larry Levan, Francois Kevorkian and Walter Gibbons.

The connection he establishes between the haunting songs for cello and voice Russell recorded on 1980’s World Of Echo, and the empty dancefloors of Lower Manhattan as AIDS starts to take its toll, is particularly affecting. Russell himself would lose his fight against the disease in 1992, having been diagnosed as HIV positive shortly after World Of Echo was released.

However, unlike the cities he inhabited, he continued to embrace new music and new ideas, experimenting with house, electro and hip hop forms, working alone in his homemade studio right up to the end, building up a body of work which has only recently begun to see the light of day.

In a sense, Arthur Russell was so much a part of his times that he tended to disappear into them, blending in with so many different scenes that the camouflage seemed at times to have taken over. Lawrence too, for example, how many previous accounts of the New York downtown scene fail to notice him at all. With Hold On To Your Dreams, the outline of an outstanding and prescient artist can now be more clearly made out.

Ken Hollings
Words on Music

A lot of music writing is published every year. There's a lot about Led Zeppelin *alone* published every year. Like most genres, you have to weed through a lot to find the good stuff. The best music writing not only deepens and expands the way we listen to music—it reveals the world the music is grounded in. A large segment of *Flagpole* readers are obsessive fans of a wide array of music who are also interested in pop culture, politics, the arts, human rights, the environment and more. Hopefully, this will bring to their attention a few of the more deserving music books, starting with a look at those published this October through November.


Russell was a unique talent who moved freely among the downtown New York experimental scene dominated by the Kitchen, neighboring punk and new wave clubs, the fading folk scene of the Village, uptown classical music circles and gay discos. Today it’s not uncommon for musicians to experiment in different genres, but Lawrence argues that Russell was a pioneer in that regard. His extremely varied music included compositional work such as “Instrumentals,” underground disco hits like “Is It All over My Face?” and "Go Bang!," and beautifully quirky alt-country ballads. Russell not only spanned many styles, his music pushed the envelope of each style he worked in.

Russell has always had a small and devoted following, despite the fact that he died at age 40 in relative obscurity, a victim of AIDS. Reissue CDs and the recent documentary *Wild Combination* have helped his music find a larger audience. For those who have seen the documentary, Lawrence's book offers a more in-depth and coherent look at Russell's music and career. More importantly, Lawrence uses Russell to navigate New York’s music scenes, revealing surprisingly rigid boundaries between them. Lawrence points out that Russell upset a large contingency of the Kitchen regulars when he curated a rock show featuring the Modern Lovers that was intended to explore the possibilities of rock as high art. And Russell had such
well-connected supporters as Philip Glass and Ernie Brooks who just didn't know what to make of his forays into disco and other dance music.

Lawrence, who heads the Music Culture: Theory and Production program at the University of East London, is a wonderful writer, able to ruminate on music in a way that is deeply knowledgeable without ever losing the groove and the beat. He’s also a member of Lucky Cloud System, which regularly hosts dance parties with disco guru David Mancuso. Check out Lawrence’s blog at www.timlawrence.info/index.php.

John McLeod