

# Swansong Rediscovered: *Wild Side*

The discovery of two lost 35mm prints has enabled a fresh screening of Donald Cammell's final feature

Donald Cammell's final feature, *Wild Side* has a troubled history. After the director was fired during post-production and the film re-edited against his wishes, he removed his name from the project then after a botched 1996 US release committed suicide. A posthumous 1999 reconstruction by UK's Tartan Films and Film 4 yielded a greatly improved "director's cut", but a combination of Tartan's 2008 demise and producer Nu Image's disinterest resulted in it falling out of distribution. Since then, with no high-quality materials available either for home media or cinema screenings it has become almost a lost film. The recent discovery of two pristine 35mm prints has made a new theatrical screening possible, and *Lost Reels* is now hosting a special showing of the film at the ICA in London.

*Wild Side* is a dark, edgy, unruly thriller built around crime, money, sex, and power games. A companion piece to *Performance* (1970), Cammell's debut feature co-directed with Nicolas Roeg, it's the American pulp noir sibling to his earlier British gangster story. The plot concerning a money-launderer (Christopher Walken), set up for a sting operation by an undercover cop (Steven Bauer) but disrupted by his estranged wife (Joan Chen) and a banker moonlighting as a call girl (Anne Heche), results in similar complications. As the film shifts unpredictably between hard-bitten drama, sensuous lesbian love story, and absurd black comedy, it delivers an incendiary mix of mind games, sexual liaisons, and ever shifting loyalties, as the four characters navigate an increasingly ridiculous, and in many ways irrelevant, plot. The performances, particularly Walken's as the nervy, eccentric Bruno, are larger than life, teetering on the edge of self-parody and Heche, the emotional centre of the film, is outstanding as the intermittently tough, vulnerable, and uncertain Alex. At times uncomfortable viewing it's simultaneously an exhilarating, one-of-a-kind, wholly original piece of work.

*Wild Side* was only Cammell's fourth feature in an almost three-decade career and was green-lit by independent US production company Nu Image purportedly because the direct-to-video outfit wanted to move towards more high-brow, art-house material. The partnership always seemed an unlikely one, and if the director hadn't sensed a

and re-release the film on his own terms, so he hired a new editor, John Gamen to work with him on a reconstruction of the film using the then new Avid system. Then on April 24, 1996 after writing a letter absolving his *Wild Side* co-writer and spouse China Kong of any responsibility, he committed suicide.



Devil's bargain when he embarked on the relationship, he almost certainly did when the project began to unravel. A sharp budget reduction from \$9 million to \$3.5 million and a shooting schedule of less than five weeks were the first warning signs, but when Cammell retired to the editing room with his longtime friend and editor Frank Mazzola, all hell broke loose. Unhappy with the non-linear storytelling and associative jump cutting of the work in progress, Nu Image insisted on changes, and after some rounds of protest and failed negotiation, Mazzola and Cammell were expelled from the editing room. What emerged some months later was a product of questionable artistic or even commercial value, and with a near unmarketable product on their hands Nu Image abandoned plans for a cinema release and *Wild Side* premiered on US cable TV in February 1999. Despite this debacle, Cammell still had hopes to one day recover the rights

In normal circumstances this would have been the end of the road for Cammell's film, but miraculously it wasn't. Hamish McAlpine, a close friend and head of UK's Tartan Films, wanted to distribute *Wild Side* in the UK, and as part of this plan determined to release the film in a version as close to Cammell's intentions as possible. This led him to co-fund and produce a completely new version of the film, re-hiring Mazzola and Kong and using Gamen's Avid cut together with past conversations and notes from Cammell as a guide. The

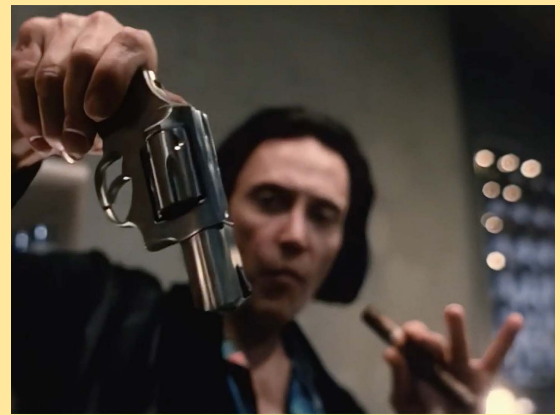


new edit was built completely from the ground up with Mazzola reverting to the original material and many unused takes discarded by Nu Image. When the cut was assembled, he used the original negative to conform, grade, and create two new 35mm prints: a master / reference print and a “show print” for theatrical screenings. The film, titled *Donald Cammell’s Wild Side*, was delivered to Tartan Films and had its world premiere at the Edinburgh International Film Festival (EIFF) in August 1999, followed by a National Film Theatre (NFT) screening in February 2000 and a limited UK cinema release later that June.

The differences between the original Nu Image version and the directors cut are significant. Where most “directors cuts” often add or remove small amounts of material in relative isolation, the recut of *Wild Side* is a completely different proposition. Not only are scenes added, deleted, and re-sequenced, virtually every scene is extensively modified. Most scenes are longer, richer, and feature alternate takes to provide stronger, more vibrant performances. Often Cammell would shoot basic takes to cover the scene and warm up the actors before encouraging the variations and experimentation he was looking for. Where the Nu Image version sticks mostly to these conventional “rehearsal” takes and handles their progression straightforwardly, the director’s cut makes full use of the actors’ working with the material to make it their own. Mazzola’s cut also adds vitality and intelligence to each scene. A good example is when Alex first meets Virginia, a conversation that serves a crucial plot point but also

initiates Virginia’s seduction of Alex. The Nu Image version progresses speedily through the dialogue, moving the story forward as quickly as possible, where the director’s cut lets the scene play, including all the flirtatious comments and lingering glances, enabling the subtext to work as it should. There are many other changes: the non-linear flashback structure is restored, supporting characters are emphasised and de-emphasised; there’s an entirely new score by Ryuichi Sakamoto; and several story points are modified. Although the film has fewer scenes its run-time is longer by almost twenty minutes and the net result is a film that significantly leans into its strengths - the characters, the acting performances, the black comedy - and minimizes its weaknesses.

When the film was released in UK cinemas it garnered positive, even enthusiastic reviews. *The Guardian’s* Peter Bradshaw described it as, “an original and exhilarating thriller, capriciously intelligent, with experimentalism and verve...an arresting work from an important and distinctive director”; in his *Sight & Sound* review Mark Kermode called it, “an extraordinary piece of work...noisy, unstable and dangerous, but irresistible.” But *Wild Side’s* domestic art-house success was to be short-lived. After the theatrical screenings in summer 2000 it was released on Tartan DVD in November and then broadcast twice on Channel 4 in 2001. There was a final TV broadcast in 2004, then in 2008 Tartan Films were forced into administration. Their catalogue was sold to the newly created Palisades Tartan (no



relation) who briefly exploited Tartan’s library, then wound themselves down again, re-selling all the rights and abandoning *Wild Side*. The UK rights reverted to Nu Image (now Millennium Media) and the two 35mm prints of the director’s cut – the only ones ever produced - were left at their third-party storage facility, condemned to destruction due to their “orphaned” status and accumulating vault fees. For the last ten years the only way to see the director’s cut of *Wild Side* has been to acquire the out-of-print Tartan DVD or watch it on Amazon pay-per-view, in both cases the video being a twenty-years-old standard definition transfer created from Tartan’s 35mm reference print.

The story of how the two 35mm *Wild Side* prints were rediscovered will be saved for another time; it’s sufficient to say that they are no longer in commercial storage and are now safely maintained in a UK film archive. Their recovery not only means a 35mm print is available for future revival screenings but that a high-definition restoration is now also possible - the film could be redistributed if an adventurous blu-ray publisher were able to secure the rights and commission a remaster. BFI? Arrow? Indicator? Second Sight?

Until then, please enjoy this special screening of *Wild Side* and join me in celebrating the return of this important film to its creator’s canon, the landscape of UK cinema, and most importantly, to you.

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