

the lively arts

Ladies Chain picks up the contradance tempo

By SARAH FADER

"Contradancing gets you slowly at first. But once you've been through a couple of dances...everything becomes more familiar. Then you enter into the fervent religious phase of knock-down, drag-out, all-night contradancing."

In an interview at her home in Northampton, Bonnie Blair described the passion for contradancing which prompted her, in the company of six other musicians, to form the contradance band known as Ladies Chain.

"There's definitely a collective spirit; if the dance is going well and people are having a good time the energy of the place gets higher and higher. It's wonderful to play and call for a dance when it's that way. I get high as a kite calling for a good dance. You are fed so much energy by the crowd you can't sleep afterwards."

Seven musicians formed it

Ladies Chain is a band of seven women performing on guitar, piano, banjo, flute, fiddle, recorder, and bones. Bonnie Blair plays guitar, and bones in addition to calling for the dances.

"It's very difficult to play and call at the same time. When I'm calling a dance I'm looking very closely at the dancers, trying to get a feel for whether people understand what's going on, if they're getting the information they need so that they can dance and have a good time."

Named for one of the figures used in contradancing, Ladies Chain was newly formed in January to provide music for a contradance sponsored by the Valley Women's Union.

The band has since played for contradances at Munson Library in South Amherst, at the Guiding Star Grange Hall in Greenfield, in Brattleboro, Vt., and at various weddings and gallery openings throughout Hampshire County. Earlier in the year, Ladies Chain traveled to Cape Breton, where they played at the Broad Cove Folk Festival.

European roots

Contradancing is traditional, early American dancing, very different from western square dancing or southern country dancing.

Contradancing involves variations on many European folk dances; Scottish and English country dancing, the French quadrille, and German dances. Beethoven wrote music for contradances.

At the start of a dance the caller gives the name of



LADIES CHAIN a group of seven area musicians take to the stage for a round of contradance music.

each step to be used in the dance as the group walks through the formation. Once the dance has begun, the caller shouts the name and direction of each figure in time to the music.

"It take time to experience yourself as a real musician or caller. You're accustomed to being around other people who do it, and of course they are the authentic musicians, and you're the one who wishes you were authentic. So you practice really hard and hope no one finds you out."

In addition to playing and calling for Ladies Chain, Bonnie Blair teaches music at the East Mountain School in Westfield, an integrated school for normal and physically handicapped children.

In her music classes at the school, Blair uses many

simplified contradance figures. She also spends time traveling to Vermont for Morris dancing at the Marlboro Morrison Sword.

A traditional English country dance, the Morris dances are practiced all year before they are performed in May as a celebration of the spring season.

Before each dance, the members of Ladies Chain practice furiously, growing more and more nervous as the performance date nears. Stage fright dissolves, however, as soon as the first chord is struck.

"Our worst expectations are invariably born out; what if something horrible happens, what if this or that goes wrong, it always does, and we live to tell about it and everyone still has a good time. I'm always surprised when it's over that the time has gone so fast."