

JAZZ JIVIN' AND HELL DIVIN' WOMEN

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Tiny and Ruby

Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss were in London recently for the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival's screening of their films 'International Sweethearts of Rhythm' and 'Tiny and Ruby: Hell-Divin' Women'. Rose Collis took the opportunity to talk to them about their unique collaboration of ideals.

'The obvious thing we're both interested in is looking at histories that have been lost - trying to recreate them and celebrate them in some sense before they're lost forever.'

It's not always easy for film-makers to articulate their *raison d'être* succinctly and logically, but Andrea Weiss' explanation of what lies behind her work with Greta Schiller is as good as any you'll get.

After working as, respectively, co-director and archive director on the award-winning 'Before Stonewall', a documentary about lesbian and gay lives in America before the 1969 Stonewall riot in New York, Schiller and Weiss teamed up in 1986 to make 'Sweethearts'. It tells the story of the multi-racial, all-women jazz band who stormed their way across America during the 40s. 'Tiny and Ruby' focuses on the trumpet player and drummer from the band, now both in their 70s, lovers and partners for 43 years. What had lead to this second film? Greta Schiller explains: 'One of the successes AND failures of 'Sweethearts' is that it's a wonderful portrait of one group of women. But it wasn't our intention to do a portrait on any of the individuals and there certainly wasn't room - it was an ensemble film. However, out of those women, Tiny really shone out: you could really see her personality and drive for life shine through. She's a spectacular personality; she provides a lot of inspiration to people, with no intellectual rationalization, but she did what she wanted to do with her life.'

'Tiny's been a show woman since she was 15,' says Schiller, 'so someone making a movie about her is just an updated version of being on stage. We conceived the film more as a *cinema verité* about their lives, their relationship and

their family - but once we turned the cameras that wasn't possible because they are show-people. Anyone who's made a film about show-people knows that when the camera's on them, they perform - period'.

Apart from her obvious personal charisma, what else was it about Tiny's life and work that had impressed them so much? 'When the Sweethearts ended,' says Andrea Weiss, 'most of the women abandoned music, got married, had babies, put their instruments in their cases, and never opened them again. Tiny never did that; and it was much harder for her after the 40s, especially with the transition of men reclaiming their jobs after the war. She overcame incredible obstacles.'

For a Black lesbian musician during these times, there must have been obstacles - which had proved the greater for Tiny? Greta Schiller considers 'all of them, only on a worse level because there weren't any big movements for Black or women's or lesbian liberation. Every obstacle that society puts up to keep people in a preconceived place, she didn't see them as obstacles - she saw them as walls to knock down and keep going forward. I think that's tremendously inspirational. That's another thing that runs through our work; that people, within political and social parameters, in any situation can create a good life for themselves. That people do not have to be victims and that an individual can take responsibility for themselves and their life. I think that's been the driving thing throughout all my documentaries and that's what I want to expound on in my narrative.'

Andrea Weiss' archive researching skills have been much lauded; her stirring work, particularly on 'Before Stonewall', has made the difference between superficial audio-visual reminiscences and a full representation of rich and varied histories. But, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, her workload in this department was hardly lighter for 'Tiny & Ruby'. She explains: 'It was very hard because the archive footage of the Sweethearts we found - which wasn't easy to locate in itself - did not include Tiny. She was not in the image, even though musically she was really the star. We had one shot of her, way over in the corner of the picture, which we blew up so it looked huge. But she was just erased, even at the time. It seems like the studios or whoever was making these little documents of them considered that she didn't present the 'right' image of the band; they wanted a frontwoman who looked like Lena Horne, you know? It was a real challenge; basically we had to think of creative solutions to the problems of total visual erasure from history. I mean, she was considered the female Louis Armstrong of her day and not only is she not remembered in the way he is today, she wasn't even documented visually at the time. Imagine if there was no footage of Louis Armstrong! So we ended up trying to recreate the period, with footage of the clubs, integrated with still material and the little animation sequence. It was the only way, physically, of putting her back into the archival history - placing her back into the material that she'd been taken out of.'

Schiller and Weiss' dedication - and their ability to unearth fascinating subjects - put their films head and shoulders above most other documentaries. Catch 'Sweethearts' and 'Tiny and Ruby' while you can, and learn why hell-divin' women don't get the blues.