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Singing and swinging at the Brattle

By Jay Carr
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Black History Month always brings rewarding films: Thursday at 8 p.m. the Harvard Film Ar-

MOVIE REVIEW

chive will offer a couple of Josephine Baker rarities, and to-

day at the Brattle there's Greta Schiller's and Andrea Weiss' documentary, "International Sweethearts of Rhythm," about a 16-piece black and white women's swing band that moved out of a one-room Mississippi school and more than held its own against such similar wartime aggregations as Phil Spitalny's All-Girl Orchestra and Ina Rae Hutton and Her Melodeers. Touring the black circuit in the South and playing such other cities as Washington and Detroit, their supporters included Louis Armstrong, Panama Francis, Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie. The Sweethearts' lead trumpeter, Tiny Davis, even became known as the female Louis Armstrong and at the age of 76 picks up her trumpet and does a wicked imitation of Armstrong, complete with handkerchief, singing "Mack the Knife."

INTERNATIONAL SWEET-HEARTS OF RHYTHM - Documentary by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, unrated. At the Brattle Theater with Schiller's and Weiss' "Tiny & Ruby: Hell Divin' Women." Tonight only.

Their music-making, seen in snatches of archival footage, was sweet, solid and mellow. And the recollections, including one by still-vivacious alto saxophonist Roz Cron who recalls having to wear black makeup when they traveled through the South, form a lively mosaic of spunky, talented women who refused ever to become victims. It can't have been as easy for them as their leader and vocalist, Anna Mae Winburn, makes it sound. Essentially living on their tour bus, and matter-of-factly fielding racism and sexism, they persevered and took advantage of the fact that the wartime shortage of men in civilian life gave them a chance they otherwise would not have had. "We didn't like being known as a novelty band," Winburn says, and their footage on "Tuxedo Junction" backs her claim. "International Sweethearts," with its ca-

maraderie and its collective portrait of women who saw themselves being taken seriously for doing work of their choice, is a treat and a lift.

That 30-minute documentary made in 1986 is being accompanied by a new companion piece of equal length, "Tiny & Ruby: Hell Divin' Women," focusing on the relationship between the well-known black gay jazz trumpeter Davis and Ruby Renel Lucas, her manager, drummer, lover and, in her own words, "shoo-bee-doo" of 42 years. It began, Schiller says when various band members being interviewed for "International Sweethearts" warned her that Davis might say things they'd rather not have mentioned. When they heard that, Schiller and Weiss soon were parked on Davis' doorstep. "I could sing it, I could swing it. I was wild, loud and fat," Davis recalls with gusto. The relish in her recollections is contagious and the strength she has drawn from the loving solidity of her life with Lucas is hearteningly apparent. "I still got what it takes, but nobody wants to take it," Davis says with a laugh. "Times wasn't ready for us. Still isn't."