

# Rescuing Donald Cammell's Wild Side

*How Donald Cammell's final film was lost, miraculously rescued, then almost lost again*

As an admirer of both *Performance* (1970) and the lesser-known *White of the Eye* (1987) news of a film by writer / director Donald Cammell was guaranteed to engage my interest. Learning of *Donald Cammell's Wild Side* in 1999 this was certainly the case. Living in the US and having little opportunity to see what was a UK-only release I was nonetheless fascinated by the unique backstory to the late auteur's final film. Fired from his own project during postproduction, Cammell removed his director's credit then committed suicide shortly after its botched US release. Now three years later the film had been reconstructed to his original intentions and was being released in the UK as a posthumous "Director's cut". It was a unique scenario and an inspiring one. Cammell was arguably one of Britain's most distinctive filmmaking talents, and although I thought the film unlikely to eclipse his signature work, it was certain to be a stimulating watch and deserving of a place in his small but interesting canon.

Years later when I finally saw *Donald Cammell's Wild Side*, I thought it in many ways a perfect companion piece to *Performance*. A dark, edgy, unruly thriller built around crime, money, sex, and power games it was the American pulp noir equivalent of 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 emot-

ional 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. When the film was released in cinemas it garnered positive, even enthusiastic reviews. *The Guardian's* Peter Bradshaw descr-

completely off the radar? It didn't seem possible.

I determined to search for *Donald Cammell's Wild Side* and bring it back to UK audiences, little knowing this would be the start of a greater than two-year journey and involve more twists, turns, and revelations than I could ever



ibed 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."

There was a certain anticipation in UK film circles before the restored *Wild Side* was released: a lengthy article in the British Film Institute's *Sight & Sound* magazine; a piece in *The Guardian*; and a new documentary, *Donald Cammell: The Ultimate Performance* was shown on television, but two decades later the film seemed all but forgotten. Unavailable on television or home media, infrequently discussed by critics, and absent from repertory cinemas, by the 2020s even cinephiles seemed barely to have heard of it. How could a Donald Cammell film, let alone this film, be so

have anticipated. What started as a screening project became a film preservation project, and the search for a single film led to the discovery of many other films at risk of being lost. It became not only the story of how a notable film-maker's work could almost be destroyed by a studio and then miraculously saved by his collaborators, but also of how the same film could just as easily be lost again when the preservation of film culture is left largely to chance.



## Lost and Found – Part I

*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 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 long-time 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 (Cammell had by now removed his director's credit) Nu Image abandoned plans for a cinema release and *Wild Side* premiered on US cable TV in February 1996. Despite this debacle, Cammell still had hopes to one day recover the rights 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 partner China Kong of any responsibility, he committed suicide.



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 (with Channel 4 Films) a completely new version of the film, rehiring 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 a new 35mm print. 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, whereas 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. This is the film I saw when I tracked down a copy of the out-of-print Tartan DVD. A film representative of Cammell's talents and worthy of his filmography. So why was it nowhere to be found?

## Lost and Found – Part II

Despite the art-house success of the *Wild Side* Director's cut the film's distribution, and in some ways it's very

existence, were hanging by a thread, and that thread was UK's Tartan Films.

Tartan were an independent distributor who rode a wave of success in the early 90s by introducing several Asian subgenres to the UK through their Asia Extreme DVD label. They also gained the respect of many critics by taking risks with art house titles, some of which were successful, some which were less so. In 2008 the combination of a costly US expansion and a softening DVD market at home, led to Tartan being over-extended and they were forced into administration. A US company named Palisades Tartan (no relation) acquired Tartan's library, but they quickly wound down again, reselling all the rights, and abandoning all of the 35mm film prints when they closed shop. This was a grave issue because by this time cinemas had mostly transitioned to digital projection and the ability to screen a film on celluloid depended on the survival of existing prints. When current prints ceased to be available a film's life on 35mm ended. Palisades' abandoning of the Tartan prints made this demise imminent because the orphaned prints wouldn't be kept by the storage company if their fees were unpaid. But it was even more serious than this for *Wild Side*. The Director's cut was a UK-only release so there were no other 35mm prints anywhere else in the world. The loss of the Tartan *Wild Side* prints would not only mark the end of the film's 35mm life in the UK it would mark the end of its life anywhere. And if it seemed like the situation couldn't get any worse, there was the question of original negatives. For all the other Tartan titles the negatives could safely be assumed to be in the hands of the film's producers, but in the case of the *Wild Side* Director's cut, the producer was Tartan. Abandoning all of Tartan's film elements meant abandoning the negatives, and if these were destroyed alongside the prints, the film would be completely and irretrievably lost.

It was within this context I began my search for a print, and I started at Deluxe since it was well-known among UK film programmers that most of the former Tartan prints were stored there. Sure enough, upon my first inquiry I struck gold. They had

two prints of *Wild Side*. But when I used this as a stepping-stone to find the current rights owner the situation quickly changed. Deluxe told me the rights owner was Peccadillo Pictures, and with this I realised the prints they had were for the 2004 *Wild Side*, a feature directed by Sébastien Lifshitz, not *Donald Cammell's Wild Side*. But if Deluxe didn't have the prints, who did? I decided to research whether there'd been any recent screenings. If there had been, possibly the exhibitor could point the way to the print. I didn't expect to find any given the unusual circumstances of the film, but I was immediately proven wrong. A Nicolas Roeg / Donald Cammell double retrospective had been programmed at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) in 2018 and as part of this the Director's cut of *Wild Side* had been screened. I contacted the curator and he enthusiastically agreed to help. He'd personally spent over six months tracking down the *Wild Side* print and after he pointed me in the right direction, my search for a print was over.

I then began to research the Rights. When Palisades Tartan had dissolved in 2012, many of the UK rights were sold to 101 Films, but 101 Films had never heard of *Wild Side* or seen it on any Tartan list they'd handled so I concluded that any special UK licensing for the UK version must have lapsed, and the rights had reverted to the original producers Nu Image, who were fortunately still in business under the name Millennium Media. This proved to be the case, and although the team at Millennium were initially a challenge to get hold of, I was successful engaging with them and able to confirm they owned the rights for a screening.

The search for *Wild Side* was complete. I had everything I needed for a revival event, so I discussed the film with the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London and they were excited to host it. I triumphantly returned to the distributor with a print access request and it was at this point the situation took an unexpected and truly horrific turn.

#### Lost and Found – Part III

I'd confirmed the 35mm print used



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for the TIFF event was still in storage in March 2022, but it was now March 2023 - a whole year later, and I was informed the print had now been destroyed. This had been done in May 2022, only two months after I'd found it, during a clear out of material with unrecoverable storage fees. The news hit me like a punch in the stomach. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. *Wild Side* was gone forever.

I'd known the print was vulnerable and the storage fees were a problem. The TIFF curator was made aware of this when he'd accessed the print and had articulated his fears at the time that the storage company could soon run out of patience. I'd assumed I still had some time to work on this, possibly by engaging a partner such as the BFI to move the material to their archive, but this was now proven to be false optimism. By waiting too long I'd allowed *Wild Side* to be destroyed. I was consumed with feelings of loss and regret. In the aftermath there was one minor solace. It emerged that four prints from the batch of destroyed materials had survived due to being out on loan at the time, so I asked the depot if they'd be willing to donate them assuming I could find an appropriate custodian. They agreed but time was of the essence, so after rapidly reviewing a list of candidate archives, I found one to step in. Then on the eve of heading over to collect the four prints there was a welcome and unexpected development. Some other “orphaned” films had been found, intact but also slated for destruction. Might we be interested in



these too? The loss of *Wild Side* was ironically leading to the preservation of further cinematic treasures. As we shored up our plans to transport a further set of elements from the facility there then came a message I could hardly believe: *Wild Side* had been found. The process of locating and provisioning the additional prints from deep storage had uncovered the fact that some prints, for whatever reason, had never been destroyed. It’s impossible to describe my feelings when I heard this. It transpired there were in fact two prints. Labelled as Answer print and Show print these designations seemed to confirm they were prints struck by Mazzola from the original negative, and given the film’s limited distribution, likely the only two ever produced. Not only was *Wild Side* no longer lost, there were two prints of outstanding quality, both now possible for us to retrieve and secure. The Answer print would be the preservation copy and the Show print could be used for occasional screenings.

It’s been over two years since I set out to bring *Donald Cammell’s Wild*

*Side* back to UK cinema audiences and it’s been an emotional journey as well as a physical one. In addition to being a film exhibition project, it became a film preservation project, and although there were moments when all seemed lost, the final outcome is that two 35mm prints of *Wild Side* – likely the only two to exist in the world - are now recovered and in safe keeping. *Wild Side* is back, and the Director’s cut can once again be enjoyed on the big screen. Along the way further irreplaceable 35mm prints have been saved and can continue to be seen by audiences in the UK.

#### Lost and Found – Part IV

There’s one more loose end in this story and this regards the film’s original negatives. I’d noted how these were at risk alongside the prints since Tartan Films had produced the Director’s cut and were most likely also the owner of the negative elements used to create it. If Tartan’s film elements were orphaned and destroyed, then so would be the negatives. When all seemed to be lost with the UK prints, I began to research the negatives and

the happy result was that I discovered them to be in the safe hands of the Academy Archive in Los Angeles, California. Frank Mazzola had edited the Director’s cut in LA and by a similar process to our rescue of the UK prints, the Academy Archive had salvaged literally thousands of orphaned 35mm and 16mm elements, including the Director’s cut of *Wild Side* in 2012. This being the case a full restoration and even a new distribution of *Wild Side* is feasible. Hopefully, the BFI, Criterion, Arrow Films, Blue Underground, Second Sight, Vinegar Syndrome, or *someone* will one day make this happen.

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 British cinema, and most importantly, to you.

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