

MEDIA

JAMMING WITH THE GALS. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm played the Apollo Theater in New York, the Howard in Washington, D.C., the Regal in Chicago. Louis Armstrong and Count Basie stood watching and smiling—because their sound was tight and they could swing, this 16-piece, all-girl, interracial band. They blew hot during the forties, when men were at war, traveling together on a bus, sleeping on it to avoid arrest in the South for mixing the races. “It was absolutely necessary that I pass as black all the time,” says Roz Cron, who played alto sax. “We used different kinds of makeup, and it turned my skin orange. I never looked quite right.” They went to Europe by popular demand, to entertain black troops. After the war, when women were discouraged from working, the band lost bookings and folded.

Filmmakers Andrea Weiss and Greta Schiller remember the band's glory days in their loving 30-minute film tribute, a collage of interviews of band members and footage of their fabulous jams, led by the torchy but doughty singer Anna Mae Winburn. “Do you want to jump, children?” she coaxes, and the band, in unison, shouts, “Yeah.” What stands out most is the attachment these musicians felt for each other at a time when many professional women preferred to stand apart, as glittering exceptions. Several band members were offered higher-paying jobs in male bands but turned them down. “I loved them gals too much,” says trumpeter and vocalist Tiny Davis. Superb on their instruments, they resented the epithet “novelty band.” With her eyes still full of wonder, one woman explains, “I never dreamed I could experience such freedom.” It's good to be reminded that, before the Women's Movement, there were women brave enough to yearn openly for serious work for themselves—not for God, or family, or country.

—Laurie Stone

booklist

International sweethearts of rhythm.

Producers: Greta Schiller, Andrea Weiss, Rosetta Reitz, and Rebecca Reitz. Directors: Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss. The Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. 1986. 30min. Film, \$425. All

video, \$295. All rental \$55.

Called the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, this all-female, predominantly black band barnstormed the country during the post-Depression years, playing to packed nightclubs, theaters, and auditoriums. Recalling those swinging, halcyon days, former orchestra members tenderly remember the adulation of fans, the group's camaraderie, and, of course, the cramped tour bus accommodations. Not all was perfect, though, as this racially diverse group also reflects on the difficulties of nonstop travel, especially in the segregated Deep South. Yet one effervescent singer, who still belts out a tune reminiscent of earlier days, treasures the memories of Louis Armstrong's interest in her talents. Numerous black-and-white stills, newspaper articles, and show programs as well as outstanding performance footage intertwine with the affectionately rendered interviews from band members, other musicians, and fans. An enjoyable mood and nostalgia piece for public library audiences familiar with “the greatest girl band in America.” Adult. SEB.

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orchestra 86-700146(F) 86-700147(V)

American Film and Video Association
Evaluations

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm

30 min. color 16mm & video 1986. Sale: \$425(16mm); \$295(video). Rental: \$55(16mm & video). Directed by Greta Schiller & Andrea Weiss.
Distributor: The Cinema Guild.

Synopsis: Uses performance and archival footage plus contemporary interviews to tell the story of the famous multi-racial, all women's jazz band of the 1940s. It places the Sweethearts, as an integrated band in the south, in a historical context, examining the prejudices they faced as women and as blacks.

Comments: An outstanding work! Well conceived and constructed. Paced well with excellent editing and sound. Good combination of archival materials and present day interviews. Explains clearly the band's history and fits it into the context of the period. Leaves audiences enthusiastic and intrigued. Technical quality very good.

Age Level: High School—Adult

Uses: Useful for black history, women's studies, jazz history and general entertainment.

Overall Rating: Blue Ribbon Winner, 1987 American Film & Video Festival

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Subject Areas: Black Studies; History, U. S.; Music & Musicians; Women's Studies