

DECEMBER 2, 1986

Sing, Sing, Swing!

BY JAN HOFFMAN



The Flapper Story: a world gone fizzy

THE FLAPPER STORY. A film produced, written, and directed by Lauren Lazin.

I PROMISE TO REMEMBER: THE STORY OF FRANKIE LYMON AND THE TEENAGERS. Directed by Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher. Produced by Pacific Street Film Projects.

INTERNATIONAL SWEETHEARTS OF RHYTHM. Produced and directed by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss. Presented by Jezebel Productions and Rosetta Records. All three films distributed by the Cinema Guild. Saturday and Sunday afternoons at the Public Theatre, through December.

When was the last time you danced out of a movie so pleased you insisted on paying more for your ticket? While it's true that after a recent screening at the Public nobody stamped the box office waving dollar bills, there were many happy, startled faces. Even had admission been charged, these three short films would still make a delicious 90-minute package; as part of the Public's free weekend series, this is unquestionably the best film deal in town.

"When I was a little girl I wanted to be a missionary. I outgrew that quickly." Fond, shrewd recollections about the bad old good old days by women now in their eighties lend a special intimacy to the glorious archival footage in *The Flapper Story*. This was the generation after the suffragettes, young middle-class women whose rebellion consisted of style and manners. The too-short film is crammed with eye-popping moments from a world gone fizzy: Jazz Age flappers dancing on the wings of an airborne plane, lascivious street corner Charleston contests, beauty pageants, Prohibition speakeasies. In an ecstatic postwar gush of new money and unleashed hormones, says one woman, the flapper's "skirts were a little short, a little tight. She slept around... she had a good time."

Why couldn't a woman be more like a man? Her feminism was expressed mainly as a desire to sample the wares of the masculine preserve. The flapper lopped off her maidenly Victorian ringlets in favor of bared ears and a boyish bob. The scandalous image of her smoking cigarettes appeared on the covers of magazines. She stuck her flask in the rolled top of her silk stocking, took frequent nips of giggle water, often becoming spif-

licated. Though the film is vague about working class flappers, it does include footage of women cheerfully trooping off to work in overalls and high heels, and sawing away at tree trunks.

The ex-flappers in the film—who all, coincidentally, wear their white hair very short and close to the face—describe the decline and fall of the bad girl. Birth control was not widely available, and the pregnant flapper usually had to get married. Then came the Depression, and she put away her dancing shoes for good. *The Flapper Story*, a master's project produced, directed, written, and edited by 25-year-old Lauren Lazin, is not uncritical towards its subject: even as it mourns the flapper's demise, it puts her significance into sober perspective. Noting that the flapper's insouciance had no political content, the narrative concludes, "Freedom was a party, and then the party was over."

I Promise to Remember: The Story of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers is, by comparison, the least substantial of the three films. In 1956 Frankie Lymon was 13 and, for about 18 months, one of the hottest performers in America; in 1968 he died from a heroin overdose, washed-up and forgotten at 26. In the TV clips from the Ed Sullivan and Alan Freed shows, Frankie, doing splits, snapping his fingers, and seducing the camera with those knowing eyes, looks like an old scoundrel in a child's body. "No, no, no, no, no... I'm not a juvenile delinquent," he sings mockingly. Several years later during his attempted comeback, Frankie looks pathetically awkward: his face is puffy and vulnerable, his voice has deepened to an unremarkable tenor, and he's reduced to lip-synching his old hits.

I Promise to Remember, pegged partly to the graying Teenagers' own comeback effort (Frankie has been replaced by a young woman), is an impressionistic, cautionary tale of a life swallowed whole by the music industry. As one veteran producer says, "Who's gonna tell you what you're worth if they're putting it in their pockets?" The group did not own the copyright to "Why Do Fools Fall in Love," most recently resurrected as a smash single for Diana Ross. In 1957, Frankie went solo, flopped, and began to hit the skids. Though *I Promise to Remember* suffers from a lack of hard information about Frankie's decline, it is effectively chilling: by the time he was 17, "Nobody wanted no part of him."

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm opens with the understated, "They were a bunch of women trying to make their way in the world," and escalates toward the conclusion that they were "the greatest girl band in America," whose supporters included Panama Francis and Ella Fitzgerald. The Sweethearts were a 16-piece swing band of black and white women who all lived on a bus, playing the major cities and the black circuit in the Deep South. At the end of World War II they were invited to Europe to entertain black American troops.

The film, which has some rare footage of a wild, spirited concert, is mostly a compilation of memoirs. As in the other two films, memory here is evocative but tantalizing: though the remarkable escapades are recounted with rich good humor, you hunger for the missing information. The women had to switch roommates every three months to avoid forming cliques "or a real tight relationship"—were there chaperones? Was it the funkiest sorority in the country, or what? A white, classically trained alto saxophonist describes how she had to wear makeup to pass for black in the South; but how did she come to join a mostly black band in the first place? But these are quibbles, more than compensated for by the spectacle of one Tiny Davis, a plump, elderly little black woman who blows her horn, then mops her brow with a white handkerchief, and grins, in a wicked, wicked imitation of Louis Armstrong. ■