

# Guitar Styles of the Carter Family

Maybelle played guitar solos and backed up the singing on all the original Carter Family's recordings. She also sang harmony to Sara's lead vocal. Sara filled out the rhythm by strumming autoharp or playing a very basic, unornamented "Carter scratch" on guitar, and A.P. added bass vocals, rarely playing guitar.

## Tuning and Capos

Maybelle Carter favored the key of C, and she often used a capo or tuned her guitar several frets lower than usual in order to play in different keys while using the C chords and licks. For example, she capoed up four frets to play "Gathering Flowers from the Hillside" in the key of E; a C chord is really an E when you're capoed up four frets. She tuned down four frets to play "Can the Circle Be Unbroken" in the key of Ab, because a C chord is an Ab when you're tuned down four frets.

Throughout the transcriptions that follow, the chord letter-names above the music are in respect to Maybelle's guitar. For example, in "Can the Circle Be Unbroken," when she frets a C chord the letter-name written above the music is C, even though she's tuned low and the actual sounding chord is Ab.

Sometimes Sara's autoharp was tuned a bit high or low, and the women appeared to be playing in unusual keys, or "between keys" (e.g., somewhere between B and Bb). On "Little Moses," Sara played in Bb, but her Bb was so low that Maybelle had to tune down three frets (rather than two frets) to match the autoharp. (When the guitar is tuned two frets lower than usual, a C chord sounds like a Bb.)

## Extra Beats and Changing Tempos

Many Carter Family arrangements feature "extra bars," or bars with "extra" beats (bars of 6/4; the chorus of "Can the Circle Be Unbroken" offers a typical example). They sound "extra" to modern listeners because polished, contemporary players invariably smooth out these rough edges when they play tunes derived from mountain music. But these "irregularities" were a characteristic part of the '30s string band sound. The old-time bands added these beats on purpose, to tighten up the vocals (leaving shorter pauses) and to make the music less predictable and homogenized. Who says all songs have to be eight or sixteen bars long? Usually, the Carters used "extra" beats or bars consistently; for example, they played the same bars of 6/4 during every verse of "Circle," and left out the "extra" beats during guitar solos. Occasionally a bar was extended two beats because of the singer's momentary whim.

Tempos were flexible on Carter Family recordings. Tunes often picked up momentum and sped up, gradually. They also tended to speed up during instrumental solos and then slow down again, very slightly, for vocals. The tempo markings given at the beginning of each tune represent the song's "average" tempo.

## The Carter Scratch

Maybelle used a thumbpick and fingerpicks to play the "Carter Scratch," which is what she called her basic rhythm lick when she taught it to her daughter June and granddaughter Carlene Carter. She played melody and bass runs with her thumb and brushed down and up with her fingers. Carlene Carter says her grandmother's middle finger was constantly strumming. Countless guitarists have imitated the sound using a flat-pick.

Here's the basic lick:

1. Pick a bass string with your thumb.
2. Brush down on the two or three highest (treble) strings with the nail of your index or middle finger.
3. Brush up on the treble strings with your index or middle finger.

As in the example below, alternate thumb/bass notes when playing rhythm, picking the root and fifth (e.g., in the C chord below, play a bass C and then a bass G) or root and third (C and E).



Once the basic scratch lick flows smoothly, add another stroke between the first two: brush *up* on the treble strings with your index finger. This fills out the rhythm. Occasionally, Maybelle included the extra upstroke, often alternating it with the basic lick, as shown in her backup during the vocal in "Wildwood Flower." She played an upstroke on the treble strings between bass/melody notes, as well:

The Carter scratch with an extra upstroke:



Playing melody and brushing up on the treble strings:



Here's the Carter scratch in 3/4 (waltz) time:



## Bass Runs

Maybelle peppered her "Carter scratch" accompaniment with bass runs, which connect one chord to the next. Here are some of her favorites:

