



MAXINE SULLIVAN

Intriguing Story of Jazz Great

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MAXINE SULLIVAN: LOVE TO BE IN LOVE. Produced and directed by Greta Schiller. The Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

Jazz lost one of its most understated, underrated voices in 1987 when Maxine Sullivan died at the age of 76. Loved by fans and peers alike, she left behind many recordings and the memories of countless live performances. Sullivan is the subject of Greta Schiller's new video for Jezebel Productions, a well-intentioned but confusing pastiche of interviews and concert footage interspersed with movie and newspaper clips, mostly undated. All of this leaves the viewer intrigued by Sullivan but frustrated by the difficulty in piecing together the details of her career.

Sullivan grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in a musical family of ten. After eight years in domestic service, she was discovered by bandleader Claude Thornhill. Capitalizing on the current craze sweeping the country, Thornhill hit upon the idea of a swing version of the Scots ballad "Loch Lomond." The rest is history.

"Loch Lomond" catapulted Sullivan to fame, and by 1937 she was the best known Black singer in America and an international star earning \$1000 per week. The format of "swinging the standards" proved so successful that other singers, such as Ella Fitzgerald, began to copy it.

In the 1940s, Sullivan became part of the jazz scene flourishing in the New York nightclubs. Club dates and a succession of afterhours jam sessions had her performing with the foremost professionals in the business. But in the 1950's it all ground to a halt. Jazz pianist Marian McPartland suggests that television played a large role in the demise of the great nightclubs. Fascinated by the new medium, people no longer needed to leave home for entertainment. Schiller provides a revealing glimpse into the world of early TV with a short clip from "The Dinah Shore Show." Pretty, perky and indescribably insipid, Dinah gives her audience a musical

history less on calculated less to inform than to provide a stage for her ootsy-cutesy posturing. Clearly, there was no room in TV programming for a Maxine Sullivan.

It became increasingly difficult for Black performers like Sullivan to make a living. She described those years as a struggle of one-night stands from coast to coast without the advance publicity radio had provided. Finally, in 1957, tired of "walking uphill with the brakes on," she dropped out of show business to raise her family.

Then in 1969, longing to perform again, Maxine staged a comeback. The public welcomed her with open arms. She recorded again, made the rounds of jazz festivals and concerts, and toured internationally. A consummate professional, Sullivan's performances and studio sessions went like clockwork. She recorded her mid-70s album "Maxine or my Mind" in two hours. Always prepared, she delivered each song in a smooth, non-gimmicky style that was her trademark. Indeed, sometimes she was criticized for performing her material the same way each time, but others have suggested this was less a flaw than a virtue. Sullivan practiced a lyric over and over, refining and polishing it, and perfecting her phrasing until it was impeccable. Even small nuances that began life as improvisations eventually became permanent. Ted Ono, a young record producer whose 1985 album "Love to be in Love" is an unabashed valentine to Maxine and includes some of her best work, tells us that Sullivan sang simply and from the heart, always delivering "a warm message in a cool manner." There is certainly a warm message in this video. It is clear that Greta Schiller cares deeply for her subject. "Maxine Sullivan: Love to be in Love" is a warm and heartfelt tribute to a great singer. But it succeeds only as tribute, not as biography. Perhaps with better editing it could have succeeded as both. Still, for those of us who knew Maxine and loved her, it will do very nicely. ▲

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