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CREATING THE INTERNATIONAL SWEETHEARTS OF RHYTHM GRAPHIC NOVEL

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to discuss the herstory of *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*, and the process of creating a comic book about them. In the first part, the author discusses his introduction to the medium of comic books. Next the thesis notes comparative graphic novels and their narrative techniques. These show that there is a growing demand for historical fiction and creative nonfiction comics.

In a detailed central section, the thesis presents the intersectional solidarity within the band. Here the thesis draws on many different resources including; books, panel discussions, and documentaries. After this, the thesis discusses the author's process for writing and illustrating the first chapter of his graphic novel.

In conclusion, the author recounts the ways in which an education at Syracuse University positively influenced the creation of his most recent comic book work. This thesis hopes to offer all Syracuse University students useful tips on writing and illustrating historical graphic novels, and thus making a small contribution to improving the knowledge of the university's artistic and literary communities.

CREATING
THE INTERNATIONAL SWEETHEARTS OF RHYTHM
GRAPHIC NOVEL

by

Brandon J. Wallace

B.F.A in Illustration, Maryland Institute College of Art, 2012

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Illustration.

Syracuse University
June 2020

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I. My History with Cartooning

Telling sequential narratives through words and pictures is not just what I do, but fundamentally who I am. I began writing and drawing comic books, at three years old, immediately after learning what a comic book was.

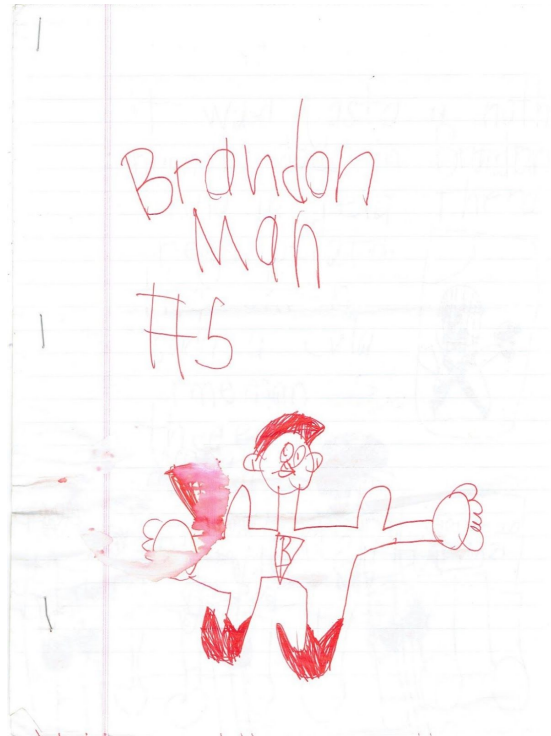


Fig 1. *Brandon Man #5 Cover*, Brandon J. Wallace, 1994

My earliest inspiration was an episode of the 1992 *Addams Family* Cartoon where Uncle Fester drew a comic book in a notebook. The comic was about the adventures of his imagined alter-ego, Fester-Man. All of a sudden, the heroic lives of my favorite super heroes like; the *Power Rangers*, *Batman*, and *Spider-Man*, were something I could attain with a pen and paper. In those days, my work was pure escapism. The work was sequential, but it was missing some of

the format, like paneling and word balloons. I kept making these throughout my adolescence.

When I was in middle school I was introduced to Aaron Mcgruder's *The Boondocks* in *The Washington Post*. In Huey Freeman, the main character of the strip, I saw someone who looked like me and spoke like me. Huey was astute and not afraid to say what he thought. As a Black boy I often felt that my voice was less valid or trustworthy to strangers and Huey helped show me how to act in the face of racist patronization. The second time I really connected with a Black character in comics was when Warner Brothers animation adapted the; loc-sporting, honor roll achieving, electric-magnetic superhero, Virgil Hawkins a.k.a Static to television. Static's comic book co-creator, Dwayne McDuffie, I would later come to learn was a huge advocate for inclusive representation for all in comics. In fact, since his passing in 2011, there was a comics award named after him. His solidarity with all marginalized people through comics is something that I find particularly inspiring. I would try to emulate both Huey Freeman and Virgil Hawkins's scholarship and hairstyles as I grew. This is when I began to feel how representation in popular media matters.

With the rising popularity of Japanese anime and manga in the early 2000s, I became much more interested in the specificities of comic books. Throughout middle school and high school I would begin experimenting with panel layouts, angular borders, and dramatic posing. All of this was to try and emulate my favorite *Shonen Jump* stories such as *Rurouni Kenshin*, *Naruto*, and *Bleach*. Although I am grateful for those stories

for reinvigorating my passion, it's imperative that I thank my art and literature teachers in high school for getting me to look past the Japanese action genre.

My high school art teacher, Thomas Baker, while supportive of my endeavors, encouraged me (kicking and screaming) to improve my artwork through practicing foundational drawing. One of my literature teachers, Brian Larkin, and I created a Comic Book independent study. In this class we focused on reading comics that were considered of literary merit, such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Will Eisner's *Contract with God*, which is the first book to be described as a graphic novel. These books approached storytelling in a way that I had not previously seen in comics. Their narratives were not the vast sometimes directionless stories that I had often seen in serialized comics. These were tight narratives with a clear beginning, middle, and end. These stories felt more grounded in reality than the comics I had read. It felt as if the voices of these comics were not inspired by other comics but by personal or historical accounts and experiences. I think it was then that I saw that the comic book is not as a genre, but as a medium, just like film, novels, and plays. This epiphany more than any other influenced my decision to research a piece of history that I believed deserved an adaptation.

II. The Rise of the Historical Graphic Novel

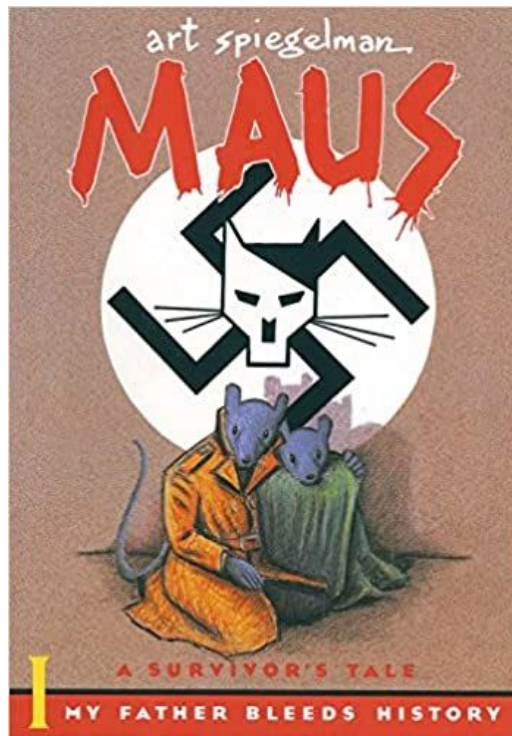


Fig 2. *MAUS* Cover, Art Spiegelman, 1980

In 1980 Art Spiegelman began publishing his work that has been described by Jules Feiffer as; “a novel, a memoir, a documentary, and a comic book”, *Maus*. I’ve read *Maus* for the first time very recently and I find that description is very apt. The story follows Art Spiegelman interviewing his grandfather about his first-hand experiences in Germany during the Holocaust. The comic cuts between the interview in the 1970s and World War II Germany. One of the elements of the story that people found truly unique was that he portrayed the Jews as mice and the Germans as Cats.

Spiegelman said that the reason he chose the metaphor of a mouse was because Adolf Hitler referred to the Jews as subhuman and the image of mice was used in reference to the Jews in Nazi propoganda. Appropriating this iconography allowed Spiegelman to give humanity to the Jewish narrative by creating a sense of solidarity while showing the predatory nature of the Nazis by portraying them as cats.

One thing Spiegelman stated in an interview with BBC news, is that one of his reasons for choosing this story was out of necessity. He said that drawing a comic book is so arduous that if he was going to do it, he had to have full confidence in the narrative. This motivation speaks to me. One reason why I chose to adapt the story of The Sweethearts was that their story is one that is a constant source of inspiration to me.

Spiegelman explained that the reason that he chose to have himself as a character was because he did not want to create the illusion that what he was showing was an objective historical lens. He wanted to show the humanity and personal nature of the story. In fact he begins with the tale of how his father met his mother. The sensitivity and personal nature of combining real accounts with sequential imagery was so groundbreaking that Spiegelman became the first Cartoonist to win the Pulitzer Prize.

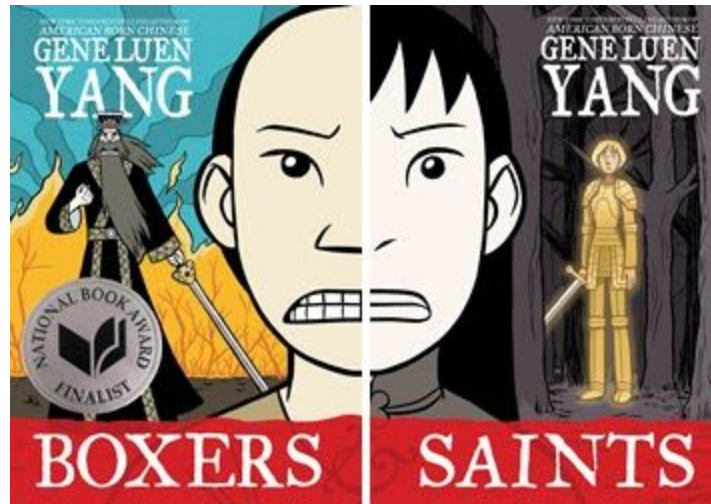


Fig 3. *Boxers and Saints* Covers, Gene Yang, 2013

In 2013, Gene Yang published *Boxers and Saints*, which could not rely on first person accounts, but shows us how powerful historical fiction can be as a tool to empathize with people who lived in the past or even possibly in another part of the world. *Boxers and Saints* tells the tale of two people on opposing sides of The Boxer Rebellion in China at the onset of the 20th century. The conflict occurred when an organization called The Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fist led an uprising against Western Influence in Northern China. What Yang does so masterfully is that he splits the story into two companion graphic novels. *Boxers* tells the story of Lee Bao, who becomes the leader of the Boxer rebellion after his fellow villagers are killed by western imperial authorities. *Saints* tells the story of Four-Girl, who becomes a Catholic convert after being mistreated by her fellow villagers because of the fact that her name sounds unlucky. The protagonist of each book shows up in the other's story as an antagonist. Yang's decision to use this format allows us to empathize with both perspectives. We spend time with each character and come to see their totality as human beings. This format influenced my decision to work on a book that includes multiple perspectives.

III. Intersectionality in the Big Band Era

The research part of my thesis began in a History of Jazz class taught by Dr. James Gordon Williams. The class focused on women in Jazz history. The first group we learned about was The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, and I immediately fell in love with their story. I feel that their story is the antithesis of the divisiveness incited by the Trump presidency. As an African American, I feel particularly proud that African Americans created an inclusive space where they could perform. I not only watched and read all of the materials required for the class but I researched everything I could find on them.

The aspect of this story that I find most interesting is how it perfectly illustrates the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality is the way in which various forms of discrimination combine or overlap.¹ Black Women's fight for professional equality in all fields is a prime example of this. The tale of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, the first racially-integrated all-girls swing band, illustrates many ways in which Black Women experience challenges unique to their combination of race and gender. Due to racial segregation, they were ghettoized to Black venues either explicitly or implicitly, were pressured to adhere to strict social definitions of 1930s and 1940s femininity, and they had to deal with the dangers of the Jim Crow era. Their herstory shows how the solidarity of the Black community, in addition to the skills of these young women, played an integral role in their success. This can be seen through the bands' initial fundraising ventures with The Piney Woods School, the presence of strong Black women as role models, and the Black women who opened their homes while the band traveled.

¹ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."

Jazz began in the late 19th century when musicians like African-American cornetist, Buddy Bolden began to develop a New Orleans style of Ragtime music.² With the advent of radio technology, the style of music that would eventually be known as jazz and its sub-genres such as swing would increase in popularity. Due to racial segregation, and sexism of the time, the people were allowed to play this music were primarily white men.³ Male improvisers assumed, and still assume today, that women musicians were either vocalists or pianists because, Sherrie Tucker explains, instruments have been gendered before any one plays a note.⁴ This instilled a false idea that men were the only serious jazz performers.

Enter World War II. It was a time that displayed some of the worst humanity has to offer. The conflict led to; concentration camps, bloodshed, and the creation of weapons of mass destruction like the atomic bomb. The ramifications of the draft, however, provided American Women with powerful opportunities to take center stage in the workforce.⁵ During this time period, all-female bands like Phil Spitalny Hour of Charm Orchestra began to pop up.⁶



²Boyd, "Buddy Bolden and the Birth of Jazz: An Interview With Michael White."

³ Tucker, *Swing Shift*, (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2000),56

⁴ Tucker, 15

⁵ *Ibid*, 27

⁶ *Ibid*, 19

Fig 4. Phil Spitalny and his Queens of Harmony (CBS 1935)

This band was an all-female, all-white band led by conductor, Phil Spitalny.⁷ While the concept of a band of women was innovative, he imposed a very specific idea of femininity visually and behaviorally on the women.⁸ He hired women who looked similar to one another, and had them wear long dresses, regardless how impractical that was for performance (Fig 2.). Spitalny also abused his power over the women by having them audition in their undergarments.⁹ 2017's "Me Too" movement reminds us that men in power continue to use their professional influence and power in abusive ways.¹⁰ For instance, male film producer, Harvey Weinstein, who bribed female filmmaking professionals and other women into giving him sexual favors behind closed doors with promises of career advancement.¹¹ One advantage that the Sweethearts would have, that the Queens of Harmony unfortunately did not, was having women in leadership roles.

Inspired by the visibility of the Queens of Harmony, The International Sweethearts of Rhythm were formed by Laurence Clifton Jones in 1937 at the Piney Woods School.¹² Piney Woods, formed in 1909 in Mississippi, is a school created with the express purpose of providing a quality education for African-American children.¹³ Jones intended to raise funds for Piney Woods by taking advantage of the growing trend of all Female Swing Bands.¹⁴

⁷ Ibid, 19

⁸ Ibid, 91

⁹ Ibid, 101

¹⁰ Bennett, "The #MeToo Moment: When the Blinders Come Off."

¹¹ Kantor and Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades."

¹² Handy, *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*, (New Jersey, The Scarecrow Press Inc, 1983),6

¹³ Piney Woods School History, Piney Woods School Website, Accessed April 18, 2019

<https://pineywoods.org/history/>

¹⁴ Placksin and Hughes, "Women and Jazz: International Sweethearts of Rhythm."



Fig 5. Portrait of Lawrence C. Jones

The Sweethearts initially were composed of girls ages 13-16 from the marching band, including Jones's daughter, trombonist, Helen¹⁵ The name International Sweethearts of Rhythm was inspired by the mixed heritage of the girls in the band, including Native American, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and in the case of Willie Mae "Rabbit" Wong, Chinese.¹⁶ Uncommon for most bands of the time, his celebration of diversity was representative of Piney Woods.¹⁷ Jones wanted to feature how non-white the group was.¹⁸ He even had Willie Mae change her last name from Lee to Wong because he thought Lee sounded too European.

¹⁵Placksin and Hughes, "Women and Jazz: International Sweethearts of Rhythm."

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷ Handy, 9

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹Piney Woods already had success in music with their two male swing bands.²⁰ The funny thing about this is that the students were not allowed to dance on campus.²¹ There was a lot of pushback from some Christian parents at first, as many of them believed Jazz to be immoral.²² Trombonist Lillie Keeler Sims, even stated, when speaking on a panel that the girls brass band, before their members were co-opted into the Sweethearts, were chastised for playing an apparently suggestive song titled *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* in a Methodist Church.²³ Sims also stated that, as the band was preparing to travel, her father made her quit due to his religious beliefs.²⁴ Many of the parents did eventually agree with trumpeter Sadie D. Whitehead's mother, even saying "Well, 22 people can't be wrong."²⁵ Thanks to the skill of the band and the support of the community, they were successful in raising funds for the school. Through their actions the Sweethearts were able to help not just themselves, but the other children who attended the school as well.

¹⁹ Tucker, 200

²⁰ Placksin and Hughes, "Women and Jazz: International Sweethearts of Rhythm."

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid



Fig 6. International Sweethearts of Rhythm Album Cover

After this initial success The Sweethearts kept building momentum as a touring band. With their departure from Piney Woods the Sweethearts would face increased adversity, but they also would meet more friends and leaders along the way. They had one standard bus as well as a tour bus that was built by Piney Woods school students.²⁶ The tour bus was aptly named Big Bertha. According to Whitehead, the students of Piney Wood built this bus for them.²⁷ The achievements of their fellow students and bandmates enabled the Sweethearts to operate in a way that was unattainable for many Black swing bands.

²⁶ Placksin and Hughes, "Women and Jazz: International Sweethearts of Rhythm."

²⁷Ibid

In 1942 the band found an iconic female leader. Eddie Durham, who was the Sweethearts' composer, left to join Count Basie's band.²⁸ He was replaced by vocalist Anna Mae Winburn.²⁹



Fig 7. Anna Mae Winburn in the International Sweethearts of Rhythm Soundie

Winburn was an experienced vocalist, having collaborated with numerous other bands including Durham's All-Star Girl Orchestra. While she initially had reservations about joining a predominantly female group, she eventually joined the band.³⁰ Winburn became a mother figure in the band for the girls, teaching them about the world and how to carry themselves in it. Willie Mae Wong said that she taught them "the facts of life."³¹ We can see some of the confidence that

she exudes in, *Jump Children*:

²⁸ Handy, 162

²⁹ Handy, 167

³⁰ Chaikin, "The Girls In The Band."

³¹ Ibid

“When you’re feelin low and don’t know what to do (x2)

Just stay in the groove, don’t let nothin bother you

I may be small but baby have no fear (x2)

I can climb a hill with that shift in gear

I ain’t good lookin and I don’t have waist long hair (x2)

But Momma gave me something that can take me anywhere”

These lyrics portray a woman confident in her self image and abilities. “When you’re feeling low and don’t know what to do, just stay in the groove let nothing bother you” could mean many things. In my view Winburn is reminding Black Women to not let the weight of the patriarchy crush their spirits. “I may be small but baby have no fear. I can climb a hill with that shift in gear” could be interpreted as Winburn being capable of accomplishing feats that some may consider difficult for her as a woman. “I ain’t good lookin and I don’t have waist long hair, but my momma gave me something that can take me anywhere” shows that her strength and value comes from the mentorship of other women rather than the sexual validation of men. She knows what she is capable of. This theme of confidence is apparent in other songs the Sweethearts performed as well.



Fig 8. Ernestine “Tiny” Davis

Trumpeter and vocalist Ernestine Carol, aka Tiny Davis was another strong personality in the group. Davis had an unapologetically, salacious sense of humor.³² As a Queer Black Woman she her experiences illustrate the Intersectionality of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm.³³ The lyrics she sings in “How About That Jive”, 1944, read:

“Mama’s round and brown she can roll just like a ball (x2)

She’s got a lot to give and daddy you can have it all.

Don’t worry about children cause I got it by the ton (x2)

So bounce me bounce me baby here’s where you get your fun.

I got your 5 by 5 and I’m known all over town (x2).

I ain’t much when I stand but oh when I lay it down.

Now when you pick your chicks, you pick em big and fat, you can bet your boots

that it’s tight like that.

³²Chaikin, “The Girls In The Band.”

³³ Tucker, 183

How bout that jive? Response: Alright alright(x2).

Daddy you can have it all.

I'm big enough to burst round enough to roll,

and what I got

will satisfy your soul,

I'm a queen size Mama with a king sized appetite,

you've got the key to my door if you know how to turn it right."

Davis then ends the piece with a wonderful trumpet solo. Just like Winburn in the previous song the singer is owning the skin she's in. When she says "I'm big enough to burst, round enough to roll, and what I got will satisfy your soul" it's showing that she is a bigger woman and that it doesn't take away from her sexual abilities or allure. In fact, it gives her something unique. "I got your 5 by 5 and I'm known all over town. I ain't much when I stand but oh when I lay it down." is saying that her sexual abilities are known all over town. Davis is an unapologetic sexually liberated woman. I interpret these lyrics as showing how The Sweethearts pushed back against the patriarchal 1940s ideals imposed on them.

The diversity of the band was reflected in the audience and support systems the band had. Black performers were limited in the spaces in which they were able to perform, either by social or legal segregation.³⁴ As they grew in popularity they began to play at venues such as the Apollo, and the Howard Theater.³⁵ Some white performers like Florence Shefte and other members of Betty Mcguire's band would attend the Sweethearts performances at Black venues.³⁶

³⁴Chaikin, "The Girls In The Band."

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Tucker, 62

The Sub-Deb's even invited the Sweethearts to their performance, however, those in charge of the white venue would not grant access to the Black musicians.³⁷ Whitehead said male musicians also appreciated them, naming Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and Erskine Hawkins.³⁸ She said they would even have battles with the male bands.³⁹ Alto saxophonist Rosalind "Roz" Cron, one of the bands first white performers, explained that the men who supported them were Black and that the white male musicians didn't support them.⁴⁰



Fig 9. Roz Cron

Cron joined the band in 1943 while The Sweethearts were up north. Cron had played with a few bands, including Ada Leonard's band and trumpeter Georgie Graham's band.⁴¹ In the

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Chaikin, "The Girls In The Band."

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Placksin and Hughes, "Women and Jazz: International Sweethearts of Rhythm."

⁴¹ Chaikin, "The Girls In The Band."

documentary, *The Girls in the band* she recounts some of the professional frustrations she had prior to joining up with the Sweethearts of Rhythm.⁴² She explained that she had been asked to join Ada Leonard's orchestra, and when they brought out the costumes the musicians were asked to wear pink and frilly dresses.⁴³ Whereas male bands had consistent performance attire, wardrobe choices for female musicians changed and were much more about presenting a specific idea of gender identity than about the practicality and mobility.⁴⁴ Rae Lee Jones, the Sweethearts manager and chaperone reached out to Graham, to see if he knew of any female saxophonists who wanted to play with the Sweethearts.⁴⁵ She was pleased that The Sweethearts wore suits, which she thought looked more "professional" than frilly dresses.⁴⁶ Cron had been living with her parents and was ecstatic to let them know that she would be joining the band.⁴⁷ She said it was all fun, until they started playing in the South.

⁴²Ibid

⁴³ Chaikin, "The Girls In The Band."

⁴⁴ Tucker, 68

⁴⁵Chaikin, "The Girls In The Band."

⁴⁶Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid



Fig 10. Jim Crow

Jim Crow refers to both the racist minstrel caricature created by Thomas Rice (Fig 8.), as well as the system of laws that were used to oppress Black people in the south between slavery and the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. During the Jim Crow era white Americans, whether law enforcement or civilian, policed the way in which Black Americans interacted with whites in the south.⁴⁸ The band had to consider where they stayed, where they could get gas, where they got food, and who they were seen socializing with.⁴⁹ They couldn't enter whites only hotels because most of them were Black Women.⁵⁰ The white women also occasionally would have to stay on the bus in areas where it would be less visible to white people that they were staying with Black people.⁵¹ Fortunately for the group, there were many Black women who were willing to risk their own safety by allowing the racially mixed group of young women to board

⁴⁸Chaikin, "The Girls In The Band."

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

with them.⁵² Cron recounted a night where she was separated from the rest of The Sweethearts and a young Black soldier escorted her.⁵³ The two of them were arrested for being seen together.⁵⁴ The Black man was told to get out of town, and she was held captive until Rae Lee Jones could get her out.⁵⁵ Segregation was an issue even if the women were simply walking down the street. One of the advantages that the International Sweethearts of Rhythm in this regard was many of the girls in their band were of mixed racial backgrounds. This made it difficult for white men to differentiate who was and wasn't supposed to be there.⁵⁶ During southern performances Rae Lee Jones would darken the skin of the white members of the band using nut brown powder to make them less noticeable to the police.⁵⁷ It's ironic that skin darkening products, tools that were used to dehumanize Black people and create the caricature from which the Jim Crow laws were named were used to avoid segregation laws.

While Jazz was born in New Orleans, it was developed in Kansas City. Kansas City became the cradle of Jazz because there were many speakeasies there in the 1930s. Even after there were crackdowns on those underground establishments, the music culture thrived. Legends like pianist Count Basie, saxophonist Lester Young, and pianist Mary Lou Williams all developed within the music culture of that scene. It is also the birthplace of The Women's Jazz Festival that began in Kansas City in 1978.⁵⁸ In 1980 the festival organizers decided to invite The

⁵²Ibid

⁵³ Placksin and Hughes, "Women and Jazz: International Sweethearts of Rhythm."

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Chaikin, "The Girls In The Band."

⁵⁷Chaikin, "The Girls In The Band."

⁵⁸ Handy, 1

International Sweethearts of Rhythm and give them the commemoration they deserved having been there in some of Jazz's most formative years.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Handy, 7

IV. Developing My Visual Language

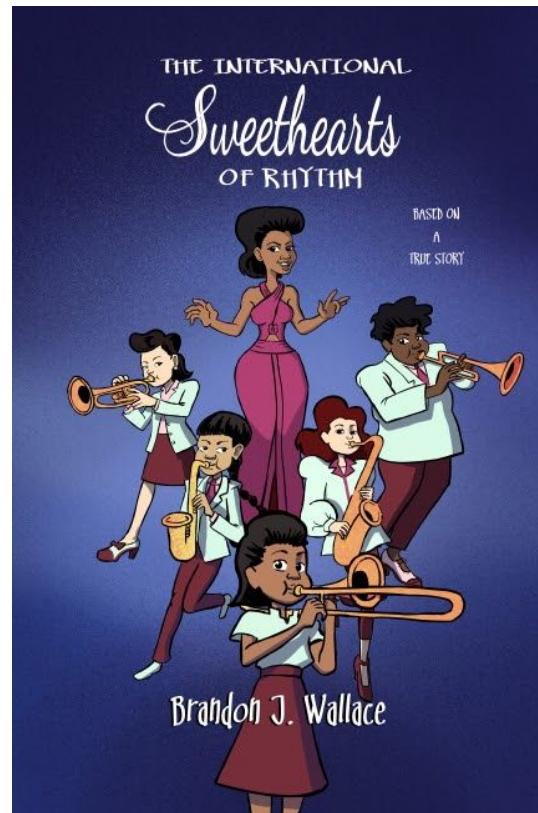


Fig 11. *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm Cover*, Brandon J. Wallace, 2020

When I was younger, particularly in high school and in my undergraduate studies, I was obsessed with trying to find “my style.” I’ve since learned that a much more effective way of gaining consistency is to create process habits. By analyzing many stories in different forms, I have discovered how I work best. My process consists of research, visual development, writing, thumbnails, pencil under, drawing, inking, color, and lettering.

First is the research component. Sometimes this involves the heavily involved research that is representative in this project. Other times, this process involves looking back to particularly memorable experiences from my own life and analyzing the components of those memories that made them emotionally resonant.

Next I begin the visual development stage of the process. In this part of the process I gather reference photos to inspire what the environments and character designs will look like. This is something that I didn't really develop until I took a concept art class with Sean Murray at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Sean taught me to try many different iterations of a design before settling on the final.

The writing phase of my process is very organic. I begin with an outline of the events of the story that I'm telling. This will start with rough bullet points of the emotional moments I want in the story. In much the same way that I would write a research paper, I create a narrative question at the beginning and answer it by the end. With *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* I was asking, how were The Sweethearts able to overcome systemic obstacles? The answer is by supporting each other. This stage is often done in tandem with the thumbnailing stage.

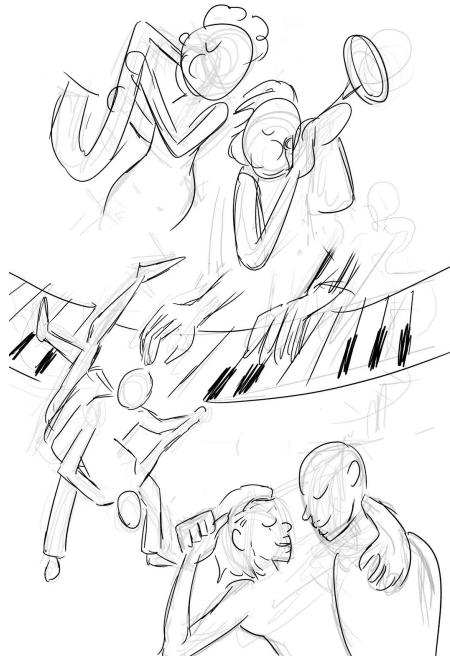


Fig 12. *Sweethearts Page 46 Rough*, Brandon J. Wallace. 2019

Thumbnailing is my first pass at translating the script into drawings. I use the software program, Clip Studio Paint to draw and layout a rough digital mock up of the final book. I only include the information that is essential to clarifying the narrative, and nothing more. There are no embellishments, just panel layouts and rough drawings.



Fig 13. *Sweethearts Page 46 Pencil*, Brandon J. Wallace , 2019

Pencils are the more defined sketch phase. I flesh out the structure of the drawings, and I make sure there is consistency in the characters, and environments. This gives a closer approximation of the artwork. I will typically still do this in Clip Studio since working digitally allows for more flexibility in my compositions. If I need something moved, rescaled, or erased it's much easier to do within the computer program.



Fig 14. *Sweethearts Page 46 Ink*, Brandon J. Wallace , 2020

Inking is the last stage of drawing in my work. To get to this step, I print out the digital “pencils.” Then using a sable watercolor brush and Dr. Martin’s brand black ink, I redraw the image. I enjoy working with traditional ink because I like to relinquish some of the control that’s found in digital drawing tools. The naturalistic inconsistencies of working with ink on paper come through. I think it adds a bit of charm to the final linework.



Fig 15. *Sweethearts Page 46*, Brandon J. Wallace , 2019

After the line drawings are finished, I color my pages. For this process I begin by scanning the final inked drawings back into the computer. Then I begin “flattening”. Flattening is filling lines with random colors that serve as a placeholder for the final palette. After the flattening is done, I choose the final palette. I choose my colors based on value, temperature, and the feelings I want to convey in a particular scene.



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Fig 16. *Sweethearts* Page 25, Brandon J. Wallace , 2019

For instance, in the scene where Helen is talking with her parents, the color of every element is telling us something subconsciously. Dr. Jones is going to be argumentative with Helen, so he is wearing red to indicate danger. Helen's Mother, Grace is wearing blue since she is supporting her and we associate blue with calming forces like water and the sky. Helen's purple outfit indicates that they are a family unit since it is the combination of the red and blue of her parents.

The last step of my comics before printing is lettering. Lettering is putting text on the page. For this step I purchased a font from Blambot.com. I drew the dialogue balloons on the pages digitally then I added text to the balloons. With the words on the page the project was done. I sent the digital files to Blurb.com to print.

V. Takeaways

I've learned a lot from Syracuse University. The Illustration department has taught me to develop and trust my process through repeated self-guided projects. Bringing multiple comics to printed completion gave me the confidence to follow through on this project. The history and lecture courses I enrolled in helped me to strengthen my research and writing skills. Without those skills I would not have been able to write this story.

Unfortunately, due to the global pandemic as a result of Coronavirus I will not have a thesis exhibition. However, I had plans for the space that I believe would have been pretty interesting. In addition to the completed printed comic, I was also going to hang some of the pages printed and framed on the wall. I was also going to play a vinyl album reprint from the 1980s that I bought on eBay. I think this would have created a truly immersive experience. Although the show won't happen. I believe the work still has it's strongest presentation tool: the book.

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Discography

- The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*
The Best of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm 1944-1946, 2013, MP3

Vita

Brandon J. Wallace was born in Houston, Texas and raised in Silver Spring, Maryland. After completing his studies at Gonzaga College High School, Washington, D.C. in 2008, he enrolled at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, MD. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2012. In the following years, he worked as a Freelance Cartoonist. In August of 2017 he entered the Master of Fine Arts Illustration program at Syracuse University.

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