

James Burton

Although not very well known by the general public, James Burton is acknowledged by many in the industry as one of the best and most influential guitarists of the rock era. He has worked with many of the great names in the history of music in the latter half of the Twentieth Century.

He was born in Minden, Louisiana in 1939, and moved to Shreveport, Louisiana with his family at age ten. James Burton learned to play the guitar and to love music at an early age. Like many other musicians who came from the South, he found his way to the Louisiana Hayride radio program in the 50's. There he served as a backup musician for some of the bigger names on the bill, such as George Jones, Slim Whitman, and others. He made contact with another Louisiana born musician named Dale Hawkins, and Burton's guitar solo on Hawkins' 1957 hit *Suzie Q* made people begin to notice that this was a teenager with a lot of talent.

James Burton went on to work as a backup musician with Bob Luman for a while, then headed for the West Coast and began a long, successful collaboration with Ricky Nelson. Burton played guitar in a picking style similar to guitarists who recorded on the Sun label, such as Scotty Moore and Carl Perkins. One example of this style is very much in evidence on Nelson's top ten hit from 1958 *Believe What You Say*. Partly as a result of his work with Burton, Ricky Nelson went on to a smoother country rock style of music. Burton can be seen in the background, playing guitar, on some of the musical interludes on the old *Ozzie & Harriet* television shows on which Nelson starred with his parents.

By the mid-60's James Burton had established himself and was highly regarded in the music industry. He left Ricky Nelson's band and was recruited to help start a band to work with Elvis Presley, when Presley returned to performing live in 1969. Burton worked with Presley until the latter's death in 1977, and continued to do session work. He was in demand, and worked with many big names in rock and country circles, including artists such as Randy Newman, Buffalo Springfield, Hoyt Axton, Judy Collins, and many others.

In the 1970's he worked with Gram Parsons, one of the prime movers in the

emerging country rock style of music. Burton played on Parsons' albums *GP* and *Grievous Angel*. After Parsons' death in 1973, Burton went with the Hot Band formed by Parsons' girlfriend, Emmylou Harris. His work came to be appreciated by a new generation of fans. His first loyalty during this time was to Presley's ensemble, but he toured with Harris when time allowed. Burton came to be known for some outstanding guitar solos.

He had established a pattern of remaining loyal over several years to artists with whom he enjoyed working, and began to play this time with John Denver. He played a variety of different types of guitars, most notably, the Fender Telecaster. He never had a top forty hit of his own and recorded only two albums under his own name, *Corn Pickin' and Slick Slidin'* in the 60's and *The Guitar Sounds of James Burton* in the early 70's.

James Burton has had a long and varied career, working with many of the great names in the music business. He has worked hard and established himself among the best guitarists, while remaining out of the limelight. He is acknowledged by many as a major influence on the evolution of country rock.