

STUDENTS

# The Instruments of the 1927 Bristol Sessions

RESOURCE DOCUMENT





## SUMMARY OF CONTENT

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This document introduces students to the instruments that were commonly used in early country music and were played at the 1927 Bristol Sessions recordings. It provides a description of each instrument, information about its origins and how it came to America, how it is played, and the sound that it makes.

## INTRODUCTION

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The primary instruments played on 1927 Bristol Sessions recordings were the fiddle, banjo, and guitar, which are also the main string band instruments. Other instruments used include the mandolin, ukulele, autoharp, harp guitar, piano, harmonica, jaw harp, bones, and kazoo. Back in the early 1920s and 1930s, musicians often bought inexpensive instruments from **mail-order catalogs**, made the instrument themselves, or played an instrument that had been passed down through their family.

## THE THREE MAIN STRINGED INSTRUMENTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

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- FIDDLE
- BANJO
- GUITAR

## OTHER STRINGED INSTRUMENTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

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- MANDOLIN
- UKULELE
- AUTOHARP
- HARP GUITAR
- PIANO

## MOUTH AND PERCUSSIVE INSTRUMENTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

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- HARMONICA
- JAW HARP
- BONES
- KAZOO

## VOCABULARY LIST

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## THE THREE MAIN STRINGED INSTRUMENTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

### FIDDLE

#### Description

- Wooden four-stringed instrument
- Hourglass-shaped body with two f-shaped sound holes
- Short neck

#### Origins and route to America

- Originated in 16th-century Italy
- Brought to America by immigrants – especially those from England, Ireland, and Scotland – perhaps as early as the 17th century

#### How it is played

- Played with a bow
- Can also be strummed or plucked

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- Historically, the fiddle has also been called “the devil’s box” because it was associated with dancing and merry-making activities, which were often viewed as improper.



### BANJO

#### Description

- Four- or five-stringed instrument
- Animal hide or plastic stretched over a circular wooden or metal rim
- Long fretted neck

#### Origins and route to America

- Western Africa
- Brought to America by enslaved Africans in the late 1700s

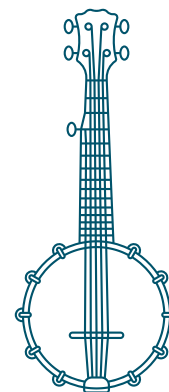
#### How it is played

- Different playing styles, but the two most common are [clawhammer](#) and [finger picking or 3-finger style](#)

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- The head of a banjo can also be used like a drum.



### GUITAR

#### Description

- Wooden six-stringed instrument
- Pear-shaped body
- Long fretted neck

#### Origins and route to America

- Spain
- Brought to America by Spanish explorers/settlers in the 1700s
- Became even more popular after guitars were brought back to the US by returning soldiers from World War I

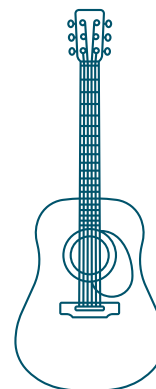
#### How it is played

- Strummed and picked
- Players may use their bare fingers or a variety of picks: thumb and finger picks that are worn or a rounded triangle-shaped pick that is held

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- The guitar is the most recognizable instrument used in all genres of music.





## OTHER STRINGED INSTRUMENTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

### MANDOLIN

#### Description

- Wooden eight-stringed instrument
- Tear drop-shaped body
- Short fretted neck

#### Origins and route to America

- Comes from the **lute** family and can be traced back to medieval period
- Evolved in Italy and Germany in the 18th century
- Brought to America by Italian and French immigrants and seen in Appalachia by the late 19th century

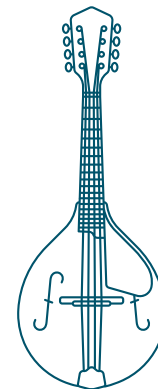
#### How it is played

- Strummed and picked
- To play one note, you pluck two strings at the same time; chords use multiple strings
- Most players use picks

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- Mandolin **orchestras** became popular during the early 20th century and consisted of numerous mandolin, guitar, and harp guitar musicians playing together.



### UKULELE

#### Description

- Wooden four-stringed instrument
- Looks like a miniature guitar

#### Origins and route to America

- Often viewed as a Hawaiian instrument due to its central role in the island's musical heritage
- Brought to Hawaii by Portuguese immigrants in the 1870s
- Introduced to mainland U.S. through "cultural **expositions**" or fairs in the early 20th century

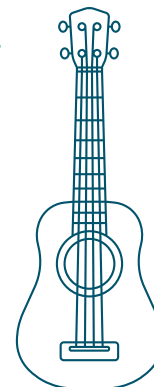
#### How it is played

- Strummed and fingerpicked

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- The name "ukulele" means "jumping flea," descriptive of the way a player's fingers seem to jump quickly across the strings.



### AUTOHARP

#### Description

- Wooden instrument, usually with 36 strings (but sometimes has 47 or 48)
- Wedge-shaped body
- Has 12, 15, or 21 chord bars (to be pushed down on strings to produce chords)

#### Origins and route to America

- German origins with an interaction between a German-American immigrant and a German native contributing to its development in the late 19th century

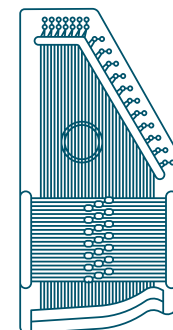
#### How it is played

- Primarily strum and use chord bars to produce different chords
- Use finger picks

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- Musicians play the autoharp by placing it in their lap or by putting it against their chest like they are holding a baby.





## OTHER STRINGED INSTRUMENTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

### HARP GUITAR

#### Description

- Wooden instrument
- Reflecting its name, it looks like a guitar with a classical curved **harp** shape attached as a second neck
- The guitar part has six-strings; the harp part has any number of strings, usually up to 12

#### Origins and route to America

- Its origins aren't entirely clear – there are similar instruments seen in Europe as early as 1650
- However, it primarily developed in America in the late 19th century

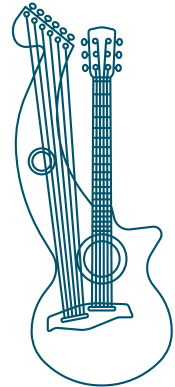
#### How it is played

- Strummed and fingerpicked

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- The strings attached to the “harp” neck are known as “floating strings” because they are **unfretted**.



### PIANO

#### Description

- Upright or grand-style stringed instrument
- 88 black-and-white keys
- Around 230 strings
- Metal foot pedals

#### Origins and route to America

- Invented in Italy in the early 1700s
- Seen in America by the late 18th century, possibly introduced by a German immigrant who was a piano maker

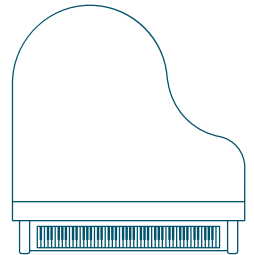
#### How it is played

- Press the keys individually and in chords
- Typically play rhythm with one hand and the melody with the other
- Use foot pedals to increase or soften sound

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- Steinway & Sons is one of the most well-known piano makers in the United States, and local company [Mapes Strings](#) in Elizabethton, Tennessee, makes their piano strings.





## MOUTH AND PERCUSSIVE INSTRUMENTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

### HARMONICA

#### Description

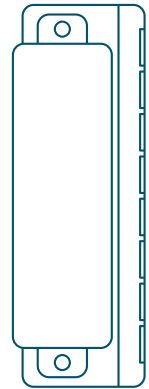
- Small, palm-sized metal rectangle
- Holes along one edge
- Called a “**free reed** instrument”

#### Origins and route to America

- First developed in the early 19th century in Vienna, Austria
- Supplied to the United States initially by a German maker in the 1860s

#### How it is played

- Blow into the holes and use one hand to muffle or project the sound; sound also changes based on how hard you blow
- Each hole is a different note and when played together, you can create harmonies
- When blown, the internal reed vibrates to produce sound



Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- Players often use the harmonica to produce train sounds like the lonely hoot of a train whistle or the chugging sound of train wheels on the rails.

### JAW HARP

#### Description

- Crossbow-shaped metal instrument
- Small bent metal tongue

#### Origins and route to America

- Thought to have Asian origins back to at least the medieval period
- Brought to America by European traders in the 17th century

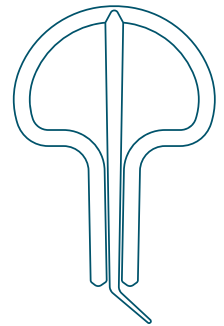
#### How it is played

- Hold frame of jaw harp against teeth and pluck the metal tongue to create different tones

Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- Jaw harps are often used in “jug bands,” musical groups that are made up of a variety of unusual instruments often made from every day items





## MOUTH AND PERCUSSIVE INSTRUMENTS AT THE 1927 BRISTOL SESSIONS

### BONES

#### Description

- Two slightly curved slats, approximately 6–8 inches long
- Look like rib bones of an animal
- Can be made from real bones (rib or shin bones of sheep or cow), wood, or plastic

#### Origins and route to America

- Found in several ancient cultures, including prehistoric Mesopotamia and Egypt, Greece, Roman Empire, and ancient China
- Brought to America by Irish and English immigrants in the 18th and 19th centuries

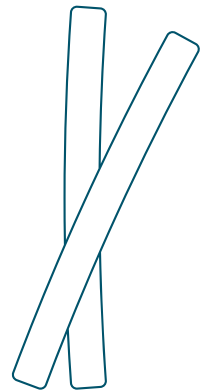
#### How it is played

- Hold two bones in one hand or two in each hand, similar to how you hold chopsticks for eating Asian food
- Move hands so that the bones knock against each other to different rhythms

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- African American musician El Watson played the bones on two Johnson Brothers recordings at the 1927 Bristol Sessions, and these are some of the earliest **integrated** country music recordings known.



### KAZOO

#### Description

- **Tapered** tube shape
- Circular piece on top (called the membrane hole)

#### Origins and route to America

- Related instruments are known in Africa and ancient Mexico
- Kazoo-like instruments were seen in North America as early as the 1800s, but the kazoo as we know it today has been attributed to an African American man who worked with a German clock manufacturer living in the U.S. to make his idea for this small instrument into a reality
- Later mass produced in America by other designers and companies

#### How it is played

- Player hums into the flattened end of the kazoo
- Can alter the sound by covering, in part or completely, the membrane hole

#### Sound it makes [LISTEN here](#)

#### Fun Fact

- Kazoos are known as membranophones because they have a membrane in the instrument that vibrates when the player hums. The early kazoo-related instruments in Africa had membranes made of spider egg silk, while those in Mexico had membranes made of corn husk.





## VOCABULARY LIST

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*\*The majority of these definitions are taken from Merriam-Webster.*

### **Clawhammer**

A style of banjo playing using the thumb and one or more fingers picking or strumming in a downward direction

### **Exposition**

A public exhibition or show

### **Free Reed**

A reed in a musical instrument (such as a harmonica) that vibrates in an opening just large enough to allow the reed to move freely

### **Fretted**

Has small, raised metal bars on the fingerboard to show the player where to put his/her fingers on the strings in order to produce different notes

### **Harp**

A plucked stringed instrument consisting of a resonator, an arched or angled neck that may be supported by a post, and strings of graded length that are perpendicular to the soundboard

### **Integrated**

Bring people or groups with particular characteristics or needs into equal participation in a group, institution, or activity

### **Lute**

A stringed instrument having a large pear-shaped body, a vaulted back, a fretted fingerboard, and a head with tuning pegs which is often angled backward from the neck

### **Mail-Order Catalogs**

Paper books or booklets listing items for sale from a particular store or company; items could then be ordered via letter or telephone and delivered to the buyer's home – similar to ordering online today

### **Orchestra**

A group of musicians organized to perform ensemble music; often refers to groups of stringed instrument players in particular

### **Tapered**

To become progressively smaller toward one end

### **Unfretted**

Lacking ridges or bars across the fingerboard of a stringed musical instrument