

'Tiny and Ruby'

They Document Our Living History

by Steve Warren

I've seen *International Sweethearts of Rhythm* three times now and its spinoff, *Tiny and Ruby: Hell-Divin' Women*, twice. They get better each time. If you haven't seen them yet, you've got some catching up to do.

Directed by cameraperson/editor Greta Schiller and archivist Andrea Weiss, the *Before Stonewall* team, *International Sweethearts of Rhythm* is the story of the same-named "all-girl" band that toured from the late 1930s through the war years.

Though not as heavily publicized as the female aggregation of Ina Rae Hutton (to be played by Bette Midler in a biography being filmed next year), the Sweethearts are at least as fondly remembered today by those who saw them.

Some film footage and at least one album of music by the Sweethearts still exist. Weiss has added other appropriate material to establish the period and enhance Schiller's interviews with surviving band members and their fans. A male musician means it as

high praise when he says the Sweethearts' drummer "played like a man."

A lot of ground is covered in a brief 30 minutes. The band started in the Piney Woods School, 23 miles from Jackson, Mississippi. They traveled in the summer to raise money for the unique educational facility and finally broke away from the school to travel full-time. Anna Mae Winburn became their leader and vocalist after the war effort took most of the men from the band she'd been leading.

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A scene from *Tiny and Ruby: Hell-Divin' Women*.

"I didn't know if I could deal with that many women," she admits. She could.

The women express the bonds of sisterhood in different ways. One recalls, "We switched roommates every three months... so you didn't form any real tight, one-on-one relationships." Others speak innocently of their communal love, but lesbian trumpeter Tiny Davis is more direct about her affection for "all those yellow and white and pretty gals... I just loved them gals too much."

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm were interracial, but on the road the white women would have to try to pass for black to avoid trouble. One speaks amusingly of trying different permanents and makeup "that would turn my skin orange—I could never get it right."

Though she's featured sparingly to keep her from stealing the show, Tiny Davis is the film's most memorable character. A self-described "little hustlin' lady" who earned extra money by selling sandwiches she made and doing laundry for the band, she leaves you wanting to know more about her.

And that's why Schiller and Weiss have followed up with another half-hour documentary, *Tiny and Ruby: Hell-Divin' Women*. This time it's mostly Tiny, at home with her lover of 42 years, Renei Phelan, aka Ruby Lucas. Ruby, who played piano, bass, and drums, was never a Sweetheart (except to Tiny), but became part of Tiny's post-Sweethearts band, Tiny Davis and Her Hell-Divers.

Ruby relates how they met at a party after one of the Sweethearts' appearances in Kansas City: "Tiny sold food and drinks..."

"And pussy," Tiny interjects.

"Oh, Tiny," Ruby sighs. It's hard for a gay woman to be a "straight man," even with 42 years' practice.

"Renei keeps me in line," Tiny says, but we know no one could.

With her bulging eyes, expressive mouth, and various oversized body parts she uses for punctuation, Tiny contributes her share of stories, including one about a gay bar Ruby ran in the 1950s. Describing the distinctions of the day, she says, "A daddy is a daddy, and a femme is a femme. I'm a femme."

Music isn't neglected in this film, either. In a family musicale, Ruby plays piano while Tiny, once billed as "the female Louis Armstrong," shows she still has chops ("I'm only 76 years old, and I got what it takes, but nobody wanna take it") in a trumpet duet with her young great-grandson on "Night Train."

Cheryl Clarke puts some of Tiny's thoughts into "narrative poetry" in occasional voiceover, sometimes accompanying some cute animated graphics. But the irrepressible Tiny has to get the last word herself:

"I always made my livin' blowin'. Music. Blowin' music—get that right, gal!"

Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss have got it right in these two films, as they continue to document our living history while the people who can give first-hand accounts are still around to do so. ●

★ ★ ★ ½

International Sweethearts of Rhythm and Tiny and Ruby: Hell-Divin' Women

Sept. 8-11

York Theatre, 2789 24th St., 282-0316
