

Introduction to Autoharp

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The autoharp is a “chorded zither,” preceded by countless similar laptop instruments that made it possible to play a chord with your left hand and pick a melody with your right. Most of them were invented in Bavaria and brought to America by German/American manufacturers.

C.F. Zimmerman did just that, blatantly “borrowing” a design from Bavarian builder Karl August Gütter. Ironically, Zimmerman’s real goal was to convert people to a new kind of musical notation. That’s why the chord bar labels on the earliest autoharps are so confusing.

Zimmerman’s product line went through two other companies, and was out of production before **Oscar Schmidt** bought it and registered the trademark “Autoharp,” although it was already in common use.

About the same time, string band members like **Sarah Carter** began using them. Sarah’s sister **Maybelle** chose a position that allowed her to stand during performances, holding her Model 73 twelve-chorder upright and reaching her left arm around the thing to press the chord bars.

The 12-chord **Model 73**, was manufactured in the hundreds of thousands with very few changes.

But then the **Rhythm Band** company introduced the **ChromaHarp**. It was much more ergonomic than the Model 73 because it was designed for upright playing.

The Oscar Schmidt company then updated their instruments with rounded edges and more room for strumming the strings above the chord bars. Autoharp fanciers call the older styles “**Type A**.” They call the post-sixties styles “**Type B**.” The strings are made differently, something you need to know if a string needs replaced.

In the sixties and seventies, both Oscar Schmidt and ChromaHarp produced many experimental models. By 1980, only the standard sizes were being produced, generally under the OS or ChromaHarp brand.

Custom manufacturers like **Evo Bluestein** and **Pete D’Aigle** make high-end professional instruments. Evo Bluestein also created the “**Sparrowharp**,” which is narrower and works great for folks with short arms. In Germany, the **Rosen** company, who has been making autoharps pretty much since they were invented, is still making high-end autoharps and other kinds of zithers.

Artists like **Bryan Bowers** have reconfigured the chord bars so they make more sense and play in more Folk- or Guitar-friendly keys like A and E, sacrificing Polka-friendly keys like Eb.

Other players who generally play in C, G, or D change the tuning of their autoharps so that strings like A, D, and G are doubled, giving a fuller sound. This is called **Diatonic Tuning**, and there are almost as many versions as there are players. They sacrifice chords and notes like Ab and notes like Bb, which are seldom used in those keys.

There are many **playing styles**. Zimmerman envisioned playing the instrument on your lap or a table, and playing both chords and individual notes on the short strings by the note name label.

Many upright players simply strum the strings like you would strum a guitar.

Some strum and play the melody at the same time – you figure out what chord you need to get the melody note you want, then you strum that chord so that the highest note you play is the melody note.

Players like Bryan Bowers wear finger picks and a thumb pick. They can use their fingers to strum the high notes while using their thumb to strum the low notes.

In other words, there is NO wrong way to play an autoharp, unlike some instruments whose owners assume their favorite technique is the only “right way.”

Sample Songs: (Most of these are usually sung a step higher, but not all autoharps can play songs in G or D)

C7 Gm (Bb)

I went down to **Old Joe Clark**'s, Never been there before.

C7 Gm (Bb) C

Stuck my toe in the table leg, stuck my nose in the butter.

C Gm (Bb)

Fair thee well, Old Joe Clark, Fair thee well, I say,

C Gm (Bb) C

Fair thee well, Old Joe Clark, I'll be back again some day. (These chords also work for “Shady Grove.”)

F C7 F

Buffalo Gals, won't you come out tonight, Come out tonight, Come out tonight.

F C7 F

Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight, and dance by the light of the moon.

F Bb F C7

Boil that Cabbage Down, boys, turn them hoe-cakes round.

F Bb F C7 F

The only song I ever did sing was “Boil that Cabbage Down.” (Repeat.)

F C7

The Fox Went Out on a chilly night; he prayed for the moon to give him light.

F Bb F C7 F C F

He had many a mile to go that night, before he reached the town, oh, town, oh town, oh!

Bb F C7 F

He had many a mile to go that night before he reached the town, oh!

F

It Takes a Worried Man to Sing a Worried Song

Bb F F (Dm)

It takes a worried man to sing a worried song. It takes a worried man to sing a worried song.

C7 F

I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long.