THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL SWEETHEARTS OF RHYTHM

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The theater was ablaze with lights that proclaimed—THE INTERNATIONAL SWEETHEARTS OF RHYTHM. The Sweethearts, an all-woman 16-piece band, were familiar to the tough, show-wise audience, and a long line of eagerly expectant people stretched down the street and around the corner, waiting for the doors to open. Known to the audience as the finest all-girl jazz band in the country, the Sweethearts had in seven years attained a reputation equal to that of the great male bands of the period, those led by Jimmy Lunceford, Count Basie, and Fletcher Henderson. The year was 1945; the place, the Apollo Theater in Harlem.

A hot attraction, the Sweethearts were then at the height of their fame, although to some they were merely a novelty—sixteen pretty girl musicians led by an extravagantly beautiful young woman, Anna May Winburn. They played with assurance, discipline and excitement, reflecting the expert teaching of their director, Maurice King. There were some fine soloists, including Violet (Vi) Burnside, a driving, gutty tenor sax player with more than a suggestion of Coleman Hawkins in her style. The star soloist of the trumpet section was Ray Carter, whose muted sound was colorful and technically brilliant. The hard-swinging drummer, Pauline Braddy, inspired by her idol and mentor Big Sid Catlett, whipped the band along with a strong rhythm. Her foot beating on the bass drum pedal matched exactly the time-keeping of the bassist, Margaret (Trump) Gibson, and together they gave solid, dependable backing to the soloists.

The main attraction was roly-poly Ernestine (Tiny) Davis, billed as "245 Lbs. of Solid Jive and Rhythm." A compelling personality, she had a distinct flair for comedy and a humorous way with a song. Her comic dancing, rolling eyes, and funny rendition of "Stompin' the Blues" broke up the audience; and she played a strong, forceful trumpet on "I Can't Get Started," another crowd-pleaser.

The band played at the beginning of each show (four a day), and again later in the show. There were other name acts on the bill, but the Sweethearts opened and closed the program.

This band was truly unique in that it was a racially mixed group, a phenomenon unheard of even in blasé New York City. They were known to have traveled widely in the South and Midwest, many miles from their starting point, the Piney Woods Country Life School near Jackson, Mississippi, where the original band was formed in 1938. The members of that first band were all approximately fourteen or fifteen years old, high-spirited, naive youngsters who enjoyed playing for dances in small towns within driving distance of the school.

Between 1938 and the present date at the Apollo, the band's personnel had changed many times. Ione and Irene Gresham, who both played sax with the original band, had decided to stay at Piney Woods when the band turned professional; this was a decision reached by several of the girls. Others had concluded that life on the road was not for them; still others had left the band to get married. However, some of the members of the original group remained—Helen Jones and Ina Belle Byrd, trombone; Willie Mae Lee Wong, baritone sax; Edna Williams, trumpet and vocals; Johnnie Mae Rice, piano; and Pauline Braddy, drums. Inside the theater the girls were dressing and warming up on their instruments. Tiny Davis practiced high notes on the trumpet, getting ready for her feature numbers. Anna May Winburn gave final touches to her sleek, upswept hairdo. She wore an exquisite, tightly-fitting sequin gown, while the band members were dressed in decorous black skirts and jackets, with white blouses. Each girl wore a flower in her hair, which added a feminine touch to their rather severe attire. Mrs. Ray Lee Jones was the manager of the band, a tall, imposing woman and a disciplinarian reminiscent of a boarding school matron. She walked among the girls, adjusting a neckline here, tucking in a stray hair there, checking the girls' lipstick and eye make-up. "That'll do; off you go," she ordered. With a last minute flurry of practice notes, the girls filed out of the dressing room to take their places on stage.

The huge curtain parted as the strains of the Sweethearts' theme song, featuring Rosalind (Roz) Cron on alto sax, filled the theater. Next, a solid, swinging arrangement of "Tuxedo Junction" kept the audience snapping their fingers. Among the several outstanding soloists featured on the program was diminutive Evelyn McGee, who drew whistles of appreciation for her singing of "Candy" and "Rum and Coca Cola." Anna May Winburn put aside her baton to sing, "Do You Want To Jump, Children?" "Yeah, yeah," shrilled the band, answering her musical question in childlike voices. Following this was a wild, frantic version of "Sweet Georgia Brown" taken at an impossible tempo, with Vi Burnside free-wheeling in and around the melody, playing a shower of notes on her tenor sax that took one's breath away. When the show was over, and with the echoes of the cheers and applause still ringing in their ears, the girls could now look forward to a quick snack between shows, visits from friends, and the heady excitement of being back in New York City.

Few white people ever saw the Sweethearts. At that time the Apollo and other theaters like it—the Howard in Washington, the Regal in Chicago, the Paradise in Detroit—catered to black audiences, and the small number of whites who ventured there were the real jazz afficionados. Among them was record producer John Hammond, who thought the band was "just marvelous; a great band." It might even have been, as one of the fans remarked, "the world's greatest girl dance band." Pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines had high praise for the group—"a wonderful swinging bunch of gals"—but there were negative comments, too. Huffed one well-known woman player when asked if she had ever worked with the Sweethearts, "You wouldn't catch me anywhere near *that* band." And the typical remark from male musicians was, "You certainly couldn't consider them in the same league as any good *male* band." Yet musical director Maurice King was enthusiastic. "You could put those girls behind a curtain and people would be convinced it was men playing." The group was often likened to the Lunceford band, and Jimmy Lunceford himself had high praise for the girls.

It had taken stamina, long hours of practice, dedication, and experiences both rewarding and frustrating to bring the International Sweethearts of Rhythm all the way from Piney Woods, Mississippi to the Apollo Theater in New York. The newer band members were all aware of the pioneering spirit that had helped the first schoolgirl band to pave the way for the present group's highly acclaimed reputation.

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Research indicates that the principal of the Piney Woods Country Life School, Laurence C. Jones, was a most unusual man—well-educated (University of Iowa), charming, knowledgeable in the ways of the world, and totally committed to raising money for the betterment of his school. Money was constantly needed to take care of the thousand boys and girls, many of them orphans, who lived at the school.

Mr. Jones believed in keeping everybody working. The bell rang at 5 a.m., at six the children had breakfast, and by seven they were all busy with school work or some other activity. There was a farm—boys were taught farming and furniture-making among other things—and the girls learned domestic skills such as cooking and dressmaking. The football team bested everyone in the area, and there were two marching bands, one of boys, one of girls. The school had everything—there never had been a place like it for blacks in the South. At that time they were held back, yet Mr. Jones's powers of persuasion were so strong that he was able to convince all the white businessmen he met that his idea of teaching every child a trade was of prime importance. He knew the right people to approach, and money flowed into the school from many sources.

There was a great deal of musical activity before the formation of the Sweethearts. In addition to the 45-piece marching bands, there was a group called "The Cotton Blossom Singers," who were at that time the main fund-raisers for the school. Mr. Jones personally supervised all these activities.

This was the burgeoning swing era—the great bands of Ellington, Hines, Basie, and Lunceford were developing unique stylings from their jazz heritage. A new kind of jazz, jazz people could dance to, began to flourish, and it burst forth all over the country, inspiring white musicians—the Dorsey Brothers, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller—to form their own bands. It was inevitable that someone would think of putting together a different type of show business package, one that was bound to succeed—an all-girl (white) swing band, Ina Ray Hutton and Her Melodears. Irving Mills, mentor of the Ellington band, did just that.

According to Helen Jones, who had been adopted at the age of three months by Laurence Jones and his wife and brought up at Piney Woods, Mr. Jones heard Ina Ray and her band in Chicago, and his fertile mind instantly grasped the possibilities and advantages of establishing such a group to raise funds for Piney Woods. As soon as he returned, he set about selecting girls for the band. There were many who had musical talent and who, with training, would develop into competent musicians. Helen Jones recalls that Mr. Jones wanted her to play the violin, but she begged for a chance to learn the trombone, because she "loved to watch that slide going in and out." This was a fortunate decision, because Helen's strong, full tone enhanced the Sweethearts' trombone section from the formation of the group until they disbanded.

No one remembers who was the first director of the band. After Laurence Jones had assembled the group, they were rehearsed for a short time by a teacher named Lawrence Jefferson. Then Edna Williams, a talented young pianist and trumpet player not much older than the band members themselves, took over. It seems that Edna Williams, or someone like her, taught the girls their first tunes, which were, according to drummer Pauline Braddy, "Baby, Don't Tell On Me," "How Long, Baby," "720 in the Books," and "Stardust." Some of the girls were given half notes or whole notes to play, while others played the melody. A few learned the tunes by reading the music, while the others would imitate notes and phrases sung or played by the teacher. She also taught them breath control and how to produce a tone. Gradually they became proficient enough to move on to "stocks"—sheet music copies of popular tunes of the day. Finally, they were ready to set forth on a fund-raising trip in the area, as Mr. Jones had envisioned. Sixteen in all, the girls rode in a special bus to play dates in armories, halls, and high school gymnasiums. Mr. Jones thought of everything. He even hired a chaperone, Mrs. Ella P. Gant, who traveled along with the girls.

As the girls gained in experience and proficiency, the band blossomed. The plain blouses and dark skirts the girls wore gave them a fresh appearance. Their neatly combed hair and well-scrubbed faces emphasized how young they were (14-15) to be on the road. Soon the trips became longer, and Mr. Jones hired Vivian Crawford as a tutor for the girls, and Mrs. Ray Lee Jones (no relation) to replace Mrs. Gant. Mrs. Jones was a social worker from Omaha, who Laurence Jones had met on one of his fund-raising trips. She kept order among the girls and brooked no disobedience, but was concerned enough about their health to see that they all ate well and drank plenty of milk.

By now the band was beginning to sound more professional. Some of the original group had dropped out, and others took their places. Evelyn McGee, a talented youngster from Anderson, South Carolina, joined the band as vocalist. Mr. Jones had an uncanny way of spotting talent. On a trip with the band to Bolivar, Mississippi, he espied a very beautiful girl, Helen Saine, playing basketball, and invited her to come to Piney Woods and join the band. "But I can't play an instrument," said Helen. "We'll teach you," Mr. Jones replied. Something in his approach must have made the invitation seem worthwhile to her parents, because Helen Saine was allowed to leave immediately for Piney Woods and was soon learning to play tenor and alto sax.

Then came Grace Bayron and her sister, Judy. While on a trip to New York the year before, Laurence Jones had noticed Gracie carrying her saxophone case on an East Harlem street. He followed her home and asked her parents if they would relocate their family to Piney Woods—Mr. Bayron to teach Spanish, Gracie and Judy to play in the band. The parents declined the offer, but by some strange quirk of fate, both died within the year. Remembering Laurence Jones's invitation, Gracie Bayron telephoned him soon after her parents' death. Arrangements were made, and a few days later a chaperone arrived to escort the girls to Piney Woods. "Gracie started playing in the band right away," Judy Bayron recalls. "I was just given a guitar to hold so I could sit in the rhythm section. But eventually I learned to play trombone."

The band began to take on an air of professionalism that Ray Lee Jones helped to bring about with her constant supervision and strict rules. She had insisted that each girl wear a flower in her hair on stage. Now she started buying costumes for them that gave them a more sophisticated appearance.

Hotel accommodations for a racially mixed group were impossible to find, so trips were made in a bus fitted with bunk beds so that the group could travel all night and wake up refreshed. They ate on the bus, practiced, prepared their lessons, got dressed and, as the

bus pulled into town, were ready in their costumes for their performance. It would seem as if the Sweethearts led an exciting life, traveling from town to town, playing to packed houses and appreciative audiences, but in fact it was a hard, rugged existence, with no chance for social life. The girls looked glamorous on stage, but, says Helen Jones, "We were the biggest bunch of virgins in America."

The band's fund-raising endeavors took them farther and farther afield, and in October, 1939 they played Chicago, Des Moines, Omaha, and Kansas City in the space of a week. Their Chicago appearance was sponsored by the Chicago-Piney Woods Club, and a review of their performance at the Romping Earl's Club House read in part:

"Sixteen girls, best known in music circles as the 'International Sweethearts of Rhythm' who hail from Piney Woods, Miss., right in the heart of the Delta, invaded Chicago Saturday night and gave jitterbugs, swing fans and hep cats something to talk about.

"They beat out a bit of mellow jive, sang the latest song hits, then started a swing jam session that caused the dance lovers to stop in their tracks and listen to the hot sounds that blared out from the instruments played by these Mississippi girls.

"Together for two years, these girls handle their instruments like veterans and can rightfully take a place among the leading male aggregations."

Perhaps reviews such as this helped to pique the interest of a talent promoter from Washington, D.C., and Daniel M. Gary suddenly appeared on the scene, approaching Mrs. Jones with the suggestion that he take over the bookings for the band. It seems that after consulting with Laurence Jones, Mr. Gary did indeed start booking the band, and they embarked on their most successful tour thus far, playing major cities in the South and Midwest.

However, as their musicianship improved and their successes increased, so in direct proportion did their problems—problems that would soon lead to a decision that would drastically affect the future of the band and its members.

It appears that Laurence Jones thought he was losing control of the band, primarily because Ray Lee Jones was encouraging the girls to question his judgment in financial and other matters. He therefore confronted her with the threat of dismissal. When the girls decided to stand by her, he informed them that they would not receive their high school diplomas unless they returned to Piney Woods immediately. To his dismay, the girls refused to change their minds; even his adopted daughter, Helen, defied him. Perhaps they had already been influenced in their decision by thoughts of the bright future Dan Gary had promised them.

It was a momentous decision, especially since everyone knew they were virtually running away from Piney Woods, taking with them the uniforms and instruments belonging to the school, as well as the bus. Perhaps the consequences of such a decision had not yet dawned on them—that Mr. Jones, hurt and furious at what he thought was a betrayal, would later have Ray Lee Jones arrested for theft. Even this did not stop the forward movement of the band, because Dan Gary, through his various political connections, managed to secure her release, on the condition that the bus, uniforms and instruments be returned to Piney Woods.

At this point, having lost Piney Woods as a home base, the band needed a new headquarters. Property records show that Ray Lee Jones, as Trustee of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, Inc., purchased a ten-room house at 908 South Quinn Street, Arlington, Virginia. The girls believed they were members of the corporation and that they owned shares in the house, as they had been told that a portion of their salaries would be used to help pay the mortgage. It was a beautiful idea—their very own house where they could rest and relax. To girls who had started in the band with nothing, the prospect of having their own house was thrilling indeed.

Once settled in Arlington, the girls rehearsed every day, sometimes for as long as six hours at a stretch, and consequently their playing became more polished. They began to believe that their dreams of hitting the big time would come true when they were plunged into the exciting, fast-moving, sometimes sinister web of black night clubs, while continuing to play at well-known ballrooms and theaters. There were more changes in the band personnel—stronger, more experienced musicians were brought in. Anna May Winburn, who had once led a group of her own, was hired to front the band; her beauty and stage presence were a definite asset. She brought down the house with her rendition of "Blowtop Blues," a song written for her by jazz critic Leonard Feather.

It was becoming evident that despite the many changes and improvements in the band, their repertoire was too limited for the bookings Dan Gary had scheduled for them at theaters such as the Apollo, the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., the Regal in Chicago and other top-rated theaters across the country. It was time to bring in an arranger, and Mrs. Jones was advised to hire Eddie Durham, who was also well-known as a songwriter, guitarist, and trombone player. He had to his credit a hit song, "I Don't Want To Set The World On Fire," and other original tunes. His arrangements of "St. Louis Blues" and "At Sundown" were simple, but effective. He also arranged a beautiful Harold Arlen song, "When the Sun Comes Out," as well as some of his own compositions, "Moten Swing" and "Topsy," for the Sweethearts. Durham had had his own all-woman band, so he knew the best approach to take in teaching the Sweethearts. Knowing that there were few improvisors in the band, he wrote out solos for them that sounded as if they were improvised on the spot when played.

Durham had high regard for the Sweethearts, and he enjoyed working with them. "People couldn't believe it was women playing," he commented, "so sometimes when the curtain opened I'd make off that I was playing and the girls were just pantomiming. Then I'd stop, and people could see they really were playing. I simplified things for them as much as possible. You structure arrangements for people...you write for what you've got. I had to train the Sweethearts, but at the Apollo nobody believed girls could play that way."

Durham showed considerable sensitivity in allowing for the girls' technical limitations while stressing their strong points. He played an important role, as a teacher as well as an arranger, in the development of the band. Through his efforts they were beginning to know where they were going musically.

None of the surviving members of the band's early days recalls exactly when their romantic fantasies of success ran head-long into reality. They were becoming aware that real life was turning out to be not only places like the Apollo, but also endless and grueling one-nighters, tedious rehearsals, and long nights on the bus. They sometimes had to eat in dirty restaurants, where often they were

handed their food through a back window, typical treatment for blacks in the South at that time. (Anna May Winburn recalls screaming angrily at one restaurant owner, "My brother is overseas fighting for people like you, and you're treating me this way?")

Most of the time the girls slept on the bus because it was too risky for mixed groups to stay in black hotels. On the rare occasion that they did, there was always the danger that the police would question the hotel owner, trying to find out if some of the girls were white. Ironically, the white girls, and those who looked white, suffered as much from Southern racism as the black band members.

The girls were harrassed in hotels and at restaurants, and even while on stage. Policemen would roam the clubs, trying to spot the white band members. Often they succeeded, despite the heavy, dark make-up the lighter-skinned girls used in an attempt to disguise their pale complexions, and the wigs they wore to hide their light hair. When this happened, Mrs. Jones was ready with false credentials to prove the girls were Negro. It was a constant worry in the minds of the girls that despite all their precautions, one of their number might be taken away at any time, not for any wrongdoing but simply because of her color.

Harrassment of another sort was experienced by some of the black band members. During a performance in a night club, Anna May Winburn tripped while stepping onto the stage. When a white man rose to help her, he was immediately forced back into his seat by a nearby policeman who ordered, "You sit down and let that nigger woman help herself."

(A few years later Anna May and her husband, Duke Pilgrim, fared better in a confrontation with Southern police. While driving through town with two white members of the band they had formed, their car was stopped by a policeman. "You know you're not supposed to have them white women in the car," rasped the officer. Pilgrim, with a look of innocence, replied, "I know that, officer, that's why I've got them sitting in the *back* seat." He drove away, leaving the befuddled policeman standing there.)

The band kept improving, kept moving ahead. They had seen their names on theater marquees and billboards, and they had heard the warm applause of audiences all over the country.

Their next big milestone musically was the hiring of Jesse Stone as the band's coach-arranger. Like Eddie Durham, Stone was a highly respected and successful figure in the world of topflight Negro swing bands. He had written several well-known songs, "Idaho" and "Smack Dab in the Middle" being the most familiar.

Jesse Stone made many changes and improvements in the band. He brought in several new musicians, among them Lucille Dixon, bass; Marjorie Pettiford (Oscar's sister), alto sax; Johnnie Mae (Tex) Stansbery, trumpet; Amy Garrison, sax; and Roxanna Lucas, guitar. The addition of these talented woman, whose reading and playing skill was at an advanced level, raised the caliber of the entire group.

Jesse Stone made a special point of teaching the girls how to improve their intonation, how to listen to each other in order to achieve a smooth blend and a sharp attack. Some of his new arrangements were more challenging than anything the girls had attempted thus far, and therefore special coaching was necessary.

The major innovation that Stone made was the formation of a singing group drawn from the band. Helen Jones recalls, "We had some numbers where a group of us went down front and sang. Evelyn, Ella Ritz Lucas, somebody else and myself had a quartet. We went down front after we played part of the show and we sang and everybody liked it. Jesse is really the one who did that. In fact, we sang some of his numbers."

During Jesse Stone's first year with the band the Sweethearts made considerable musical progress. The overall sound was smoother, the musicianship improving. It was a rough life, but a free one to the extent that the girls had broken loose from familial ties, from school and similar restraints. Also, the earlier camaraderie had grown into a bond of friendship that had been strengthened by the many experiences, good and bad, that the girls had shared.

But not only did the band members learn more about music from Jesse Stone, they also became fully aware through him that they were performing for less than adequate wages.

Evelyn McGee recalls, "Jesse would fight with Mrs. Jones about how she was taking advantage of the girls. For example, we played five shows a day in Baltimore during Christmas week. The lines were unbelievable, the audiences fantastic—but at the end of the week Mrs. Jones gave each girl less than $100.

"Jesse hit the ceiling, and gave his notice. But Mrs. Jones held him to his two-year contract, so he stayed on another year. When he finally left, it wasn't because he was dissatisfied with the band. It was because of the treatment we were getting from Ray Lee Jones."

The girls were becoming disenchanted, and some of them left. Those who stayed on seemed to have a more philosophical attitude about things. "It's funny, when you're young and don't know anything, you do a lot of things without thinking," Helen Jones reflected recently. "You believe a lot of things people tell you when you're 'country' and don't know much about the world. I can see how certain people kept control of our destiny then. Deep down, we knew we weren't making much money, and we knew the hotels were dirty and the food was bad. But we didn't think about that so much—we were enjoying ourselves."

The year was 1944; the Americans had been involved in the Second World War for three years. Perhaps because many male musicians had been drafted, all-girl orchestras proliferated and flourished. Among them the groups directed by Phil Spitalny, Ina Ray Hutton, and Ada Leonard were best known, but all the girl bands were more in demand than they had ever been before.

Not only were the Sweethearts busy, they were perhaps more stable, since there were fewer changes of personnel that year. One notable change was replacement of Marge Pettiford as lead alto by Rosalind (Roz) Cron, a Jewish girl from Boston, Massachusetts. Roz had been with Ada Leonard's band for some time. There were violins in that band, and the music was more sedate. Consequently Roz, a high-spirited girl who was an extremely good player, relished the freer, more swinging style of the Sweethearts.

"I remember something about the difference between working for Ada Leonard and being with the Sweethearts," Roz says. "In all the theaters, when the Sweethearts started playing the audience would come in, dancing down the aisles to their seats. Black audiences were always like that. But if you'd go to hear Tommy or Jimmy Dorsey, or Ada Leonard, people just *walked* to their seats and sat down."

Shortly after Roz Cron joined the band, Maurice King arrived from Detroit to replace Jesse Stone as musical director. He had a cataclysmic effect on the band. Roz Cron in particular was impressed. "Maurice immediately put us through the most grueling rehearsals. It was a tough struggle, but we made it. 'Tuxedo Junction' turned into a really polished thing."

Maurice King recalls, "When I worked with the girls I would show them a passage in an arrangement and how to phrase it, four bars at a time. We'd keep on going over it, and finally, when it jelled, you could see their little eyes beam. It was like putting an erector set together."

King obviously enjoyed teaching and working with the girls. He began writing specialty numbers for the band, and his "Vi Vigor," "Slightly Frantic," "Don't Get It Twisted," and "Diggin' Dirt" became part of the Sweethearts' book. " 'Diggin' Dirt" was what we called a dance stopper," said King. "We'd end the tune, pause, and then start it all over again. We'd do this several times. It was a big number."

En route to California, where they were scheduled to record for the Armed Forces Radio Network, the girls spent their days playing, rehearsing, and sleeping on the bus. Finally, they reached Texas, where they were booked on a series of night club dates. One afternoon in Austin a policeman who was watching them rehearse asked King, "Isn't that a white girl over there?" "What makes you think she's white?" King replied. Looking right at Roz Cron, the policeman said, "Well, she looks white to me." At this point King answered piously, rolling his eyes heavenward, "Well, our girls are not responsible for what one of their parents may have been forced to do." He then turned back to the band and continued the rehearsal while Roz, red as a beet, had a difficult time keeping quiet.

Once in California the girls were plunged into a round of new activities. They were taken to various Hollywood studios to make short films which would later be used as "fillers" in movie theaters. Most of these are now in the collections of jazz buffs.

At this time the Sweethearts also recorded several shows live at the Club Alabam for the GIs in Europe and the Pacific, each show featuring a big star. It was thrilling for the Sweethearts to work with such people as Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, Jerry Colonna, Phil Harris, and Jimmy Durante. Recently portions of these programs have surfaced in a collection of women's jazz performances on a small, independent label. Many of these "air checks" are also being sold on the open market, so there is no telling where the music of the Sweethearts may be heard next.

After playing the Club Plantation, one of the best West Coast jazz clubs in Los Angeles, the group set forth once again for Arlington, Virigina. A whole new chain of events was beginning. The State Department had become interested in the band, because there had been a demand for it from the GIs in Europe who had heard the broadcasts over the Armed Forces Radio Network. This resulted in a tour of Europe with USO Camp Shows for the Sweethearts.

Attired in their brand new USO uniforms, the Sweethearts sailed for Europe on July 15, 1945, reaching Le Havre on July 22. They were chaperoned by Maurice King, as Ray Lee Jones had become ill and couldn't make the trip. In the European Theatre the war was already over, but there were still thousands of occupational forces to be entertained. When the girls arrived, they were ecstatically received, and every time the band performed, the audiences went wild. The program varied somewhat from the routine they used in night clubs. Tunes were added that the GIs knew and liked, but basically it was the same show that had excited the Apollo audience earlier that year.

They were all living together in a hotel, and Maurice King was required to conduct a room check at 10:30 p.m. every night, because of the curfew. He would make the room check and leave, knowing full well that some of the girls would sneak out afterwards. "I should have received a medal for bringing back that band intact," King has said with a mysterious smile. Piney Woods seemed a million light years away.

When the band returned to the States after Christmas, 1945, the girls had money in the bank for the first time in their lives. As financial guardian of the band, Maurice King had seen it that most of the money the girls earned was deposited in U.S. banks to await their return from Europe. Only Helen Jones had elected to have Ray Lee Jones hold her money for safekeeping, instead of depositing it in a bank.

The controlling factors of the band were still the Washingtonians, Dan Gary and his partner, Al Dade. Gary was still the president of the corporation and Ray Lee Jones was still the trustee, although she had left Arlington to return to her home town of Omaha, seriously ill.

The band went on. More and different projects were being undertaken. Leonard Feather, who has always admired women musicians and done his best to further their careers, now prepared to record for RCA Victor, using several different women's groups. The Sweethearts recorded two numbers for Leonard Feather—"Don't Get It Twisted" and "Vi Vigor," both written by Maurice King. They also made two sides for Guild Records, with one side featuring Tiny Davis singing and playing "Stompin' the Blues." The reverse side spotlighted Anna May Winburn singing "Do You Want To Jump, Children?" The culmination of all this activity was a short film, *That Man Of Mine,* which starred Ruby Dee and featured the Sweethearts. Maurice King wrote the theme song, and the Sweethearts played it.

At last the Sweethearts had realized some of their earlier dreams. They had played to audiences of thousands in the United States and abroad, recorded overseas broadcasts with big name Hollywood stars, had made records and films. What was left for them?

For some it seemed a good time to leave the band and go back to school. Others had already met their future husbands, and they left to get married. A few stayed on, but there were many new girls coming in. Some remained for a while, but others left after only a week or two, so it is impossible to document all the band members during the last years the group was together. Nevertheless the band continued to grow in stature. Some of the musicians were the best the band had ever had, and this is confirmed by the following enthusiastic review carried in the July 27, 1946 issue of *Billboard.* Noting the band's appearance at the Million Dollar in Los Angeles, the review read in part:

"The joint is jumpin' again this week with a solid bill headlined by the International Sweethearts of Rhythm... Anna May Winburn fronts the Sweethearts (all-gal ork) in smooth and easy style. Fem musikers are top instrumentalists and dish out a polished brand of music, offering such widely titled concoctions as 'Don't Get It Twisted' and 'Just the Thing.' Instrumental breaks fall to Pauline Braddy on the skins and a sensational sax tooter, Vi Burnside. Latter socked 'em between the eyes with 'After You've Gone' and 'I Cover the Waterfront.'

"In the vocal bracket, featured thrush Mildred McIver does 'Day By Day' and 'Mr. Postman Blues' well... Surprise vocal shot was guitarist Carline Ray doing 'Temptation.' Gal has a deep voice and knows how to peddle a tune."

The band was to continue until the end of 1948, playing brilliantly and getting excellent reviews. And yet, something was missing now that virtually all the original Sweethearts had left.

Helen Jones was on her way back to Omaha to visit Ray Lee Jones, now desperately ill. It was a shock to Helen to see her so obviously near death, but just as shocking was the admission Mrs. Jones made—that she had spent all the money Helen had entrusted to her. She begged Helen's forgiveness. "I didn't realize the magnitude of it until years later," Helen reflected recently. "I felt so sorry for her. There she was, down and out, in this little old house that she had bought for her parents. And when she died she left it to me, but I didn't take it. Her parents were still there, and I didn't want to put them out. So there was nothing I could do. At that time I was young and I didn't know anything, so whatever came up, I just accepted it. That's life—everyone learns one way or another."

Somehow, in spite of the mystery surrounding the management of the band, Ray Lee Jones had been the life force that held it together. When she died, the band also died.

But memories and dreams do not die easily. They still flourish in the hearts and minds of these women, who open their scrapbooks and point with pride to the fresh-faced group of girls with whom they once had shared so much. No matter that their moment in the spotlight was brief. Their spirit and courage has been passed on to a new generation of talented young women, who are seeking their own dreams.

photo by Shawn Sites

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