

Diddley bow

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The **diddley bow** is a single-stringed [American instrument](#) which influenced the development of the [blues](#) sound. It consists of a single string of baling wire tensioned between two nails on a board over a glass bottle, which is used both as a [bridge](#) and as a means to magnify the instrument's sound.

It was traditionally considered a starter or children's instrument in the [Deep South](#), especially in the [African American](#) community, and is rarely heard outside the rural South, but it may have been influenced to some degree by [West African](#) instruments.^[1] Other nicknames for this instrument include "jitterbug" or "one-string", while an [ethnomusicologist](#) would formally call it a "[monochord zither](#)".

Origins

The diddley bow derives from instruments used in [West Africa](#). There, they were often played by children, one beating the string with sticks and the other changing the pitch by moving a slide up and down. The instrument was then developed as a children's toy by slaves in the United States. They were first documented in the rural South by researchers in the 1930s.^{[2][3]}

Construction

The diddley bow is typically homemade, consisting usually of a wooden board and a single wire string stretched between two screws, and played by plucking while varying the pitch with a metal or glass slide held in the other hand. A glass bottle is usually used as the bridge, which helps amplify the sound. The diddley bow was traditionally considered an "entry-level" instrument, normally played by adolescent boys, who then graduate to a "normal" [guitar](#) if they show promise on the diddley bow. However currently, the diddley bow is also played by professional players as a solo as well as an accompaniment instrument.

The diddley bow is significant to [blues](#) music in that many blues guitarists got their start playing it as children, as well as the fact that, like the [slide guitar](#), it is played with a slide. However, because it was considered a children's instrument, few musicians continued to play the diddley bow once they reached adulthood. The diddley bow is therefore not well represented in recordings.

Notable users

One notable performer of the instrument was the [Mississippi](#) blues musician [Lonnie Pitchford](#), who used to demonstrate the instrument by stretching a wire between two nails hammered into the wood of a vertical beam making up part of the front porch of his home. Pitchford's headstone, placed on his grave in 2000 by the [Mt. Zion Memorial Fund](#), is actually designed with a playable diddley bow on the side as requested by Pitchford's family.