SWEET HEARTS OF SWING

THE RISE AND FALL OF AN ALL-GIRL BAND

By Marcia Froelke Coburn

The first thing you notice is how pretty they are. Turned out in the style of the 1940s, with formidable shoulder pads and pompadour hairdos, the 16 women are, by and large, great lookers; they sit behind stands decorated with big hearts and exude a certain fresh kind of beauty and youthful appeal. In front of them, their more exotic looking leader, Anna Mae Winburn, glides through a song wearing a bias-cut gown that clings like a fevered whisper.

But then, what strikes you and stays to haunt you long after this film has ended is the music they're making. With a strong brass section and heavy percussion, it is a vibrant big band sound, full of the rhythm and phrasing that made music of the era "swing."

The band is the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, the hottest and most successful all-woman jazz band of the 1940s. Also the first racially integrated women's band, the group played to almost exclusively black audiences for over a decade. Yet although they cut several records and played to turn-away crowds at the biggest jazz clubs in the country—including the Apollo in New York and the Regal here in Chicago—their sound, until recently, had become little more than a memory that resonates in the minds of those who heard them play.

However, a documentary film, titled *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* and scheduled to be shown at the Film Center of the School of the Art Institute Sunday, gives those of us who missed seeing and hearing the Sweethearts a chance to witness their accomplishments. Directed by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss and coproduced by Rosetta Records (which has reissued some of the Sweethearts' recordings), the film includes such valuable clips as several "soundies" (16-millimeter films that ran in elaborate jukeboxes with projectors, they were the music videos of their day) of their performances that the Sweethearts made at the height of their popularity in the mid-40s.

Two Sweethearts, Helen Saine Coston and Ernestine "Tiny" Davis, live in the Chicago area today and were willing to share their history, scrapbooks, and memories with me. They came to the Sweethearts from different places, at vastly different times in their lives, but the story they tell has a harmonious, unifying theme of women who saw the best chance to go somewhere and do something—and they took to the road, running for it.

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In 1910, Laurence C. Jones set out to create a new kind of educational system for poor black children in the south. An advocate of the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and an educated man himself (he held a degree from the University of Iowa), Jones obtained some land in the heart of the Mississippi delta; there, approximately 21 miles south of Jackson, he founded a boarding school for black and multiracial children, many of whom were orphaned.

The Piney Woods Country Life School, in Piney Woods, Mississippi, was dedicated to teaching every child

a trade. The boys learned furniture making and carpentry; the girls learned sewing, cooking, and laundry work. A farm provided not just the food for the school, but an opportunity for extensive work-study programs for the students.

In 1921, Jones organized some students into a singing group called the Cotton Blossom Singers. In the tradition of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who promoted goodwill and sizable donations for Fisk University, the Cotton Blossom Singers became the main fund raisers for the school. Eventually, two other singing groups, the Orange Blossoms and the Magnolia Blossoms, joined the Piney Woods fund-raising circuit. Support for the school grew, and in Chicago a Piney Woods Club, which raised money for the school through charity events, was formed.

It was in Chicago in 1937 that Jones saw Ina Ray Hutton and her Melodears, an all-white-girl swing band. Hutton, who had been born in Chicago in 1916 and gone on to be, in the early 30s, a Ziegfield Follies girl, was a glamorous, slinky platinum blond with a penchant for silver fox stoles. Her onstage gyrations as "leader" were so vigorous that all the seams in her gowns had to be double-stitched to avoid a scandal. Although no musician herself, Hutton had the look of the times (*Variety* dubbed her "the Blond Bombshell of Rhythm"), and that, along with a first-rate group of female musicians, made the Melodears the most popular women's band of the decade. They appeared in several movies, including *The Big Broadcast of 1937*, and they became the first all-woman band to record.

Evidently the appeal of the Melodears was not lost on Laurence C. Jones. When he returned from Chicago, he devoted his energies to creating a new fund-raising musical group for Piney Woods School: an all-girl swing band.

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In her pastel-toned house on Chicago's south side, while her tabby cat takes an unwarranted swipe at her long-haired dachshund, Helen Saine Coston sifts through a box of memorabilia. In it, there are *Billboard* reviews, a map of Paris, glossy promotion photos, and newspaper clippings, including one from the 1940s that shows a strikingly beautiful young woman holding a saxophone. The caption reads: "Helen Saine—Some sailors might say she has plenty sax-appeal."

All of these mementos document the good, high days of her life as an International Sweetheart of Rhythm: a European tour, recording sessions, headlining in such clubs as the Apollo and the Regal. But what Coston wants to show me first is a photograph of the band back in the beginning down in Piney Woods.

"You see what we looked like down in that school," she says. "Little orphans. Did you ever see such a raggedy group of children?"

The photo does show a ragtag group of 15 girls, all in their early teens, posed against the back of a bus. Holding their instruments somewhat awkwardly, as if they weren't completely at ease with them yet, they look at the camera with a compelling mixture of hope, naivete, and uneasy caution. Only the greatest leap of imagination could see a connection between this group and Ina Ray Hutton and her Melodears.

"Later, after we turned professional, then we got ourselves fixed up," says Saine Coston. "We became a lot more sophisticated. But when I see that picture or this other one—" she reaches for a framed photograph that shows a 15- or 16-year-old Helen Saine with a saxophone across her lap. "I look so young and determined and pitiful. You know, I look at this picture now and I say, 'Poor little child.'"

Helen Saine was born in a little Tennessee town called Bolivar. Her mother was a nurse, and by the time Saine was in junior high school she had taken piano lessons and learned to read music. At the age of 13 she was also showing the promise of growing into a beauty; she already possessed a dreamy look in her eyes, a shimmering, light complexion, and a certain grace. The latter she demonstrated by playing on her school basketball team, and it was there, in 1939, that Laurence C. Jones spotted her.

"The Sweethearts had just been together maybe a year when they came to my school," says Saine Coston. "Mr. Jones saw me playing basketball and he had an eye for certain-looking people to play in his band. So he spoke to my coach and my mother and they asked me if I would like to go to school at Piney Woods."

She made a visit to the school and what she saw impressed her. Piney Woods Country Life School had, by this time, grown to include a dairy, a school for the blind, two 45-piece

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marching bands (one for boys, one for girls), and, of course, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm who, even in their "raggedy" early state, held an instant appeal to Saine.

Jones had formed the band in 1938, selecting some girls for their musical ability and some for their striking and often exotic looks. The average Sweetheart age then was 14 or 15. The "International" part of their name came not just from grand aspirations but also from the mixed parentage of several of the girls. Originally, there was a Chinese-black saxophonist, a Mexican-black clarinet player, and a Hawaiian trumpet player. At this stage, the band's appeal was primarily one of novelty. The girls' inspiration came from records (they had never heard a live swing band, although eventually Jones took some of them to Memphis to see Louis Armstrong), and, at first, very few of them could read music. They learned by imitating notes and phrases sung by a teacher. Gradually, they learned to read "stocks"—standard sheet music arrangements. Their first numbers included "Stardust," "Baby, Don't Tell on Me," and "How Long, Baby"; their first tour consisted of little towns within driving distance of Piney Woods, places like Bolivar, Tennessee.

At the age of 14, Helen Saine moved from Bolivar to Piney Woods and began taking clarinet lessons there. "I learned the clarinet fairly well, good enough to play in the marching band. Then I branched over to the saxophone. What I had in the back of my mind the whole time was learning to play well enough to join the Sweethearts." After about a year, there was a vacancy. "It was for baritone sax and I played alto, but I said I'd jump over. So I practiced for about six months and then I was a Sweetheart."

Ernestine "Tiny" Davis

photo/Mike Tappin

photo/Mike Tappin

Helen Saine Coston

When Saine was 15, the band began traveling. A chaperone, Mrs. Rae Lee Jones (no relation to Laurence Jones) was hired to be with the girls. At first the band played armories, halls, and high schools in nearby southern towns, but gradually they began to expand their perimeters: Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana. The girls' schoolwork began to go by the wayside (although when they complained, a tutor, Vivian Crawford, was engaged; conveniently, she could also double on tenor sax), but Mrs. Jones expressed her concern for the girls by requiring each of them to drink a quart of milk a day.

The first non-Piney Woods musician, a sax player from Dallas named Jennie Lee Morse, joined the band. Later, a 19-year-old vocalist named Evelyn McGee was added. ("A man

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who was both a booker and ran a funeral parlor recommended Evelyn to us," remembers Saine Coston. "She sang for us, we liked her, and so she left with us that night. Can you imagine? She just went home, packed her things in a cardboard box, and got on the bus.") Bookings were scheduled at a fierce pace (often 12 to 14 dates in as many different towns in 16 days), but records show that the band members received little money themselves. According to Sweetheart album liner notes written by Rosetta Reitz, the Sweethearts were making approximately $8 a week at this time, with $7 of that going to pay for their food.

By the end of 1940, Daniel Gary, a Washington, D.C., booking agent and a friend of Rae Lee Jones, appeared on the scene. Gary, who with his partner Al Dade booked acts through their company Amusement Corporation, suggested that he be allowed to book the Sweethearts. He promised bigger cities, and by 1941 he had booked the Sweethearts into major cities of the south and midwest: Des Moines, Omaha, Kansas City, Detroit, and Romping Earl's Club House in Chicago. By this time, the Sweethearts were bringing in $3,000 a month for Piney Woods Country Life School.

Then one member of the band died and the school insured the other girls' lives, naming itself as beneficiary. Band members balked at this and at the sudden question of whether several of the girls who were eligible for their high school diplomas would actually be receiving them. Mr. Jones informed the band that there would be no diplomas unless they left the road and returned to the school, and when the girls refused he announced that Rae Lee Jones was fired and that someone from the school would be coming to bring the band back. But the band decided it had other plans.

The May 3, 1941, edition of the *Afro-American* newspaper recorded the turn of events: "Eighteen girls of the Piney Woods School band quit the school, took the school bus and, pursued by highway police, fled through seven states to Washington and freedom."

"We had been playing big cities and getting away from the Mississippi surroundings," says Saine Coston. "We were seeing the world for the first time and beginning to understand some of the possibilities that might exist for us. Mr. Gary convinced us that we could leave the school and go professional, that we'd make more money and go farther than being hooked up with Piney Woods.

"So, you know, being young and adventurous, you can see how we happened to decide to leave. We left under protest, so to speak. One night, after we finished a dance, we just took off. We had the school bus and instruments and uniforms—although we gave all that back. We felt like fugitives that night," she says, laughing. "I can't even remember now where we left from, I just know that we went to Arlington, Virginia, and every place from there."

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Tiny Davis was born Ernestine Carroll in 1909. She grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, the youngest of seven children. Her father was a night watchman, her mother's full-time job was "raising us kids."

When she was 13, she saw a trumpet and something about it enthralled her. "I don't know what or why. Nobody in my family was an entertainer or played an instrument. But as soon as I saw that trumpet I just wanted to play — boom." She asked her mother for it and her mother bought it for her within a week.

Davis took her only music lessons in high school, where the principal taught all the instruments. She became the only girl in "a 30- or 40-piece high school band. That was no problem, except maybe some of the gals got jealous. But they'd have been jealous anyhow." She married Clarence Davis, another trumpet player in the band, and eventually they moved to Kansas City, where she began her professional career. "Clarence could play better than I could," remembers Davis. "But when I got up to play I'd get more hands, 'cause when I hit a note, I'd sell it. And he was cool. He *was* a better musician than me but nobody thought it 'cause I had more pizzazz." In her book *American Women in Jazz*, author Sally Placksin calls Davis "one of the most well known women to come onto the jazz scene during the early 30s."

In the mid-30s, Davis was recruited to join a new, all-woman band called the Harlem Playgirls, and she stayed with that group, traveling the country and playing top clubs, for several years even though by this time she had two young children at home. Around 1938, she dropped out to have a third child; within a few years, she was looking for a new opportunity. Around 1941, she answered an ad placed through the musicians' union in Kansas City. It was for a trumpet player to join the International Sweethearts of Rhythm.

"I think I met up with them in Chicago," says Davis. "I met all those beautiful Sweethearts and everything went along nicely. I was the only one who was married," she breaks into a laugh, "yes, I was. I was the oldest one, too. And I was the one having the most fun. Really. I was so happy joining that band. You know, when you're married and got children, you're *glad* to get on the road."

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The original Sweethearts had a rocky start after they broke with Piney Woods School. Rae Lee Jones was arrested for stealing the school equipment, although the charges were dropped when everything was returned to Piney Woods. "Mr. Jones notified the welfare agency in Virginia that there were underage girls in the band," remembers Saine Coston. "I was the youngest one, I was 15, so I had to go back home and stay there until I was 16."

The Sweethearts had run to a ten-room brick house in Arlington, Virginia, which was then dubbed "Sweetheart House." Rae Lee Jones was made trustee of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, Inc. and the girls were told that they owned shares in the house. Part of their future salaries would go to cover the mortgage. It was an acceptable, even appealing idea to the band; many of them were orphans and even for those who weren't, Sweetheart House was really the only place they had to go.

The Sweethearts spent several months there, rehearsing for hours every day. Dan Gary had booked them into the top jazz clubs in the country — the Apollo, the Regal, the Howard in Washington, D.C. — yet it was clear

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that at this point they weren't up to such high-level exposure.

An arranger, Eddie Durham, was brought in. He had worked with such bands as those of Count Basie, Glenn Miller, Jimmie Lunceford, and Artie Shaw and he had written several successful songs, including "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire." He wrote and arranged music for the Sweethearts' strong points and around their technical limitations. Because the soloists weren't really improvisers, Durham wrote simple but strikingly effective solos that sounded as if they had been improvised on the spot.

During this time, various positions in the band were filled and its general image was spruced up. Their schoolgirl image of white blouses and black skirts was exchanged for the look of more sophisticated gowns and upswept hairdos.

Finally, in 1941, they played the Apollo. "They always said, 'If you can play the Apollo and not get booed, you've got it made,'" says Saine Coston. "Because they were pretty critical. That's where they had all those amateur nights where they'd get the hook. So when we first came to the Apollo, everyone was pretty skeptical about what we could do. But we were invited back every year after the first time we played there."

By this time, Anna Mae Winburn, an exotic-looking singer with sloe eyes and high cheekbones, had been hired to "front" the band—that is, direct it and literally stand in front of it as a showpiece. Winburn also added several solo songs to the Sweethearts' arrangements. Then, as the Sweethearts toured the country during the rest of 1941, they picked up other professional musicians who gave the band more experience and wider range.

When Ernestine Davis joined the band in Chicago, it was Winburn who nicknamed her "Tiny." According to Davis, she actually was tiny when she joined the group, weighing in at 110 pounds, but after a year on the road, she had blossomed up to 190. Within a year or two, the bill for the International Sweethearts of Rhythm would feature "Tiny Davis, 245 lbs. of Solid Jive and Rhythm."

"Tiny was always so likable, so talented," says Saine Coston. "It's a pity that television wasn't around then, because she could have really made it big. She was funny, she could tell jokes, sing pretty good, dance a little, play pretty good. You know how you say, 'Always save the best for the last'? That's when Tiny would come out with us, she'd do her number—'I Can't Get Started With You,' 'I'm a Red Hot Mama,' 'Stompin' the Blues'—and she'd always get a standing ovation."

From 1941 on, life for the International Sweethearts of Rhythm was essentially a life on the road, moving from one town to the next, only staying over for a week or two in the big cities to play the major clubs—Club Plantation in LA, the Apollo in New York, the Regal and the Rhumboogie in Chicago. It was also a life governed by Rae Lee Jones's rules. "Oh lord, yes, she had rules," says Davis. "She'd hold on to that pocketbook and keep all that money and be watching everything. She was real strict. We couldn't run around, you know, like some gals. When you got off that bandstand, you couldn't go running off anywhere, you just had to get on that bus and get on out of town." (Still, Davis managed to escape once in a while. "One time in Chicago, I remember, Duke [Ellington] was playing at the Blue Note and we were across the street at the Crown Tavern and honey, I was just over there. The boss man had to come get me. 'You got a job across the street, remember?'")

Saine Coston remembers that "we had to have gloves, couldn't smoke, and couldn't dance with any man unless he was wearing a coat and a tie. Once some of the girls wanted to go see a movie, so Mrs. Jones, she just marched all of us to the movie, just took us all whether we wanted to see it or not. It was just a way of keeping everybody together and under control."

By 1943, several important changes had taken place: Eddie Durham had left his position as arranger (according to an interview he gave in *American Women in Jazz*, he was disturbed that over half of the band's salaries was being taken by Gary and Dade for "expenses") and Jesse Stone, followed by Maurice King, had assumed this role. More importantly, though, the Sweethearts had acquired several white members, making it the first integrated female band.

According to Helen Saine Coston,

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this integrated situation created no problems within the band. "I don't think it was even mentioned. I think about it now, in retrospect—did we ever have any altercations racially? We just didn't. We all got along."

The problem, for the entire band, was in the south, where segregation laws and racial prejudice prevented the band from using motels, hotels, or restaurants. "We had a white driver and he'd go in and get the food for us in the south," remembers Davis, "and bring it back. They didn't want for you to mix down there. And the white gals had to use that brown stuff, dark makeup, on their faces and tie rags around their heads and hide to keep people from messing with them. We'd stop in a town and the sheriff would come by, examine the bus, try to see what's happening there. We had a rough time down south."

Saine Coston remembers that the white players were instructed to tell any sheriff that their mothers were black, "that was supposed to settle the problem. Once Roz [Cron] told a sheriff that, but he went through her purse and there was a photograph of her parents sitting in front of their New England picket fence, so, I think, she got hauled off to jail."

There were other kinds of prejudice as well. "We got a lot of being called 'a novelty band,' even before people heard us," says Saine Coston. "You'd say it was an all-girls band and men would say, oh no. Some people thought of us as being 'light,' not heavy or deep. When we played the Apollo Theater, we always stayed at the Theresa Hotel, which was right around the corner, and lots of the big-name musicians stayed there, too. Dizzy [Gillespie], Duke Ellington, Count Basie, guys from those bands. They were always encouraging. We probably got more compliments from the most prominent musicians. The ones who were scuffling like us probably felt that we were taking some of their jobs. But guys like Johnny Hodges [sax player in Ellington's band] didn't mind supporting us and complimenting us because we weren't giving him any competition."

And what about the feeling that women can't play good jazz because they don't have the power to really blow?

"Yeah, I've heard that," says Davis. "Well, men are prejudiced anyhow. Maybe all women don't have the power, it depends on the woman. But I don't like to hear that 'plays like a girl' or 'plays like a sissy' stuff. Me? Oh, I had more chops than most men. I had lots of juice, too. I could boop and sell it. You know, it ain't what you do, it's how you do it. I had it in me; I've still got it. So no, we never got the credit we deserved. But women have a hard time in anything. There's nothing you can do. Just keep on keeping on."

Such bias against the band only served, according to Saine Coston, "to make us work harder to disprove it. If we got into a town at 12 noon, we'd get something to eat and then we'd go to the hall where we were going to play and rehearse from 1 to 4 or so. Then we'd stop, eat, take an hour of rest, and get ready to play. That was routine."

By 1944, the Sweethearts were at the height of their popularity (they now had seven different gowns with matching shoes) and their travel schedule was grueling. When they played the Rhumboogie Club in Chicago, crowds were turned away from the three shows a night; at the Apollo, the Sweethearts did up to seven shows a day. Often they would tour with another band, like Fletcher Henderson's or Jimmie Lunceford's, and the show would be promoted as "Swing Battle of the Sexes." In the big clubs, a typical bill that included the Sweethearts would also include Redd Foxx, Slappy White, the Nicolas Brothers, Moms Mabley, and sometimes Billie Holiday. They also cut four records for RCA Victor and Guild Records.

"We didn't really have any vacations," says Saine Coston. "We just lived on the bus. Maybe once a year we'd go to Arlington and wind down for a few weeks. Even when we went overseas, we only had four days free, so some of us got to see Paris. Otherwise, we worked full-time."

That pace suited some players, like Davis. "Life was pretty dull when we'd come off the road. Still, there's nothing like life at home. Maybe. I guess."

For years, though, the road and the bus became home and the band was family. Remembers Saine Coston, "Tiny would hustle around, trying to make money. She'd go to the grocery store and buy a big salami and loaves of bread and mustard. Then she'd

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go up and down the bus like on a train, calling, 'Sandwiches, sandwiches.' They'd cost about 35 cents. One time, she brought her iron and offered to rinse out anybody's blouse in the sink and then iron it for 50 cents. And she had a little cooler of soda pop in the back that she'd sell from. If somebody would make a crack, she'd always use her children. 'Listen, girl, I've got to send some money to my children so come on and buy a sandwich.'"

"Sure, I did that," says Davis. "Scuffling. Hustling. I should have been rich if I had all that hustle and get-up in me."

As to exactly how much money the Sweethearts made, no one wants to say for sure. "Not a lot, that's for sure," says Saine Coston. "After we joined the union, we got scale. But there were 'expenses.'"

Davis says that at her height of popularity with the band, she made "about $150 a week. But Mrs. Jones didn't pay everybody the same. Some of them was making less, I heard. But I'd call myself 'starring' and all, so I got a little more."

In 1945, the Sweethearts became USO entertainers and toured Europe for over six months, entertaining the occupational forces. It was, in many ways, the highlight of their time together; because the USO directly deposited their paychecks into banks, instead of routing them through Sweetheart management, it also became their highest-paying work.

Upon their return to the States, many members—including Helen Saine—left the band. "I wanted to go back to school. I had saved my money from the overseas tour, so Roz and I got an apartment in New York. I went to modeling school for six months, then I worked for a fur company, modeling in a wholesale place. My godmother lived here in Chicago and it was on a visit to her that I met my husband, Ray Stanley Coston. I went back to New York for my things, then I moved to Chicago and got married. I was 20 years old."

Saine Coston's husband was a doctor finishing his residency; to make money during this time, she worked at Spiegel's for several years. They had two sons, Ray Jr. and Cardoza. "This was in the days before women's lib. You just stayed home and took care of your kids. Finally I gave my sax to a little boy who was studying in a school band."

Years later, Saine Coston, who had never received her high school diploma, took an equivalency test and then the SATs. She attended Chicago State, earning a BA and then a master's in high school counseling and guidance.

Tiny Davis also left the Sweethearts in 1946. Separated from her husband, she moved to Chicago and formed her own group, Tiny Davis and Her Hell Divers. They toured for a short while, then played Rush Street clubs for years. In 1954, Davis was featured on the cover of *Jet* magazine, which ran a story about why female musicians never hit it big.

For several more years after their return from Europe, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm struggled to continue, but there was no longer any continuity in its membership. Finally, in 1949, the band dispersed and Sweetheart House in Virginia was sold. No members of the band received any money from the sale.

Sitting today in her cozy North Chicago house, Tiny Davis says, "Life's pretty tame now. Of course, once you get older, you can't do nothing but get tame. I just listen to tapes and records and dream. That's all. But I've had it. I've really had it."

Says Helen Saine Coston, "I listen now to some of those records we made—and this was before all of this technology where they have these fancy buttons and microphones and sound systems, where they take something mediocre and make it sound good. We did our recordings *cold,* just a microphone and a room. And when I listen to it now, I say to myself, 'Yeah, we did sound pretty good.'" She turns to me. "You saw us and heard us in the movie. What did you think?"

What comes to mind is that film image again: 16 women swinging, playing the best jazz they could, doing it obviously not for the money or the fame but for the sheer love and excitement of it all. They had had the desire to take to the road, and for a while, running on, life must have seemed as clear and finely pitched as every note they hit.

"You were great," I say, "the real thing."

"I always think of it as the best years of my life," says Saine Coston. "Even with the hardships—I have no regrets. I wouldn't change it for anything."