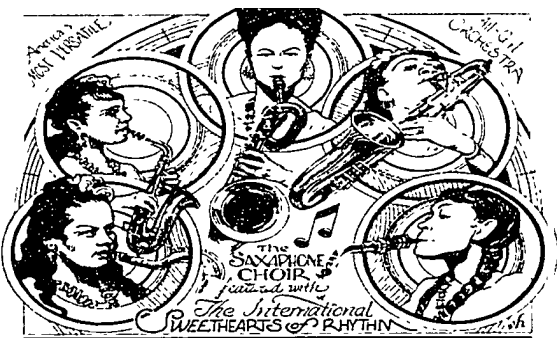


# The Sweethearts of Rhythm

By NAT HENTOFF

In the 1940s, Woody Herman hired a female trumpet player, Billie Rogers, thereby astonishing the jazz world. Women were part of the scene as singers and pianists, but everyone knew that a distaff horn player didn't have the physical strength to swing hard. Nor the temperament. Chicks were too soft to roar and shout. Furthermore, a woman playing a horn (or drums or bass, for that matter) didn't look right. It was unfeminine. It was almost un-American.

Some of my high-school buddies and I, giggling and slapping our thighs, went to see the Woody Herman band and its freak



show when it came to Boston, and we were shaking our heads for days afterward. That girl had stood up with those guys in the brass section, and she had stood up to them. She had a big, crisp sound and she sure could swing. And there was no question about it. Billie Rogers was a girl all right.

Gradually, other women horn players have, with some difficulty, established themselves in jazz. Trombonist-arranger Melba Liston, for example, and the continually inventive soprano saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom. But many of the aficionados are still doubtful that women, unless they sing, belong in the front line. And the notion that there could be an all-female big band alongside bands made up of good old boys is considered ludicrous.

Well, there was such a band. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, which proved from 1937 to 1949 that both collectively and in its hard-driving soloists, it was a blazingly hot jazz force. Nonetheless, the Sweethearts are largely unknown to jazz buffs, except to some black listeners in their middle years and black musicians who were on the road at the same time as the Sweethearts.

This all-female band played mainly for black audiences, did not make many records, and was passed over for those Hollywood musicals that featured bands. The Sweethearts did make some short films, but those were not shown in white theaters. They were also seldom mentioned in the jazz magazines of the period. This was not because the band was predominantly black. After all, Count Basie and Duke Ellington were not overlooked. The jazz journalists of the time looked past the Sweethearts because they found it impossible to take a gaggle of girls seriously as jazz musicians. The jazz journalists of the time were almost entirely male.

At last, the first complete album by the International Sweethearts of Rhythm has been released—along with pictures and extensive historical notes. The woman responsible is Rosetta Reitz, who runs Rosetta Records, which is becoming justly renowned for its Women's Heritage Series—such reissues of blues and jazz rarities as "Mean Mothers" (International Women's

Blues), "Women's Railroad Blues" and Ida Cox's "Wild Women Don't Have The Blues." The latter is in the Foremothers series. You get the picture. (Rosetta Records is at 115 W. 16th St., New York, N.Y., 10011.)

There would have been no International Sweethearts of Rhythm if the head of the Piney Woods Country Life School in the Mississippi Delta had not become aware of the profitable existence of two all-white female bands, Ina Ray Hutton's and Phil Spitalny's. This Mississippi school for poor and orphaned black children was in chronic need of money, and it occurred to the headmaster that if he organized an all-girl band among his students, it would do better on the road than the groups of singers he'd been sending out for years.

The adjective "International" made sense because the band had Chinese and Indian saxophonists, and a Hawaiian trumpeter. Later, some white young women also joined the Sweethearts, and when the band played the South, the white girls had to wear dusty pancake. But there was occasional trouble with Southern police anyway. As a black band member says in Linda Dahl's "Stormy Weather" (Pantheon), a history of jazz women, "We couldn't paint their eyes."

The Sweethearts became more and more professional until, by 1911, they were ready for the second most demanding jazz audience in the land—the audience at Harlem's Apollo Theater. The Sweethearts were asked back many times. The most demanding of all audiences, because they became part of the music, were the dancers at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. The Sweethearts clicked there too.

By the mid-1910s, the years when the music in this set was first recorded, mainly from radio broadcasts, the Sweethearts were exhilaratingly in command of their powers. Among the swagging soloists were Vi Burnside, a bristling, big-tone tenor saxophonist; Tiny Davis, an incisive hot trumpeter, and Anna Mae Winburn, a singer who sounded like a horn except that most horns couldn't phrase as insinuatingly as she did.

The Sweethearts stayed together longer than any distaff jazz band and, as Rosetta Reitz points out, they had a distinctive spirit, born of its members having been twice orphaned. On the road, the young women had only each other. The bus was their home because at many stops, restaurants and hotels were closed to them. And so they came closer together. Most of all, they wanted to show that, isolated though they were, they had the stuff to make the jazz big leagues.

By 1947, a number of the key players had left to form their own groups, and the Sweethearts came apart two years later. An attempt to revive the band ended in 1955. All that was left were a few recordings almost impossible to find, and the memories of those who had heard the Sweethearts.

When I used to hear tales of the music created by these traveling ladies, I figured they couldn't have been that good. But "International Sweethearts of Rhythm" (Rosetta RR 1312) reveals that they were better than their legend. So how come they're not even mentioned in "definitive" histories of big-band jazz? Maybe because no one believed that women could do such things.

Mr. Hentoff is a jazz critic.