



Ruby Lucas, left, and Tiny Davis, center, starred in "Tiny and Ruby." Woman at right is unidentified.

## Sweet, sweet rhythms

Women in jazz  
subject of films  
at Landmark

BY BRIAN G. BOURKE  
Staff Writer

**F**ilmmaker Greta Schiller didn't intend to become an expert on women in jazz.

"One thing just sort of led to another," says Schiller, who comes to Syracuse's Landmark Theatre this week, along with her two best-known documentaries. "Each one of my films seems to spring from a previous effort."

At 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, she'll be discussing and screening "International Sweethearts of Rhythm" and "Tiny and Ruby," both dealing with women jazz musicians of the 1940s, '50s and '60s. She's currently finishing a documentary about the late jazz singer Maxine Sullivan.

"I didn't really intend to stay with the jazz thing so long," Schiller says in a telephone interview from the Manhattan office of her Jezebel Productions. "But once I got into it, I realized that there were these great contributions to our culture and heritage made by women, and most of it has gone undocumented. Something had to be done."

"INTERNATIONAL Sweethearts of Rhythm" tells the story of America's hottest all-female, interracial jazz band of the '40s. The documentary paints a picture of what life was like for this band, combining footage of the band playing with interviews. Sexism and racism plagued them in most every city they visited, but it never stopped them from putting on a hot performance.

"Most documentaries are full of accolades — everybody telling how great the subject is," says Schiller,



Greta Schiller.

who produced the film with her partner Andrea Weiss. "But most of the Sweethearts' contemporaries are gone, so we didn't have that option, which turned out to be a good thing."

Instead, the filmmakers relied on archival footage, most of it pulled from the jazz collection of the late David Chertok, who appeared at the Landmark's fall film series in 1986. The Sweethearts are left to tell their own story. And they do a great job.

Schiller says she stumbled on the idea for "International Sweethearts of Rhythm" while making a previous documentary, "Before Stonewall."

"It tells the story of how World War II forced women to go out and work, thrusting them into jobs normally associated with men," she says. "It was the Rosie the Riveter Syndrome. And I came upon this really great footage of this all-women jazz band. They were really swinging."

"Later, I read an essay that (pianist and jazz educator) Marian McPartland wrote on the Sweethearts and that rekindled my interest."

IN A SIMILAR manner, her work on "International Sweethearts of Rhythm" led to "Tiny and Ruby." The latter film is the story of the Sweethearts' lead trumpeter, Tiny Davis, and her lover, Ruby Lucas. The film received raves, not only for its presentation of the life of women in jazz, but for its enlightening view of gay life.

"There wasn't time in 'Sweethearts' to go into the individual lives of any of the musicians," says Schiller. "But Tiny is the only one of the band members who stayed active in jazz throughout the '50s, '60s and even the '70s. There seemed to be a story there."

Schiller says her partnership with Weiss is "an organic one. I've grown more technically oriented as time has passed, and she's become the writer of proposals and scripts."

Though their partnership is intact, the two are not working together on "Maxine Sullivan: Something to Remember Me By." That film grew out of a video project Schiller did with the jazz star, who died in 1986.

"I was asked to come to Japan and do a video shoot with Maxine," says Schiller. "So I followed her around to rehearsals and performances for a few days. She died suddenly before we finished, and no one involved felt it appropriate to continue with the project. But last year, after I finished 'Tiny and Ruby,' I was living in England and the interest in jazz was tremendous. So I decided why not ..."

**THOUGH MOST** people watch documentaries on television, Schiller says she is devoted to film.

"Most people don't think of documentaries as being made for film, but I like the 16mm format. I really admire the Landmark for giving films like mine a chance."

The Landmark Theatre is at 362 S. Salina St. Admission Wednesday is \$3.50, \$2.50 for children and senior citizens. Call 475-7980 for more information.