

# Cinema

## International Sweethearts of Rhythm film at benefit

By Jorjet Harper

**International Sweethearts of Rhythm.** Directed and produced by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss; co-produced by Rosetta Reitz and Rebecca Reitz; Jezebel Productions and Rosetta Records. Running time 30 min.

Citizens for Sable is presenting a "Fun Fund-raiser" for Dr. Ron Sable, the progressive, gay candidate for Alderman for the 44th Ward on Sunday Dec. 7 at the Music Box Theater. The evening will feature documentary filmmaker Greta Schiller in person and screen two of her films: *Before Stonewall* and her newest film, *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm: America's Hottest All-Girl Band*.

By now, many members of the gay and lesbian community are familiar with Schiller's *Before Stonewall*, a history of gay experience in America from before the 1920's to the impact of the Stonewall riots. If you have already seen *Before Stonewall* you know how excellent Schiller is in retrieving "lost" history through archival film footage, photos, and oral history interviews.

Like *Before Stonewall*, *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* is a revelation and a delight to see.

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm were a multi-racial all-women's jazz band of the 1930's and 40's. They were extremely popular in their heyday, playing to sell-out crowds at the Apollo Theatre in New York, the Howard in Washington, the Regal in Chicago and other major venues. Louis Armstrong and Count Basie were among the jazz greats who praised them as musicians. But still the Sweethearts fell into obscurity after World War II: women's bands were considered "novelty" acts—and because the Sweethearts played almost exclusively to black audiences, they were largely ignored by the white media.

Schiller has resurrected priceless old film footage of the group, and sought out some former members of the band still living to talk about their experiences as Sweethearts, including bandleader Anna Mae Winburn, acclaimed trumpet player Tiny Davis, alto

sax Roz Cron, trombone player Helen Jones, alto and baritone sax Helen Saine, and vocalist Evelyn McGee.

Tiny Davis, the "female Louis Armstrong," is mentioned frequently in the remembrances of the Sweethearts, and her vibrant personality is still in evidence in Schiller's interview with her.

The film also explains the terrible problems the Sweethearts had as a multi-racial group in a society segregated by law. When they toured the South they ate and slept in their touring bus because restaurants and hotels were segregated. They faced arrest if it became known they were integrated. Sheriffs came around to inspect the bus when it was reported that white women were among the group. "It was absolutely necessary that I pass as black all the time," recalls Roz Cron, white alto sax player. "We used different kinds of make-up and it turned my skin orange. We tried everything we could and most of the time I ended up by hiding." During the war the band was in great demand both at home and in Europe to play for audiences of black servicemen—even the U.S. Armed Forces were not desegregated until 1949.

The Sweethearts began as a girl's choir in the Piney Woods Country Life School in Mississippi, a trade school for orphaned and impoverished black and mixed-race children. Initially, the school's founder, Laurence Clifton Jones, sent the girls—aged 14 to 19—on small musical tours as a means of fundraising for the school. By 1941 a thoroughly polished, professional swing band, they rebelled against having their graduations postponed, their salaries taken by Jones, and their lives insured with the school as beneficiary. After threatening to strike for fairer terms, the band finally "ran away" to Washington DC with their manager and tutor.

Since the film is only 30 minutes long, some aspects of the group's history and controversies have of necessity been glossed over. Schiller only lightly touches on the difficult early times, focusing instead on the mid-1940's when the group was at its peak in popularity. It is also briefly mentioned that the women were made to switch bunkmates every few months so no "special friendships" would develop among them in the close quarters of their touring bus—I, for one, would have liked to hear more about this particular issue.

But the camaraderie of the Sweethearts clearly comes through, as does a sense of their uniqueness as a group, their outstanding talent, the sexism and racism they fought and triumphed over, and their impact on those who saw them perform. I only wish the movie could have been twice as long—it is a piece of history that enriches us all for knowledge of it.

*Sweethearts* will be shown at 7:30 p.m., followed by a discussion with Greta Schiller, and *Before Stonewall* (another 'don't miss' film that bears repeated viewing) will screen at 8:15. Schiller and Dr. Ron Sable will also be on hand for a cocktail reception at the theater beginning at 6 p.m. (The Music Box is located at 3733 North Southport.)

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A documentary on *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* (pictured) will be shown as a benefit for Ron Sable's aldermanic campaign on Dec. 7. See page 21 for a review.