

## Arts & Show

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### 'Tiny & Ruby' relives era of hot jazz and fast living

By Patricia Smith

**A**rthritis has bent her nearly double. She can't move nearly as fast as she used to. But she still can raise a gleaming trumpet to her lips and—perhaps after a few false starts—blow it cool, hard and fast.

Ernestine "Tiny" Davis, 79, spent the 1940s as a featured player with an all-female segregated swing band called the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. The band jammed at the Apollo Theater in New York, the Howard in Washington, D.C., and the Regal in Chicago. Their incredulous male peers paid them what they surely believed was the ultimate compliment: "Those gals play just like men."

Davis didn't care how they tagged her, because she had always shunned labels. After all, she was fat, she was black and she was a lesbian. All that counted was that people flocked to see the Sweethearts because Tiny Davis blew the horn like she meant it.

When the International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival opens in Chicago on Friday, the premiere film will be "Tiny & Ruby: Hell-Divin' Women," a documentary chronicling the lives of Davis and Ruby Lucas (also known as Renee Pheasant), her partner and lover of 42 years. They live together in a modest north suburban North Chicago bungalow, filled with photographs, playbills, sheet music and memories.

"We live a good life," said Davis, "because we've had a good life."

Davis cackles and guffaws when she looks back on her life. "I was a hell-raiser, that's for sure," she said.

She was born on Aug. 5, 1909, in Memphis, Tenn., one of eight children. She fell in love with the trumpet when she was 13.

"I saw the boys in the high school band playing the horn, and I liked the way it looked," she said. "So I asked my mother to buy me one, and she did. People thought I was crazy, practicing up on top of the barn like I did. But I wanted to learn to blow that horn more than anything. More than anything."

For a while, Davis contented herself with playing in the school band and at small jazz joints. But she knew that wasn't enough. When she was 18, she married fellow musician Clarence Davis and moved to Kansas City.

"Now, that's where the music was," Davis said. "They had real jazz there. You could jam with some really big bands. On a good night, we'd make 75 cents apiece. That was pretty good money in those days."

That's when Davis joined the Harlem Playgirls. "There were about 16 of us, and boy, could we play," she said. "We played mostly for white audiences. Sometimes we were all the way in Oklahoma. A bunch of black gals in Oklahoma—imagine that."

Davis flashed an exaggerated wink. "We partied all night, sometimes for two days at a time. Everybody did just about what they wanted to do."

In 1940, Davis heard that the International Sweethearts of Rhythm were looking for a trumpet player. She had separated from her husband and was looking for a new challenge. The Sweethearts agreed to meet her in Chicago.



The life of "Tiny" Davis is chronicled in "Tiny & Ruby: Hell-Divin' Women," which will open the International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival on Friday.

"Helen Jones, who played the trombone, picked me up and took me to the Grand Hotel, which was on 51st and South Park. I walked in and saw all those yellow and white and pretty gals, and I enjoyed it. I went in there and started trying to blow that horn."

The Sweethearts began as a girls' choir in the Piney Woods Country Life School in Mississippi, a trade school for poor and orphaned black and mulatto children. The school's founder would send the teenage girls on small musical tours to raise funds for the school.

By 1941, a talented swing band had formed. It broke ties with the school and went on the road, growing larger and better with time.

The Sweethearts were the best thing that ever happened to Tiny Davis. "Our sound was so tight—nobody could argue with us," she said. "We were just like sisters, traveling on a bus, sleeping on it to keep from getting arrested in the South for mixing the races. The white gals had to wear that heavy makeup, trying to pass for black. Most of the time, they just looked orange."

Great names in the jazz world flocked to see the Sweethearts, but especially to marvel at Davis and her mastery of the trumpet. Dizzy Gillespie was awed by her talent, she said, and Louis Armstrong of-

ferred her a tidy sum to pull up stakes and join his band.

"But I guess I just loved those gals," Davis said. "We played together like a machine. I couldn't leave them."

While playing with the Sweethearts, Tiny met Ruby. "The Sweethearts would come to Kansas City every Easter, and I would sell food and drinks from wherever we were staying," Davis said. "Ruby came over one day and never left. Hell, she stayed for 42 years."

"Are we gay? Maybe we are. We have ourselves a time, I can say that."

During World War II, the band played for audiences of black servicemen at home and in Europe. But women were discouraged from working when the war ended. The Sweethearts lost bookings and disbanded.

But Tiny Davis landed on her feet. Her newly formed band, Tiny Davis and the Hell Divers, traveled throughout the United States and the Caribbean islands. "It was a virtual joy to behold," Davis said. "Folks would stand in line all day just to get in."

The Hell Divers kept going until Tiny and Ruby settled in Chicago. For four years, they operated a wild bar, Tiny & Ruby's Gay Spot, at 2711 S. Wentworth.

"If the gals wanted to be with the gals, that was all right," Davis said. "It was a place to let your hair down—or somebody else's hair, if that's what you felt like doing."

Well into the '70s, Davis blew her trumpet at the Blue Note, the Brass Rail, the High Note and other local clubs. "That arthritis in my legs slowed me down, but it didn't have nothing to do with my blowing my horn. I may be back someday."

Tiny and Ruby plan to attend Friday's premiere reception at 5 p.m., with the film beginning at 7 at the Music Box, 3741 N. Southport. The documentary "The International Sweethearts of Rhythm" also will be shown during the fest. (For more information, call 281-8788.)