

INTRO TO AUTOHARP

Designed in Germany in 1880s, the autoharp found its way into North America through the factories of C.F Zimmerman, Dolge, Phonoharp, and Oscar Schmidt.

Designs stayed about the same until the very late 1960s, when Oscar Schmidt's "Type B" autoharps emerged with a more ergonomic design and up to 21 chords. Another company, RBI, began producing the Chromaharp line about the same time.

Many experimental models were also produced, but most autoharps made since 1995 have about the same shape and either 15 or 21 chords.

It's important to know that ***you can learn the basics on any playable autoharp!***

This handout excerpts content from the articles on HarpersGuild.com, including the "Your First Autoharp" articles here: https://harpersguild.com/playing/first_harp/first_harp.htm

A booklet that contains much more information targeted to the beginning autoharp owner/player can be downloaded from our Etsy shop: <https://www.etsy.com/shop/Folkarama>.

For the purposes of this workshop we'll assume that you have a playable autoharp with five or more cord bars, and it is cleaned and tuned (two issues addressed in our booklet).



Holding: Autoharps were originally designed to be played in the lap or on a table or stand. You'd push the chord bar buttons with the fingers of your left hand. With your right hand, you'd play the strings to the right of the chord bars.

But string band players in the early days of PA systems had to be able to move toward and away from the single microphone. So Maybelle Carter and others took to holding the autoharps in an upright position, reaching around with their left hand to push the buttons.

When Oscar Schmidt created the "Model B," they moved the chord bars down to make it easier to play the high strings "above" the chord bars.

Playing Chords – Simply using a flatpick to strum a tuned autoharp with any chord button turned down makes a great sound.

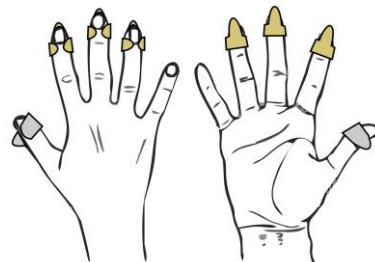


Holding the autoharp cradled in your left arm with your left hand over the buttons, push any button hard enough for the felts to settle against the strings. Strum the strings in your right hand, starting from the lower strings and going toward the high strings.

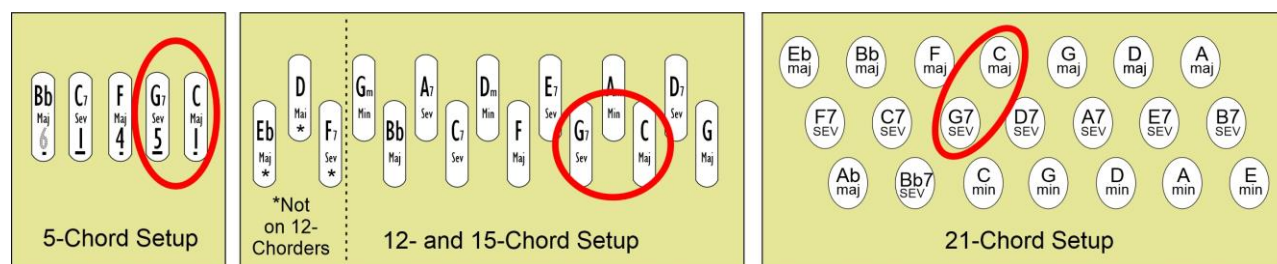
Then press another button as you release the first one and try again. You'll notice that if you strum before you push the next button all the way, you'll get noise, not music. But most people adapt quickly.

Practice this a few times, until you get the hang of strumming the strings (and maybe changing chords).

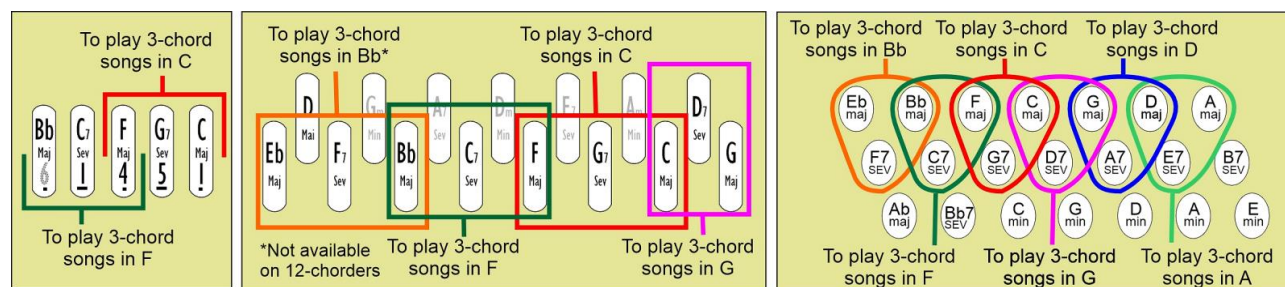
More advanced players tend to use fingerpicks and a thumbpick eventually. They usually strum upward with their thumb and downward with their finger, often in a sort of pinching motion.



Since the 1880s, autoharps have been designed to play 2- and 3-chord songs easily. As an example, 2-chord songs in C usually use C and G7. So, they are placed close together on most autoharps. There are several 2-chord songs in C in the following pages.



Many thousands of songs, including current pop songs use three chords. If you have more chords you can play in more keys, and you may be able to play more complex songs. For example, Bluegrass and Country songs in G often use Em, which is on a 21-chorder but not on a 12- or 15-chorder.



Transposing – You can see that the chords needed for 2- or 3-chord songs tend to be arranged in patterns. If a song is in a key you can't sing, or uses chords your autoharp doesn't have, you can usually just move your fingers over a couple buttons and play it in a different key.

Beyond 3-Chord Songs – Of course, more complex songs use more chords, so usually the more chords you have the more songs you can play in more keys. But most of what you learn on a 5-, 12-, or 15-chord autoharp will transfer directly to a 21-chorder.

Playing Melodies – As you get more familiar with your autoharp, you'll start to sense which strings play which notes, which helps you begin to pick out the melody to your songs as you play them. Countless YouTube videos can help you get started.

Repairing and Tweaking – Autoharps allow their owners to make many simple repairs and even modifications, with ordinarily household tools and supplies.

There are some "gotcha's" though. If you do "open up" your autoharp, be VERY careful not to lose the springs – they tend to find new homes in your carpet if they get a chance. Or worse yet, go into the hole. Also, if you have a 21-chord Oscar Schmidt, open it very slowly so the buttons more-or-less stay in place when you open it. And make certain any chord bar you remove is labeled so you won't have any trouble putting it back in place.

There are more tips about repairs and tweaking in our *Your First Autoharp* booklet and in our HarpersGuild.com articles, especially: https://harpersguild.com/playing/first_harp/first_harp.htm

- Paul Race, HarpersGuild.com, CreekDontRise.com, PaulRaceMusic.com

2- and 3-Chord Songs in C

Buffalo Gals

C C
Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight,
G7 C
Come out to-night, Come out tonight.
C C
Buffalo gals, won't you come out tonight,
G7 C
And dance by the light of the moon?

As I was walking down the street,
Down the street, down the street,
A pretty little gal I chanced to meet,
Oh, she was fair to view!

I danced with a dolly with a hole in her stockin',
And her heel kept a-rockin' and her toe kept a-
knockin',
I danced with a dolly with a hole in her stockin',
And we danced by the light of the moon!

Go tell Aunt Rhody,

C G7 C
Go tell Aunt Rhody, Go tell Aunt Rhody,
C G7 C
Go tell Aunt Rhody, The old gray goose is dead.

The one she's been saving, The one she's
been saving,
The one she's been saving, To make a feather
bed.

She died last Sunday, She died last Sunday,
She died last Sunday, Standing on her head.

He's Got the Whole World

C C C
He's got the whole world in his hands,
G7 C
He's got the whole world in his hands,
C C
He's got the whole world in his hands,
G7 C
He's got the whole world in his hands.

He's got the little bitty baby, etc.
He's got you and me, brother, etc.
He's got you and me, sister, etc.
He's got e-ver-y body, etc.

The Old Gray Mare

C C
The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be,
G7 C
Ain't what she used to be, Ain't what she used to be.
C C
The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be,
G7 C
Many long years ago.

Skip to My Lou

C
Lou, Lou, Skip to my Lou,
G7
Lou, Lou, Skip to my Lou,
C
Lou, Lou, Skip to my Lou,
G7 C
Skip to my Lou, my darling.

Lost my partner; what'll I do?, etc.

I'll get another one prettier than you, etc.

Oh, Dear, What Can the Matter Be

C
Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
G7
Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
C
Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
G7 C
Johnny's too long at the fair.

He promised to buy me a basket of posies,
A garland of lilies, a gift of red roses,
A little straw hat to set off the blue ribbons
To tie up my bonnie brown hair.

Paw-Paw Patch

C
Where, oh, where it pretty little Susie?
G7
Where, oh, where it pretty little Susie?
C
Where, oh, where it pretty little Susie?
G7 C
Way down yonder in the paw-paw patch.

Pickin' up paw-paws, put'n' 'em in her pocket,
etc.

2- and 3-Chord Songs in C

On Top of Old Smokey

C F C
On top of Old Smokey, all covered with snow,
G7 C
I lost my true lover. Came a courtin' too slow.

For courtin's a pleasure and partin's a grief,
And a false-hearted lover is worse than a thief.

For a thief will just rob you and take all you
have,
But a false-hearted lover will send you to your
grave.

Get Along Home, Cindy, Cindy

C
You ought to see my Cindy she lives way down
G7
South.
C F
She's so sweet the honey bees swarm around
C
her mouth.
C F
Get along home, Cindy, Cindy, Get along
C
home.
C F
Get along home, Cindy, Cindy;
C G7 C
I'll marry you some day.

And if had a needle and thread fine as I could
sew,
I'd sew that gal to my coat tails and down the
road I'd go.

And if I was a sugar tree standing in the town,
Each time my Cindy passed I'd shake some
sugar down.

Cindy got religion—she swung around and
round.
She got so full of glory, she knocked the
preacher down.

She loves me in the summertime,
She loves me in the fall,
If she don't love me all the time,
I want no love at all.

Crawdad Song

C
You get a line, and I'll get a pole, Honey.
G7
You get a line, and I'll get a pole, Baby.
C
You get a line, and I'll get a pole;
F
We'll go down to that crawdad hole
C G7 C
Honey, Pretty Baby, mine.

Whatcha you gonna do when the creek runs
dry, Honey? (etc.)
Sit on the bank, watch the crawdads die.
Honey, Pretty Baby mine.

Yonder come a man with a hole in his sack,
Honey! (etc.)
Look at those crawdads crawlin' back! (etc.)

Get up, old man you slept too late, Honey. (etc.)
Last piece of crawdad's on your plate! (etc.)

When the Saints Go Marchin' In

C
Oh, when the saints, Oh, when the saints,
C G7
Oh when the saints go marchin' in.
C F
Oh, I want to be in that number.
C G7 C
When the saints go marchin' in.

Oh when the sun refuse to shine, etc.

Camptown Races

C
The Camptown ladies sing this song, do-dah,
G7
do-dah,
C
Camptown race track's five miles long,
G7 C
Oh do-dah day.
C F
Goin' to run all night, Goin' to run all day
C
I bet my money on the bob-tailed nag.
G7 C
Somebody bet on the bay.

I came down here with my hat caved in, etc.
Went back home with a pocketful of tin, etc.