

# The New York Times

Film Festival

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## Portrait of Isaac Singer In Nostalgic Double Bill

By JANET MASLIN

**“WHAT a wicked place!”** thought Isaac Bashevis Singer, upon visiting his first American-style cafeteria in the 1930's and trying vainly to attract someone with a tray. “So many waiters, and no one pays attention to me!” The venerable Mr. Singer has lively, colorful memories of this and many other such incidents. He recounts an hour's worth of them in “Isaac in America,” a warmhearted, anecdotal portrait of the author by Amram Nowak.

Mr. Singer is seen visiting old haunts, such as the house in Brooklyn's Sea Gate where he first lived after emigrating here, and the headquarters of *The Forward*, the once-thriving Yiddish newspaper that published his early writing. “If you don't know really how sick you are, you may go on living another 20 years,” says the author of *The Forward's* fortunes, perhaps describing his own longevity as well. When the octogenarian Mr. Singer meets his former Sea Gate landlord, who is now 102, he reacts with an enthusiasm that is positively boyish.

Mr. Singer is seen on the lecture circuit, amusing his audiences with various *bons mots* (“We must believe in free will, we have no choice”). He is also visited in his apartment on the Upper West Side, offering the camera a tour of his crowded study and defending its untidy condition in Biblical terms — there was chaos before there was light, he says, and so the place deserves to retain its disorganized appearance. In the midst of the clutter, among his numerous other

citations, is Mr. Singer's Nobel Prize. “This is the King of Sweden, and this is Isaac Singer,” says the author, with a modesty that may be a trifle disingenuous but is nonetheless charming.

Part of “Isaac in America” is devoted to a reading by Judd Hirsch of Mr. Singer's story “A Day in Coney Island,” with the author's wanderings used as vague illustrations of his prose. This part of the film seems forced and obvious compared with the plainer, more spontaneous footage in which Mr. Singer simply talks.

On the same bill at the New York Film Festival, tonight at 7:00, is “International Sweethearts of Rhythm,” a delightful 30-minute trip down memory lane. The group of the title is an interracial, all-women swing band that enjoyed enough popularity during the 1940's to be remembered affectionately by the fans who are interviewed here. The film, by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, combines these reminiscences with those of the musicians themselves, and with vintage footage of the group working its magic. “We put in the time, we put in the hours,” one of them says. “We didn't consider ourselves a novelty band.”

Accompanied by footage of the segregated South at the time of the band's greatest popularity, the musicians talk of touring as an interracial troupe. “I always looked very freakish and not quite right, but we tried everything we could,” says Roz Cron, a white woman who played alto saxophone and would make herself up as a

### Swing Time

**INTERNATIONAL SWEETHEARTS OF RHYTHM**, directed and produced by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss; photographed and edited by Miss Schiller; coproducers, Rosetta Reitz and Rebecca Reitz; produced by Jezebel Productions and Rosetta Records in association with Channel 4 Television, London; a Cinema Guild Release. At Alice Tully Hall, part of the 24th New York Film Festival. Running time: 30 minutes. This film has no rating.

### A Look Back

**ISAAC IN AMERICA**, directed by Amram Nowak; story narrated by Judd Hirsch; cinematography by Jerry Panzer and Greg Andracke, Brian Kellman, David Lerner, Kirk Simon and Burleigh Wartes; edited by Riva Freifeld; music by Ross Levinson; produced by Kirk Simon. At Alice Tully Hall, as part of the 24th New York Film Festival. Running time: 52 minutes. This film has no rating.

black. The group encountered potential racial troubles each time its tour bus was searched by local sheriffs, who were on the lookout for white women traveling in black company.

The interviewees, among them the glamorous singer and band leader Anna Mae Winburn, recall their initial trepidation at the idea of a band like this — “I said ‘What a bunch of cute little girls, but I don't know whether I could get along with that many women or not,’” Miss Winburn recalls. And even Ella Fitzgerald had her doubts about whether the band could back her adequately, doubts that were dispelled when she heard them play. The best testimonial to the group's experience comes from one of the musicians, who says “I never realized that I could experience such freedom being away from my home.”