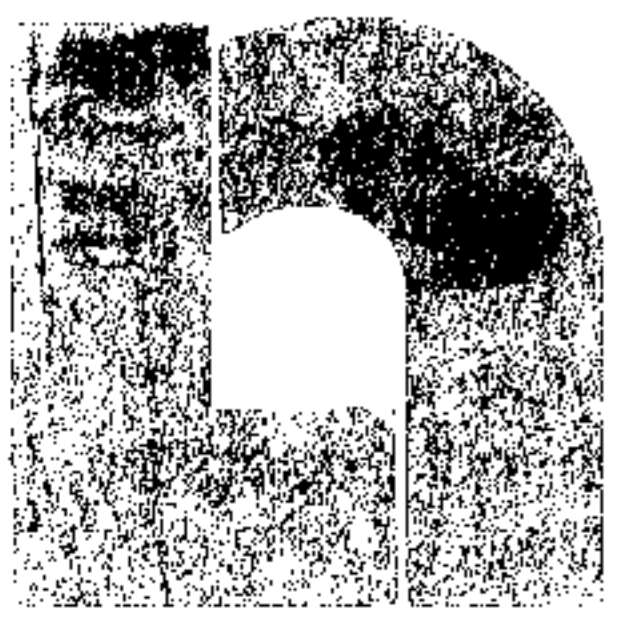


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Sweethearts: All-girl band jazzed up swing

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Correspondent

They are great lookers. It's the first thing you notice about the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. How pretty they are, turning out in style. 1945. Pompadour hairdos and shoulder pads.

Anna Mae Winburn, the band's conductor, croons a tune that would make even Ella Fitzgerald sit up and take notice. Violet (Vi) Burnside, off to her right (Winburn conducts while facing the audience), became the band's forceful tenor sax player whose gutsy mode of expression is reminiscent of Coleman Hawkins.

Helen Saine-Coston added her travelling alto sax and Pauline Braddy's bass drum pedal whipped

the band along to a fresh, high-spirited sound. The 16-piece, all-girl interracial collection of cool beauties added an exotic touch to the music known as "swing" with their big vibrant band sound.

From 1939-1946, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm held a coveted reputation as the most successful all-women jazz band of the 1940s. Unlike the band in "Some Like It Hot," the Sweethearts performed in blazers, black skirts and white blouses while behind stands decorated with big hearts. This was a racially integrated group of musicians — the first integrated women's band — who played almost exclusively to black audiences at the Apollo in Harlem, the Howard in Washington, D.C., the Paradise

in Detroit and the Regal in Chicago. They catered to the real jazz aficionados, which included a small number of whites. Among them was record producer John Hammond, who thought the band was "just marvelous; a great band."

Several former "Sweethearts" now live on Chicago's North Side, and benefit screenings of a documentary film about the band are being held at the Music Box Theatre.

They started as the Piney Wood Country Life School Band, a boarding school near Jackson, Mississippi. The members were approximately between 14 and 15 years old, naive girls who enjoyed play-

(Continued on page 8)



THE SWEETHEARTS OF Rhythm was the first racially integrated "swing" band. It catered to real jazz aficionados, such as those who went to the Regal in Chicago to hear their sound.

All-girl band jazzed up swing

(Continued from page 1)

ing for dances in small towns within driving distance of the school.

The reason for forming the band was to raise money for the school, according to Coston, a Chicagoan originally from Tennessee and a member of the band since its inception in 1938. When the band went professional, several of the girls, including Coston, stayed on to discover a sparkling life on the road performing curtain calls of "Tuxedo Junction," "Candy" and "Sweet Georgia Brown."

Like many of the other girls, Coston left the band after four years to get married. She was 20 and had travelled all over the country. They played the South and the North and west of the Mississippi to standing-room-only crowds. However, Coston didn't leave before meeting Ernestine (Tiny) Davis.

Billed as "245 pounds of solid jive and rhythm," Tiny Davis was the main attraction of the show after she joined the band. With a voice like Louis Armstrong and a trumpet sound second to none, Davis and her flair for comedy stole the show. She would do a funny dance, roll big brown eyes and perform a

funny rendition of "Stompin' the Blues," breaking up the audience each time, and then blow her driving trumpet for another crowd pleaser, "I Can't Get Started."

"I always wanted to travel the globe, see different cities and meet musicians and play with them," Davis said about choosing her career. Originally from Memphis and now living in North Chicago, Davis at age 77 is still playing gigs at Shalimar in the north suburbs as well as at Twistin' Round the Clock in Waukegan.

Davis chose to play the trumpet because it was shiny and because Gabriel blew the horn. Her only

formal lessons were in high school before jamming with Armstrong (her favorite) and a host of other prominent performers who worked with the Sweethearts, including Billie Holliday and Ella Fitzgerald.

After nine years of playing honkey-tonk night clubs, Davis responded to an audition notice for the Sweethearts and was welcomed in the pioneering spirit that paved the way for their highly acclaimed reputation. When the curtain parted, the long hours of practice, dedication and experiences, both rewarding and frustrating, were made worthwhile by unbounding applause.