

# MAYBELLE CARTER

## THE 'MOTHER' OF COUNTRY MUSIC

“Mother” Maybelle Carter helped create modern country music. She was also a pioneering guitarist who brought the instrument out of the background and turned it into a country star.

Born Maybelle Addington on May 10, 1909, in tiny Nickelsville, Virginia, she was one of ten children in a musical family. Growing up, she played both the banjo and the autoharp, a string instrument with keys. Though the banjo and fiddle were far more popular instruments at the time, she was drawn to the guitar. Borrowing from her banjo skills, she taught herself a new way to play the guitar, plucking the melody with her thumb on the bass strings and strumming the rhythm on the high strings with her index finger. Called the “Carter Scratch,” the “Carter Lick,” or the “thumb brush” technique, it expanded the role of the guitar in country music and influenced countless guitar players.

Just before she turned seventeen, Maybelle married Ezra (nicknamed “Eck”) Carter. A year later, she joined her brother-in-law, Alvin Pleasant (A.P.) Carter, and his wife, Sara (who was also Maybelle’s cousin), to become the musical Carter Family. The trio performed traditional songs, including ones they’d grown up with, as well as original songs. Their best-known songs include “Can the Circle Be Unbroken,” “Wildwood Flower,” and their theme song, “Keep on the Sunny Side.”

Known today as the “First Family of Country Music,” the Carter Family recorded almost three hundred songs and had a large and diverse radio audience. Their down-home songs influenced country, folk, bluegrass, and even rock music through the decades. After the trio broke up, Maybelle formed a new group with her three teenage daughters, Anita, Helen, and June. Mother Maybelle



& the Carter Sisters became members of the Grand Ole Opry in 1950, and regularly performed on radio shows in Richmond, Virginia, and Knoxville, Tennessee. They continued to sing together into the 1970s.

The Carter Family was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1970. Two years later, younger generations discovered Maybelle Carter’s contributions to country music when she appeared on the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s landmark album *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*. One of several classic country and bluegrass performers who appeared on the record, she sang and played on new versions of four Carter Family classics, including the album’s title track.

Carter retired from music shortly before the death of her husband in 1975. Three years later, she died, at age sixty-nine, in Nashville. Her guitar, on display on the third floor, is one of the most precious jewels in the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum’s collection of artifacts and instruments.

### SOURCES

Bluegrass Hall of Fame; *The Bristol (Virginia) Herald Courier*; Encyclopedia of Country Music; Encyclopedia Virginia; National Public Radio; *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone? The Carter Family & Their Legacy in American Music* by Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg