

## "America's Hottest All-Girl Band" opens film series

by Eve Sicular

*The International Sweethearts of Rhythm: America's Hottest All-Girl Band* tops a triple bill as Filma's "Woman's Eye View" opens on October 30 at the Irvington Theatre in an eight-program series through November. The *Sweethearts* chronicle was made by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, the

### ● CINEMA

team who directed and researched last year's festival hit, *Before Stonewall*. In this new film, a sixteen-woman multi-racial jazz band swings again, bringing their music and their story alive after nearly forty years of obscurity in film and record archives.

Some readers may be familiar with the International Sweethearts' music through the Rosetta Records' re-release of their vintage cuts a few years ago. Photos and anecdotes on the album cover whetted my curiosity about the group. Seeing the movie gave me a livelier understanding of who they were. As with earlier woman-themed documentaries though (*Union Maids*, *Rosie the Riveter*), my questions about lesbian existence in these times and places were answered only



Vi Burnside, tenor sax sensation with Tiny Davis, 245 pounds of jive and trumpet

by listening between the lines. Here, for example, the group's lead trumpeter, Tiny Davis, tells an interviewer why she once turned down Louis Armstrong's big-money offer to join his band: "I told him, 'I just love them gals!' Seeing her sparkling eyes widen as she mimics Armstrong's response, you know just what she meant (and that he did, too).

The stories of the band touring in the South, (where segregation laws prohibited blacks, whites and mulattos mixing), of eating and sleeping on the bus because they were barred from restaurants and hotels, of white members wearing dark makeup to 'pass' in public, all testify to the institutionalized bigotry of the recent American past. Fortunately, the Sweethearts were very popular and made

many records and movie appearances for the 'race' market. Seen today, the film clips dispel any notion that the group made it as a novelty act, yet the "all-female" packaging is a quaint precursor to girl-group promotions that have followed. Footage of the band playing, couples swinging and crowds jamming the front of major clubs around the country show beautifully what a hot act the Sweethearts were.

The film places the group as a phenomenon in its historical context, the late 1930s and early '40s. The group's break-up soon after World War II — before the demise of many other big bands, but after women were being again discouraged from "men's work" — was certainly no coincidence, with band members leaving music behind for marriage;

however, this is not the filmmakers' focus. Most of its half-hour length is upbeat. At the end, I wanted more, especially of the women playing.

*The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* and two other new documentaries, *Women of Summer* and *The Flapper Story*, is the first of eight Tuesday and Thursday evening programs in the fifth annual Women's Eye View festival, through November 25. The series is produced by Filma, the Portland Women's Film Forum. For more information write Filma at P.O. Box 15143, Portland, OR 97215, for a complete festival schedule. The Irvington Theater is located at 1333 NE Broadway, just down the block from the new Woman's Place Bookstore which carries the Sweethearts' album.

# Just OUT

Vol. 3 No. 12  
October, 1986  
Portland, Oregon