

# Autoharp

- **Belongs to the String Family**
- **Made of wood with wound metal strings**
- **A rhythm and lead instrument in Mountain Music**
- **The Autoharp's playing style is defined by Maybelle Carter**



A typical configuration of the Autoharp.

There is debate over the origin of the autoharp. A German immigrant in Philadelphia by the name of Charles F. Zimmermann patented in 1882 a design for a musical instrument that included mechanisms for muting certain strings during play. He named his invention the “autoharp”. Unlike later autoharps, the shape of the instrument was symmetrical, and the felt-bearing bars moved horizontally against the strings instead of vertically. It is not known if Zimmermann ever produced commercially any instruments of this early design. Karl August Gukijhkter of Markneukirchen, Germany had built a model that he called a “Volkszither” which most resembles the Autoharp played today. Gütter obtained a British patent for his instrument circa 1883-1884. Zimmermann, after returning from a visit to Germany, began production of the Gütter design in 1885 but with his own design patent number and catchy name. Gütter’s instrument became very popular and Zimmermann has often been mistaken as the inventor.

Maybelle Carter, affectionately known to family and fans as Mother Maybelle, was an American country musician. She was born Maybelle Addington on May 10, 1909 near Nickelsville, Virginia. On March 13, 1926, Maybelle married Ezra J. Carter. They had three daughters, Helen, Valerie June (better known as June Carter Cash), and Anita. She was a member of the original Carter Family, which was formed in 1927 by her brother-in-law, A. P. Carter, who was married to her cousin, Sara, also a part of the trio. Maybelle played autoharp and she created a unique sound for the group with her innovative ‘scratch’ style, where she used her thumb to play melody on the bass and middle strings, and her index finger to fill out the rhythm.



Mother Maybelle & her autoharp