



JAMES BURTON



James Burton (born August 21, 1939 in Minden, Louisiana) is a legendary American guitarist and member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He moved to Shreveport, Louisiana, with his family in 1949.

A natural guitarist without professional training, Burton started playing seriously by the time he was thirteen years old and a year later was hired to be part of the staff band for the enormously popular Louisiana Hayride radio show in Shreveport. A Telecaster player, while still only fifteen, Burton played on Dale Hawkins 1957 hit song "Suzie Q," a record that would become one of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's 500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll.

Burton has played for numerous important musicians including early work with Rick Nelson between 1958 and 1965 after which Bob Dylan reportedly wanted to hire him for his first touring band, but Burton was under contract to the television program Shindig.

James Burton was also a guitarist and the band leader of Elvis Presley's "TCB Band" from 1969 until Presley's death in 1977. A hallmark of Elvis' live shows was when he would turn to James as particular songs reached their bridges and say, "Play it, James," and Burton would begin his masterful lead guitar solos.

Burton's later career included landmark work with Merle Haggard, Gram Parsons, and Emmylou Harris, among others. In 1988, he was a prominent part of the acclaimed Cinemax special, Roy Orbison and Friends, A Black and White Night.

In 2001, James Burton was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, his induction speech given by fan, Keith Richards. His pioneering contribution to the genre has also been recognized by the Rockabilly Hall of Fame.

Burton left Shreveport for Los Angeles, California while in his teens after joining Ricky Nelson's band. He moved back to Shreveport permanently in 1990.

From 1998-2005, Burton played lead guitar in "Elvis-The Concert" which reunited some of Elvis' former TCB bandmates, background singers and Elvis' orchestral



conductor (mostly from the "concert years" 1969-1977) live on stage with a state of the art video-projected Elvis. The historic show was critically acclaimed throughout the world.

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HIGHLIGHTS:

- James Burton picked up a guitar at age 13** and was given an early Fender Telecaster by his father in 1952, and he was soon making people sick with how good he could play the thing. His first recorded work was playing on the original "Suzy Q" for Dale Hawkins.
- 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 (1958 to 1965). 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.
- The Ricky Nelson period** that followed remains one of the most innovative stages in the development of rockabilly guitar. Although at times Ricky was clearly emulating the classic Sun recordings by Elvis and Carl Perkins, whom he greatly admired, tracks such as "Believe What You Say," "It's Late," "Shirley Lee," "Milkcow Blues," and "Hello Mary Lou" are clearly milestones due to their self-assured precision and tonal development. Burton's round, full bass notes and crystalline, hard-driving highs wrote the book for state-of-the-art Fender tone. "I had a Fender Deluxe and a Twin at that time," James specifies, "but I was using a Fender Vibrasonic with a 15" Lansing speaker quite a bit on the early sessions with Ricky. I've still got that amp. I also used a Fender Concert a lot. I liked a lot of presence and clear notes; I didn't really like that fuzzy or thin sound. Those early records required a bright sound, not the Buck Owens sound. But when you played chords, you had to have a lot of highs to get the fullness."
- "Believe What You Say,"** with its raunchy string-bending and commanding tone, was the



first song to feature Burton on lead. As Ricky told *Guitar Player*, "I think he was probably the first to come up with anything like slinky strings. When we recorded 'Believe What You Say,' I remember him coming into the studio and going, 'Hey, listen to this!' He'd put banjo strings on his guitar so that he could bend them way up.

- **James replaced Scotty Moore as Elvis Presley's guitarist** when Elvis from 1969 until Elvis died.

The inaugural use of the paisley Telecaster was in Las Vegas at the International Hotel, an event that was recorded and released as a live album, *Elvis In Person at the International Hotel, Las Vegas*.

- **Burton hooked up with Gram Parsons**, an ex-Byrd (from the Sweetheart of the Rodeo era, for his post-Flying Burrito Brothers solo work.

- **James 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.

- **James' interest in the steel guitar** later led him to pursue the slide dobro, an instrument he commands with skillful precision. The dobro became his ace-in-the-hole for studio calls in the '60s, and producers would come to demand the Burton dobro sound as much as his other guitar playing.

- **Burton's technique** is as singular as his musical prowess. Armed with a Fender medium flatpick between his thumb and index finger and a National fingerpick on his middlefinger, his self-taught style befuddles onlookers. "It's just the way I started doing it," he shrugs. "I didn't notice anything peculiar until I went into a music store one day and some guy said, 'Man, you're doing it all wrong.'"

- **James recalls that the discovery was made** in an effort to facilitate smoother string-bending for his bluesy style: "It was the perfect balance all the way across the fretboard. I could use the four light banjo strings, and then just regular D and A strings for the fifth and sixth strings. It was so easy to go from one string to another. I said, 'This is for me,' and I had them gauged and started using them all the time."



- **Burton also occasionally uses nonstandard tunings** on his Telecaster: "Sometimes I tune the sixth string down to C. You might have heard that on Rodney Crowell's version of 'Ain't Living Long Like This' [Ain't Living Long Like This, Warner Bros., BSK-3228]. It's in the key of G." Another clever technique that Burton incorporates on that song is a high harmonic pitch bend. A high G harmonic is picked at the 5th fret of the third string, and then the string is pushed down with the left hand behind the nut to raise the note to a B harmonic. It's a technique that Burton has used as long as he can remember.



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Posted May, 2006

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