

Reel Life: Tiny and Ruby and how they played



Ernestine "Tiny" Davis

Ernestine "Tiny" Davis still blows her trumpet down and dirty with friends who drop by the neat green frame house she shares with Ruby Renee Phelan Lucas in North Chicago, near Waukegan. They haven't played professionally, however, since 1982, when Tiny developed such severe arthritis in her knees she could no longer stand for hours. But a session taped at their house a couple years ago by filmmakers Andrea Weiss and Greta Schiller, the makers of *Before Stonewall*, reveals that her power on the horn has not diminished much. She is still, in her words, "loud, wild, and fat." Ruby hasn't lost her power either; she can still beat a mean drum and play a mellow piano.

Tiny first gained fame as a member of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, the first interracial all-woman jazz band, which toured the States in the 40s. When the Sweethearts broke up at the end of World War II, Tiny left her husband and started her own three-piece band, with Ruby—whom she had met at a party in Kansas City—as drummer. The two women have played together in all-woman bands ever since. Ruby and Tiny were "thrown out of Kansas City," Tiny says, her broad wink and the grin exchanged with Ruby indicating that their open sexual liaison had gotten them into trouble. They weren't much fazed, apparently. They came to Chicago, set up housekeeping, and began to tour. They played across the country and in the Caribbean islands with their band—Tiny Davis and Her Hell Divers.

The film Schiller and Weiss put together, interspersing old clips of Tiny and Ruby, interviews with former band members, and scenes filmed in their home, opens the Chicago Filmmakers Lesbian and Gay International Film Festival on Friday, October 7. Along with *Tiny & Ruby*, Schiller and Weiss's *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* will also be screened. This film makes it clear that Tiny was not only the star performer of the band.

but its most interesting member. Tiny was, as she says, "a little hustling lady" who washed and ironed the other women's white shirts for 60 cents apiece. She also made bologna sandwiches and scouted up soda for the women when they couldn't get served in the south because they were black.

In the 40s, Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway, among others, came and stood in the wings to listen to her. Later her band played opposite Armstrong and Fletcher Henderson and jammed with many jazz greats. "I could have played with Count Basie, Cab Calloway—the greatest," Tiny says. "But I loved them gals too much. They were some sweet gala." Onstage, she played only with women, but after hours she played with whoever was playing in the same town; the idea was to make music all of her waking life.

Tiny is blessed with a feminine version of Louis Armstrong's voice—deep and gravelly. She sings and mugs just like he did. "I was butch on the horn," she laughs, "I blew it like Pops [Armstrong], better than Six [Biederbecke]. I used my tongue, I was real public. I wanted you to see it. My breaks and muggin' were first-class."

After World War II, work for women became scarce, and women musicians were not immune. Tiny and Ruby decided to establish a permanent gig for themselves, and in the early 60s they opened a club, Tiny and Ruby's Gay Spot, on South Wentworth Avenue. After their property went to the city for the Dan Ryan Expressway in 1968, the two women went back to playing other people's clubs. They played at Big Mike's in Old Town, the Brass Rail in the Loop, and other clubs in and around Chicago until Tiny's arthritis put them out of business.

The two films will be shown tonight at 7 at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 N. Southport; tickets are \$5.50. A reception at 5:30 will honor Tiny and Ruby, who promise to play a duet; tickets for the reception and films are \$8. For information call 281-8788.

—Florence Hamlish Levinsohn

