



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *International Sweethearts of Rhythm* by Greta Schiller, Andrea Weiss, Rosetta Reitz and Rebecca Reitz; *Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin' Women* by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss

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International Sweethearts of Rhythm. Produced by Jezebel Productions and Rosetta Records; directed by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss; co-produced by Rosetta Reitz and Rebecca Reitz. 1986; color; 30 minutes. Distributor of film and video: The Cinema Guild.

Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin' Women. Produced by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss; directed by Andrea Weiss. 1988; color; 30 minutes. Distributor of film and video: The Cinema Guild.

“Our sole purpose,” said bandleader Anna Mae Winburn, “was putting across the music.” And put it across they did, if the film is any indication of the sound and the experiences of the racially mixed group of women that formed a Swing Era band called the “International Sweethearts of Rhythm.” Interestingly, while issues of race and gender pervade the film, especially in the musicians’ reminiscences, they serve more as context than the point of the production. The same is true of *Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin’ Women*, a warm, “slice of life” documentary revolving around the forty-two-year relationship of Ernestine “Tiny” Davis (featured trumpeter of the Sweethearts) and Ruby Lucas (also known as Renei Phelan). Both films share a remarkable ability to convey the effect of racism, sexism, and homophobia on lives nonetheless filled with personal joys and triumphs.

In *International Sweethearts of Rhythm*, oral and documentary history are blended masterfully to tell the story of a band that should not be forgotten. Remarks from interviews with six former members provide the framework, illustrated by archival clippings, photos, and films, which convey the history, social milieu, and ultimate fame of the group. Underlying it all, literally and figuratively, is the music, always the music: the sound track and footage of the band in performance evoke the “International Sweethearts” more vividly than any artifact or recollection.

The Sweethearts had their beginning in a Mississippi school founded by a disciple of Booker T. Washington. Formed just prior to World War II to raise money for the school while also training students as musicians, the Sweethearts constituted the first racially integrated, all-female jazz band. Eventually, their reputation carried them to clubs and theaters in New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., and overseas to entertain U.S. troops. In telling the story of their rise to fame, the film effectively uses the Sweethearts’ reminiscences to re-create the racial prejudice faced by the group, from the assumption that they would play for black troops only to white saxophonist Rosalind Cron’s fears of being exposed as white while trying “everything” to pass as black. Such recollections are the heart of the film, and the matter-of-fact, even humorous, way in which they are told makes the past tangible and alive. Juxtaposed against the band’s faultless music, these incidents reflecting racism are rendered additionally absurd.

In similar fashion, the theme of sexism threads through the commentaries of the band members and their observers but is not at their center. One of the best moments is the clever placement of one (black) man’s comment that the Sweethearts “didn’t have the power” of a male band—immediately before proof to the contrary in footage of the band performing. Despite their hard work (emphasized by the women throughout) and their obvious abilities, the International Sweethearts shared the fate of many other women of the period, for whom opportunities expanded during the war and constricted at its end. This link is made both visually and aurally with scenes of women in war industries interspersed with shots of the band overseas and stories of marriage and family taking precedence for many members after the war.

Marriage, at least in the traditional sense, did not claim all the musicians, however. In 1946, one member left both Sweethearts and husband behind and began a new life in Chicago that revolved around her own all-female band, “[Ernestine] Tiny Davis and her Hell Divers,” and her eventual life partner, Ruby Lucas. *Tiny and Ruby*, called a “sequel” to

International Sweethearts of Rhythm in promotional material, does offer an in-depth look at one member's life after the Sweethearts, but it also stands on its own. Indeed, although similar techniques are used—archival film clips and stills intertwined with oral history—the overall character is different.

The contrast between the two films (not intended here as a criticism) may stem from their different purposes. *Tiny and Ruby*, taken on its own, is a superb study of a lesbian relationship over time but is not “historical” in the same sense as *Sweethearts*. It tells a story, primarily from Tiny's perspective, about her life before and after the International Sweethearts, supplemented by a periodic narrative written and spoken by poet Cheryl Clarke. One of the few former Sweethearts to continue a musical career, Tiny formed a number of bands (with Ruby as pianist and drummer), of which the Hell Divers was the first. Although Hell Divers and subsequent bands toured the Caribbean, cut records, and gained a following, one-night stands were the rule more than the exception. The difficulties of black female musicians—especially if instrumentalists rather than vocalists—are here illustrated in a typically subtle way. Likewise, gay life (in an era notorious for its condemnation of homosexuality as an “un-American activity”) is presented, through home-movie footage and almost passing mention of gay clubs and experiences, more in order to reinforce the normalcy of the women's relationship than to emphasize the problems they undoubtedly faced over time. At first, this reviewer saw such an approach as a weakness of the film. In reconsidering, though, I realized that my expectations of “horror stories” reflected a narrow but all-too-common vision of lesbian history that this film impressively rectifies.

What emerges most clearly in this personal history is the naturalness of the love and companionship between the two women. “Renei [Ruby] keeps me alive,” says Tiny at one point, and Ruby's comparatively few words in the film are spoken during tasks eliciting a comfortable domesticity—cooking, doing dishes, watering plants. The sense of timelessness that their bond evokes may cause some viewers to see the work less as “history on film” than a sociological case study, but, once one accepts the validity of the genre, this emerges as an outstanding example.

In sum, each film is excellent in its own way. Like all histories, the narratives are shaped by the questions as well as the responses, and specific images of the past are produced by selective organization and editing. In resisting the temptation to insert commentary or polemic, the filmmakers achieve a nice balance between their own agendas and their attempt to recapture the past. The results begin to fill in important gaps in our collective memory, and the two films serve as powerful testaments to survival and affirmation in the face of prejudice and oppression.

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Who Killed Vincent Chin? Produced by Film News Now Foundation and WTVS-Detroit Public Television; directed by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima. 1988; color; 82 minutes. Distributor: Film News Now Foundation, 350 Broadway, Suite 1207, New York, N.Y. 10013.

The *Rashomon* structure and metaphoric, minimalist approach that filmmakers Christine Choy and Renee Tajima chose for *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* were intended to introduce interpretive complexity and active audience reception to a film whose title question is purely an ironic one. Rather than adopt the traditional NBC “white paper” approach that would analyze the case from the distance of objectivity that a public television editor sought to