

## The International Sweethearts of Rhythm

AN INTERVIEW WITH GRETA SCHILLER AND ANDREA WEISS

by Rob Edelman

**Y**ou won't find *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* highlighted in the jazz history books. Yet the likes of Louis Armstrong and Count Basie would stand in the wings, applauding this sixteen-piece band when it played New York's Apollo Theater. The Sweethearts, whose heyday was the 1940s, the World War II era, felt a double prejudice: many of its members were black, and all of its members were women. They were a professional all-girl orchestra, at a time when female trombonists, trumpet players and drummers were considered little more than novelties.

The Sweethearts resented this label, and rightly so: they were serious and talented musicians. Like their black male counterparts, they were restricted up North to the 'colored only' theater circuit: the Regal in Chicago and the Howard in Washington, D.C., along with the Apollo. Ironically, when they toured the South, their white and mulatto members had to paint their faces and pass for black to avoid arrest. Despite the prejudice of the times, however, each Sweetheart experienced a freedom — something then rare for women in general and black women in particular — that shaped her life.

Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss's *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*, a thirty-minute documentary screened at the 1986 New York Film Festival, traces the group's history: its roots as a school band in Mississippi during the late 1930s; the society and culture from which it evolved; what it was like rehearsing, performing and touring. The film is a record of, and valentine to, the Sweethearts, who today have been mostly forgotten, but not by those who heard them live, when they were at their peak. A man at a festival press screening recalled how he had seen them on stage decades ago, when he was an 18-year-old GI and the only white person in an all-black audience. He described their sound in one word "Powerhouse."

Schiller and Weiss, who previously collaborated on *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*, were interviewed in New York during the festival.—Rob Edelman

**Cineaste:** How did you first learn about the Sweethearts?

**Andrea Weiss:** We initially heard of the band when we saw a really wonderful clip of them performing in a short film called *Jump Children*, when I was programming films at the Collective for Living Cinema. We'd brought in

a program of short films on women in jazz, and it was the last one on the bill — a real knock-your-socks-off finale. It was from the collection of David Chertok, and we found out later that he had four other Sweethearts 'Soundies,' as they called them.

**Cineaste:** How many films did they appear in?

**Weiss:** No one knows, really. We've been able to locate these five. They were made in 1945 and 1946, after the band had returned from Europe, where they were on a USO-sponsored tour.

**Greta Schiller:** We know that they appeared in a black independent feature with Ruby Dee called *That Man of Mine*, but we just couldn't get a print of it.

**Cineaste:** How difficult was it to come up with your archival material?

**Weiss:** Actually, most of it was fairly easy. We found it through Dave Chertok, and a number of other jazz film collectors throughout the country. If they don't have something, they pretty much know who does. There were also several other film collectors and sources. The jitterbug clips were taken out of a 1940s VD film, made by the government, warning against the evils of jazz clubs, alcohol and women.

**Cineaste:** Was it hard tracking down the individual Sweethearts?

**Schiller:** Marian McPartland, the jazz pianist, had organized a Sweethearts reunion in 1980, sponsored by the Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival. She's the one who really got the whole Sweethearts thing rolling. We got to the ones we used in the film through Roz Cron, one of the band members. It was relatively easy, compared to the research we usually have to do on these kinds of films.

**Cineaste:** Were the white Sweethearts, like Roz Cron, especially ostracized by other whites because they were associating with, and working with, blacks?

**Weiss:** As Sweethearts, they were really so isolated. When they joined the band, they essentially kissed white society goodbye. One story we don't have in the film is

Greta Schiller (left) and Andrea Weiss





Tiny Davis (center bottom) and other trumpeters in *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*

that one woman was arrested for walking with a black soldier in uniform; she was on her way to catch the band bus, to move on to the next gig.

**Schiller:** There's a specific reason why the white women were not welcome in the white community, why they weren't acclaimed as jazz musicians. They were, after all, travelling with 'niggers,' playing 'dirty' music in black halls.

By the way, it's interesting that the women themselves have no idea of how phenomenal they were, either as women playing men's instruments and men's music or as an integrated band. We would ask them where they got the courage to travel through the South and they would say, well, "We were young and foolish, and we loved what we were doing." There was no political or social awareness; they just went out and did it. But, in this regard, their actions ended up being extremely political because they were, in their own way, fighting racism and sexism.

**Cineaste:** You document the *Sweethearts'* beginnings and their success, but only briefly mention that they broke up after the war, when male musicians were coming out of the service. Why didn't you get into the whens and hows of the band's demise, and what happened to the women?

**Weiss:** We wanted to celebrate the band. To put much emphasis on what happened as it fell apart would really be depressing. It would show the women as victims, rather than as courageous and remarkable—which is what they are. We wanted to acknowledge that the *Sweethearts* did break up, but we didn't want it to end up as the film's dominant thrust.

The band didn't actually fold immediately after the war. Some of the primary players left, to try and start their own bands, smaller combos. But it was really rough; none achieved anywhere near the success of the *Sweethearts*. The band did struggle on, in one form or another, until 1949.

The *Sweethearts* broke up for reasons that were economic and social. The men were looking for their old jobs; the big band era was ending; the women were falling in love, marrying, having babies — and giving up their careers at age 21, 22, 23. There was a lot of pressure for the women to return to traditional roles. Many of them haven't even picked up their instruments since. However, it's important to add that, for the black women, traditional roles meant working outside the home anyway. It just meant a much harder time finding jobs, and much lower pay.

The *Sweethearts* also never saw a penny of what they'd saved. Their chaperone was supposedly holding their

money for them in Omaha, while they were in Europe. When they returned, one of the women went to Omaha to get her money, which had already been spent. That woman has, since then, never left the black ghetto of Omaha. She landed there flat broke and stayed there.

**Cineaste:** Did any of the women continue their careers as professional musicians?

**Schiller:** Tiny Davis, the trumpet player, was a rebel and an outsider her entire life. She formed the Tiny Davis Trio and travelled for twenty years all through the United States and the Caribbean. Eventually, she and her lover of forty years, Renee Lucas, opened a club on Chicago's North Side called Tiny and Renee's Gay Spot.

A few others struggled along. But, before Marian McPartland in 1980, and us with this film, no one had ever told them how phenomenal they were, or came to them with any kind of social or political analysis.

**Cineaste:** Would the *Sweethearts* have made it as far as they did had there been no war?

**Weiss:** Absolutely not. During the war, it was more acceptable for women to travel, to do what were traditionally men's jobs. There was also a ready-made audience: soldiers, who were hungry for entertainment. When they were on tour in Europe, they were treated as celebrities by the USO, and certainly by the soldiers. Then, to come back to the United States and be treated as second-class citizens was a real eye-opener.

**Schiller:** But the point now is that the *Sweethearts* were really extraordinary. Hopefully, with this film, more people will get to learn about them — who these women were and what they did. ■

*The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* is distributed by The Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, New York, NY 10019, phone (212) 246-5522.