

# “Hottest Women's Band of the 1940s”--International Sweethearts of Rhythm (1944-1946; released 1984)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Chris Robinson and Sherrie Tucker (guest post)\*



*The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*

When the International Sweethearts of Rhythm opened for a week at the Apollo on October 4, 1946, the most famous Black-owned and operated all-woman big band had never sounded better. With exuberant drive, tight sections, and high-spirited soloists, the 17-piece band sounded a triumphant moment in a story of humble beginnings in 1937 as a fundraiser for Piney Woods School for poor and orphaned Black and mixed-race children in Mississippi. Always popular with Black audiences and the Black press, the Sweethearts were favorites among segregated Black troops during World War II, with repeat appearances on the “Jubilee” program of Armed Forces Radio, followed by a European tour on USO in 1945. Upon their return to the US, in January 1946, their fame (though, sadly, not their fortunes) continued to surge.<sup>1</sup>

Their first record (Guild) earned them praise in March 1946 from “Band Leaders” magazine as “a right tight band rocking the riffs” with “plenty of platter promise.”<sup>2</sup> In April, the Sweethearts earned seventh place in the “Chicago Defender” Band Poll, ahead of Cab Calloway, Jimmie Lunceford, and many others.<sup>3</sup> Their film short, “The International Sweethearts of Rhythm,” featuring the band in three numbers, premiered the same month.<sup>4</sup> Soon after the week at the Apollo in October (the second such appearance of 1946), the band would record for Leonard Feather on RCA Victor, do another coast-to-coast tour, perform in a feature-length motion picture (“That Man I Love”) built from their film short, and score new representation by Joe Glaser’s agency.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, aside from one more 78 on a minor label (Manor), the “platter promise” stopped there. The band would cease operation in 1949 and its memory would elude most jazz and swing histories. Not until 30 years later, would their music find enthusiastic audiences again, in the context of the Second Wave Women’s Movement.

Rosetta (Toshka) Goldman (1924–2008) was not in the Apollo audience in October 1946, but she could have been, having already abandoned college at University of Wisconsin-Madison to pursue a life among poets and artists in Greenwich Village. As the Sweethearts played, Rosetta

was running her own newly-opened literary establishment, 110 short blocks to the south. She credited her entrepreneurial skills to growing up working in the business run by her Polish-Russian Jewish immigrant parents in Utica, New York. But the Four Seasons Bookshop was a far cry from Goldman's Bakery. Specializing in avant-garde poetry and fiction, it served as a magnet for bohemians and modern literary giants, including James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, e.e. cummings, and Anais Nin.<sup>6</sup> Like many of her customers, Rosetta was a self-defined "jazz buff." Still, like most white people, she did not know of the Sweethearts of Rhythm. Nor had she undergone the sea change in feminist consciousness that would deliver questions: "Why is jazz a male domain? Where are the women?", and that would eventually lead her to play a pivotal role in restoring and reissuing the recorded output of the Sweethearts' banner years of 1945–46.<sup>7</sup>

The recorded sound activities of the women's history boom of the 1970s and 1980s included rediscovery and reissues of recordings of hitherto forgotten women musicians of all genres. Isolated reissues of historic jazzwomen's tracks were few, requiring the combined sound recovery efforts of rare record enthusiasts and feminists, not a given, considering a jazz discourse with little interest in women, and a women's music scene with little interest in jazz. As a jazz fan, feminist, and entrepreneur, Rosetta (now Reitz) filled this junction. Her "jazz buff" and feminist orientations collided while she was both a contributor to the "Riffs" column in the "Village Voice" (1973–1974, one of the few writers at that time to cover the lofty jazz scene) and a member of New York Radical Feminists.<sup>8</sup> It was then that she began to question why she had depended on boyfriends to hip her to the latest jazz records, instead of choosing her own. Did recordings of women jazz musicians exist? Preliminary research yielded many women musicians in the genres she loved.<sup>9</sup> She decided that starting a record label would be a way to rectify the neglect of these musicians and give them the recognition they deserve.<sup>10</sup>

In 1979, she founded Rosetta Records (115 W. 16<sup>th</sup> Street), the only label to focus entirely on women's jazz and blues recordings. The emphasis was on African American women's music, with particular focus on jazz instrumentalists (because they were so unknown)<sup>11</sup> and blues singers' repertoire that expressed agency (because the politics of reissue had focused on "victim" repertoire). As a jazz listener, record collector, entrepreneur, and feminist, Reitz distinguished herself among those who scrounged for 78's and old radio broadcasts, cleaned up these artifacts, researched the history, sought surviving musicians, and reissued their recordings. In all, the label released over 20 albums, with Reitz running the whole operation, handling the research, thematic conceptualization, design, liner notes, royalty research, remastering, and production—"a tremendous challenge for any independent record producer," writes Cheryl Keyes.<sup>12</sup> The Sweethearts compilation was the ninth release, and greatly expanded the available playlist and history of the band. Annotated with five pages of liner notes citing what little scholarship existed and 20 photographs, this package would serve as the Rosetta Stone for others interested in listening to, learning about, and conducting additional research on this band.

Finding the music for each album was often difficult and time consuming. As Reitz told the "L.A. Times," "I'll get an idea, and it might take me two to four years to assemble the number of 78's I need that are clear enough to use. Sometimes, I'll finally track something down and there's not enough music left on the record."<sup>13</sup> According to music industry researcher, Ava Lawrence, Reitz "particularly enjoyed spending time with the recordings and cleaning them up to create a final master."<sup>14</sup> The kinds of materials that she reissued came with technical challenges: for

example, the source material for the “Sweethearts” album combines 78’s, World War II era radio transcriptions, and soundtrack selections pulled from the film, “That Man of Mine” (1946). Lewis Porter praised the sound quality for its “good remastering and quiet surfaces.”<sup>15</sup>

Jazz critic Chuck Berg described Reitz as a “crusader” who possessed a “missionary-like zeal.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Reitz’s dedication to preserving and releasing the overlooked or forgotten music by jazz and blues women was a labor of love that sometimes proved costly. Before releasing the International Sweethearts of Rhythm album, she shared it with vocalist Evelyn McGee Stone, who informed Reitz that the name of the song listed as “Diggin Dyke” was actually Maurice King’s “Diggin Dirt.” Lesbian-baiting is a common practice of sexist exclusion. In addition, historical tensions among the members of this band about the perception that they were lesbians (some were gay, others were not; indeed, mixed-orientations are likely true of *most* big bands and other organizations of 16+ members), made this more than a run-of-the-mill typo. Wrote Stone, “the other Sweethearts would have been heartsick had a record playing up this kind of garbage been put on the market.”<sup>17</sup> The mistake did not originate with Reitz, but was a carry-over from a mishearing of the radio introduction as transcribed on the notes for the 1978 Stash-label album “Women in Jazz: All-Woman Groups” (112). Still, Reitz wrote to Stone, saying that she would reprint the record jackets and the record labels, despite the “enormous expense ... in thousands of dollars, which I cannot afford.” Some LP’s bearing the erroneous title slipped through, but Reitz did her best, and managed to make the correction to “Diggin’ Dirt” on the cassettes and other LP’s. As she wrote to Stone, “The last thing I would want to do is hurt you or any other Sweetheart. My purpose has been, and still is, to celebrate the band because I admire, respect, and love the fact of the Sweethearts existence and contribution.”<sup>18</sup>

Reitz’s dream was that “there should not be a woman’s jazz and blues label such as mine because the women should be so well integrated into the music that it wouldn’t be necessary.”<sup>19</sup> But as critic and photographer Val Wilmer points out, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm were “deliberately written out of history--or at least as far as it was represented by white male writers--for one reason only: they were women.”<sup>20</sup> Reitz knew this. Without her work, many of these Sweethearts recordings would have been lost. In locating, restoring, and re-releasing their recordings, she curated a mobile sound archive that made the Sweethearts difficult to ignore--a feminist spin on “platter promise,” to be sure.

*Chris Robinson holds a PhD in American Studies from the University of Kansas and is a copywriter at Duke University Press. He has written for “Downbeat,” “Point of Departure,” “Passion of the Weiss,” and several other popular and academic music publications.*

*Sherrie Tucker is a professor of American Studies at University of Kansas. She is the author of “Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen” (Duke, 2014), “Swing Shift: ‘All-Girl’ Bands of the 1940s” (Duke, 2000) and co-editor, with Nichole T. Rustin, of “Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies” (Duke, 2008).*

*\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the authors and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*

---

<sup>1</sup> The musicians, particularly the original members, were terribly exploited throughout the band’s history. D. Antoinette Handy, *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1983.

- 
- <sup>2</sup> Maurice Orodener, "Waxing Wise," *Band Leaders* Vol. 3 no. 2 (March 1946), 10.
- <sup>3</sup> "Lionel Hampton Wins Annual Popularity Poll" *The Chicago Defender*, Apr 20, 1946, 16.
- <sup>4</sup> "Music---As Written," *Billboard*, Vol. 58, no. 12, (Mar 23, 1946): 24.
- <sup>5</sup> "They Said It Couldn't Happen--But It Did!," *Afro-American*, April 20, 1946, 6; "Music: Int'l Sweethearts to Glaser," *Billboard*, September 28, 1946, 17; "Glaser Gets 'Sweethearts'," *Chicago Defender*, Nov 30, 1946, 18. For more on *That Man I Love*, see Kristen A. McGee, *Some Liked it Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928-1959*. Wesleyan University Press, 2009.
- <sup>6</sup> Mary Reinholz, "Rosetta Reitz, 84, jazz historian, feminist, writer," *The Villager*, November 11, 2008; Edward Field, "The Last Bohemian: Rosetta Reitz, Our Earth Mother," *The Villager* November 26, 2008; Dorothy Sinclair, *You Can Take the Girl Out of Chicago... Tales of my Wayward Youth* iUniverse 2013; Rebecca Reitz, *Rosetta Tribute Site* [<https://rosettattribution.weebly.com/> accessed June 2, 2020].
- <sup>7</sup> Nicole Volta Avery, "Shouts and Wails for the Women of Jazz & Blues," *About...Time* Vol. XIII., No. 6 (June 30, 1995), 22.
- <sup>8</sup> Wilson...
- <sup>9</sup> Ava Lawrence, "Rosetta Reitz: Rediscovering Women in Jazz & Blues," *ARSC Journal* Vol. 36, No. 2, (Fall 2005), 215.
- <sup>10</sup> For example, see: Don Snowden, "Rosetta Tracks the Women of the Blues," *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1986; Holly I. West, "Record firm blows its horn for women in jazz," *Daily News*, July 5, 1991; Chuck Berg, "Blues-singing 'Mean Mothers' Were No Victims," *Lawrence Journal-World*, Sunday March 31, 1985, 2D.
- <sup>11</sup> Cheryl L. Keyes, "Women's Heritage Series: Rosetta Records," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 105, No. 415 (Winter, 1992) 73.
- <sup>12</sup> Keyes, 80.
- <sup>13</sup> Holly I. West, "Record firm blows its horn for women in jazz," *Daily News*, July 5, 1991.
- <sup>14</sup> Lawrence, "Rosetta Reitz," 217.
- <sup>15</sup> Lewis Porter, "Record Reviews," *The Black Perspective in Music* Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 1987), 127.
- <sup>16</sup> Berg, "Blues-singing 'Mean Mothers' Were No Victims."
- <sup>17</sup> Evelyn McGee Stone to Rosetta Reitz, August 20, 1984. Rosetta Reitz Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.
- <sup>18</sup> Rosetta Reitz to Evelyn McGee Stone, August 8, 1984. Rosetta Reitz Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.
- <sup>19</sup> Scott Yanow, "Rosetta Records: Women in Jazz," *Coda*, February 1, 1987.
- <sup>20</sup> Val Wilmer, "Sweethearts on Parade," *New Musical Express*, January 26, 1985.