

These Ladies have a Chain of their own . . .

By LAURA BARR

SOUTH AMHERST — A Scottish tune is in the air. The earliest arrivals are stepping high, twirling, and exchanging partners — practicing "Jefferson and Liberty," the opening dance. Suddenly, the band swings into "Flowers at Edinburgh," then "Scollay's Reel" and the contradance takes off.

The Saturday contradance at the Munson Library is a weekly event, but this night, something is new and different. On stage is Ladies Chain — the only all-women contradance band in the larger New England area.

Bonnie Blair of Northampton has her eyes intent upon the dance floor as she calls the steps and plays the bones, a hand percussion instrument. To her left and busy fiddling are Barbara Stack, of Northampton and Mary Lea, who moved recently from Leverett to Boston. Guitarists Heather

McLaughlin, of Leverett and Karen Simon, of Northampton are strumming and picking; doing likewise on her banjo is Donna Grossman, of Williamsburg. Completing this Ladies Chain is the flutist, Karen Nelson of Northampton.

Began nine months ago

Just nine months ago, each woman was making music individually while pursuing her own non-musical career; only two of them knew one another.

It was at a contradance sponsored by the Valley Women's Union in Northampton that the seven came together for the first time last February. "The people affiliated with the union wanted an event," recalls Ms. Lea. "They brainstormed and called musicians that they knew."

The seven met, practiced, and then played for the union's women-only contradance. Subsequently, they were invited to

join together again, this time to play at a benefit for Pat Sackrey, an area resident who was going to China as a delegate for the U.S.-China People's Friendship Association.

Members of the group cannot remember exactly when they decided to organize formally as a band, but sometime in between the first two engagements, they became an entity. "We enjoyed it and decided to stay together," offers Ms. Lea.

They decided also upon a name. Ms. McLaughlin explains that the group was faced with a question of both emphasis and identity — were they a women's band or a contradance band? "Ladies Chain," a contradance term which describes an eight-beat dance figure, was chosen to reflect both qualities.

The seven members, who must manage to arrange mutually-convenient times for weekly rehearsals, are making a strong commitment to contradancing and its music. In July, while Ms. Blair attended a camp to learn new dances, the rest of the group spent a week in Nova Scotia to broaden their knowledge of Scottish music.

Played huge music festival

Nova Scotia signified an important learning experience for the group. "We played for a couple of barn dances and met local musicians, who invited us to play in their parlors," recounts Ms. Grossman. But the highlight of the trip was an unexpected and prized invitation to play at the Broad Cove concert, a huge music festival on the coast of Cape Breton.

Ms. Grossman laughs, recalling the group's initial nervousness — it was the largest audience before which Ladies Chain had ever played, and the program was broadcast live over Canadian radio. But despite the slight case of stage fright, Ladies Chain performed at Broad Cove, gaining experience as musicians, exposure as a new band, and an invitation to return to the concert next summer.

"I think it was important in bringing the group together," says Ms. Lea. The women agree that the experience solidified their commitment to their band. They will continue to free-lance, playing for benefits, weddings, and just about any other occasion, but they also will perform regularly.

Ladies Chain has rented the Greenfield Grange for the third Friday of each month this season. "The point is to provide community dancing for people who want to dance," says Ms. Blair, noting that area towns, such as Northampton and Amherst, already have weekly contradances.

The Greenfield Grange arrangement represents to Ladies Chain an important stage in their evolution as not only a musical group but also a women's group. Ms. Simon thinks that the group has just arrived at the point of being a band that can play regularly.

Getting 'can-do' attitude

With a preponderance of male instrumentalists and, in particular, male callers, Ms. Simon suggests that a woman's inability to feel like a musician and to have the confidence to pursue that career stems from "social messages received throughout childhood." For her, the support of other women has been important in gaining self-confidence and a positive "can-do" kind of attitude.

Similarly, Ms. Nelson attributes the continuing fulfillment of her musical and personal needs to the fact that Ladies Chain is comprised only of women. Noting that each member has a different level of musical proficiency, she says, "The difference is that men, I don't think, would have spent as much time on group dynamics and the way we work together."

The members of Ladies Chain agree with Ms. Simon's assertion that "being an all-women's band, at this point, is an important model for everybody." To Ms. Grossman, "It is an excellent model for my daughter Leila."

Six-year-old Leila, who has joined Ladies Chain on stage several times. "Oh, she toots along," laughs her mother.

"I probably wouldn't have gotten involved if it wasn't a women's group," says Ms. Stack. She believes that people do notice the band is all female and have something to say about it, although may not admit that.

Yet it would appear that the seven attach a greater importance to their status as a women's band than do the people who come to dance to their music.

At the Munson Library, Rick Mandel of Amherst says, "They're new, they're all women, and they have a good time playing. They take pains to introduce people to the dances — that's what's noteworthy about them."

That there were seven women on stage escaped the initial attention of University of Massachusetts student Shawnee Hutcheson. "After I'd been dancing a little while, I took a quick glance and noticed it then." But it was of passing interest to this new contradancer. "I'm having a good time," he said, and hurried back to the crowded dance floor.

Perform mostly weekends

As with the Munson Library engagement, performances by Ladies Chain are limited largely to weekends. On Monday through Friday, each member attends to her other job — two are teachers, one a publisher, another a weaver, two students, and one a counselor.

But as the new band seeks to become more established, engagements are getting more numerous — raising the probability that choices involving time, energy, and maybe even careers are in the offing. Some of the women indicate that they would like to make their living as musicians.

For the immediate future, however, Ms. Stack doesn't see any big changes. "I see that we'll continue to deal with the issues — becoming more skilled musicians and dealing with the real changes involved in doing it professionally," she adds. "There is a possibility that our lives will take some of us away, but I'm willing to work as if I knew for sure that I could commit myself, say, for five years."

In the meantime, one could bet that Ladies Chain will continue to have, as Ms. Blair puts it, "a helluva good time." After all, what has drawn these seven musicians to the contradance circuit is the same thing that draws young and old, whether novices or "pros." "We all enjoy the dancing," laughs Ms. Simon, "and take turns dancing — even at our own dances!"



AT TOP: Ladies Chain in action, from left: Barbara Stack and Mary Lea, fiddlers; Heather McLaughlin, recorder; Karen Simon, guitar; Donna Grossman, banjo; and Karen Nelson, flute. LOWER PHOTO: Ladies Chain weaves its magic, and the dancers swirl at the Munson Library in South Amherst. (Photos by Richard Carpenter)