BERKELEY WOMEN'S MUSIC COLLECTIVE by Susann Shanbaum

A women’s band from the northern California bay area, Berkeley Women’s Music Collective consists of Debbie Lemke on drums, Nancy Vogl on guitar and bass, Susann Shanbaum on guitar, bass, and harmonica, and Bonnie Lockhart on piano. For five years, BMWC has been creating and performing music which expresses their commitment to women and to the spirit of revolution they feel in the world today. Their music ranges from a powerful electric to a more round and gentle acoustic sound.

I was asked to write about why the Berkeley Women’s Music Collective has been able to stay together for five years. I think about it in different ways at different times, so I’m not sure what the truth of the matter is. I’ll just take this opportunity to talk about things that occur to me. I’m not a writer, so I’ll just do the best I can on both counts.

The first thing I’d like to talk about is our identity as a band. When we started out as a band, no one thought of herself as a musician. We did think of ourselves as a band. We would spend more time at band practice talking than playing. We were young, it was the beginning of the women’s movement for us, and we had a lot to figure out. None of us knew musical terminology or theory except Nancy Henderson, the pianist. We learned much of what we know about music together by trial and error. Until recently our identities came more from being in the band than being musicians. We think a lot about process. Talk talk talk.

We stay together because we are very well matched in terms of talent and ability. We have different strong points in playing, arranging, organizational, and business skills. We all share songwriting ability. I often feel, "who will play with me if the band doesn't?" I feel lucky to be in the band. We all get our material arranged, performed, and sometimes recorded. That seems like a real privilege.

As people I don't think we get along exceptionally well. What makes us able to work together for so long is structure, commitment, and love. We try to structure things so a commitment is possible. If I thought about making a decision I'd be bound to for five years, I would feel too much pressure. We all feel this way about the band so we make contracts with each other for a limited amount of time — usually six months, with certain goals set for that time. Then we decide whether or not to renew. It's much easier to go through a bad or hard period when the end is in sight. It's also easier to go through something without constantly questioning whether or not we should be doing it. This brings us to commitment. I can say almost without reservation that once we make a commitment we do it.

Nancy Henderson told us that the end of our first album would be the end of her commitment. We dealt with that by having Bonnie Lockhart join us as pianist. Bonnie worked along with us during the album and took Nancy's place afterward. This was not an easy transition. It took a long time for Bonnie to feel a part of the band, but the band kept together during it. If one of us up and quit in the middle of a tour or recording, I don't think we could sustain.

We've experimented with different day-to-day structures for touring and practice also. Power, leadership, and division of labor exist whether we acknowledge them or not, so we try to make as many conscious decisions about these things as we can. We still have a long way to go, but for now we have a practice leader every practice. This works best if we make a group decision about what's to be accomplished in a specific week or two-week period (for example, three old songs and two new ones to go over). For touring we rotate road manager town by town, and then things are divided according to what we can do or enjoy doing (Vogl, packing van; Susann, cooking; Debbie, money; Bonnie, navigation and loading). So some things rotate and some are specialties. We still have resentments from time to time about having to do certain things, or not being able to do other things.

One element of the band's structure that makes it lasting is flexibility. We have to make the structure around the changing needs of the band. When I became lovers with a woman in Oregon, the band went on a six week on/two week continued to page 40
We needed extra assurance that we could each shine at what we do best, without being accused of "star-tripping" by our listeners.

At a particularly tense point within the last year, we had, in a group facilitator, the opportunity to discuss issues of group facilitation among the men in turn, sorting out for ourselves what we felt about each other as individuals and groups who had formed the basis of our communication. This was a process where the facilitator would establish himself, without regard for how we would be perceived. We promised not to use any of this information against each other, and from these true meetings, no one's personal fantasies would lead to compromising situations. She even suggested that we "savor" each other's songs, especially if we disagreed with them.

As strange as they seemed at first, these ideas have worked. Of course, we still have disagreements, but we now have a structure for airing them for the first time and the trust in each other that was created when we put our deepest feelings on the line during those "safe" times.

And They Lived Happily Ever After . . . !

The future is bright. We're even looking forward to the next tour. That may not seem like much to a traveling band, but for us it's a big deal! Our structure for dealing with our songs has grown more efficient. We've been able to work with each other to set aside safe times for discussing these all-important feelings -- five minutes before each rehearsal ("I'm in a rotten mood because my 3-year-old can't play peek a boo") or even minutes at the end ("I wish you had paid more attention to my new fiddle breaks")! Now we are aware that there is fear and insecurity underlying most decisions. Over the past year, we've been encouraged to put our trust in others, to be honest with ourselves as a group, and to trust each other. This trust has been a great achievement, even if it's just beginning to pay off!

Drinker from page 28

music. Why, then, do women composers make a low priority in the musical world? I believe that there are many reasons, such as culture, symphonies, requiems, songs, dances equivalent to those that are created by women everywhere in other cultures? Why are we so inhibited? Drinker, in his "foreword" to the Notes at Smith College, lists the gaps in her study and admires, "Nor have I done more than touch upon the manifold activities of modern women in contemporary society, with the dissemination of advice, education, performance, and composition of music." Let's summarize what she does mention of "modern women" in this book. She mentions that women in music have a long tradition, especially in the past, and that a woman's music is therapeutic and beneficial to society. She says, "music is a healing art" and "music is a spiritual force." She credits women for their contributions to music and encourages women to express themselves through music. She emphasizes the importance of women's voices, and encourages women to use their voices, not just as a symbol of their identity, but as a means of expression. She also encourages women to use music as a form of communication, both as a means of expressing their emotions and as a means of connecting with others.