

# James Burton

**Induction Year: 2001**

**Induction Category: Sidemen**

Inductee: James Burton (guitar; born August 21, 1939)

The tart, twangy tone of James Burton's Fender Telecaster guitar has been a defining element of the rock and roll sound from 1957 to the present. The lengthy list of stars whom he's accompanied on record and onstage includes Rick Nelson, [Elvis Presley](#), Emmylou Harris, and John Denver. But those were just his long-term employers. As a hard-working session musician on the busy Los Angeles scene of the mid-to-late Sixties, Burton played anonymously on countless records by the likes of [the Everly Brothers](#), Beach Boys, Sonny and Cher, Merle Haggard, Buck Owens, the Fifth Dimension and Phil Spector's stable of artists. His signature sound combines flatpicking and fingerpicking on a Fender Telecaster, resulting in a fluid, sustained melodicism evocative of pedal steel guitar and taut, staccato bursts of notes known as "chicken pickin'." Burton is also adept on pedal steel and dobro, and he brings the distinctive qualities of those instruments to his guitar work. His overdubbed dobro duet on Buffalo Springfield's "A Child's Claim to Fame" is considered a classic.

The fusion of country and R&B into a fundamental rock and roll sound stems from Burton's upbringing in Shreveport, Louisiana. Burton tuned into R&B on the radio and got exposed to country music via the Louisiana Hayride. This widely syndicated radio show - which launched the careers of [Hank Williams](#), [Elvis Presley](#), [Johnny Cash](#) and others - originated at local radio station KWKH. Burton, a self-taught musician who bought his signature red 1953 Telecaster at age thirteen, joined the house band of the Louisiana Hayride in the mid-Fifties, backing guests and regulars like George Jones and Johnny Horton. In 1957, he played the inimitable guitar licks on Dale Hawkins' "Suzie Q," a swamp-rock classic whose music he claims to have composed. From there, Burton backed rockabilly singer Bob Luman and was then recruited by [Ricky Nelson](#), who heard him playing down the hall at his record company. Burton remained with Nelson from 1958 to 1965, anchoring the teen idol's sound with his crackling, controlled solos and chord work. Nelson's closing musical performances on *Ozzie & Harriet*, the weekly family sitcom on which he starred, were required viewing for budding rock and rollers, and Burton could be seen bopping right beside him.

He pursued several intensive years of session work in the mid-to-late Sixties and also served a mid-Sixties stint as guitarist in the Shindogs the house band for *Shindig*, a prime-time rock and roll TV show. In 1969, Burton received a call from [Elvis Presley](#), asking Burton to join his band. Presley, a professed fan, told Burton he watched *Ozzie and Harriet* every week to see him play with [Ricky Nelson](#). This same year, a Fender guitar decorated in pink paisley was designed for Burton. It would become his guitar of choice in the studio.

## Essential Recordings

Susie-Q, by Dale Hawkins  
 Believe What You Say, by Ricky Nelson  
 Red Cadillac and a Black Mustache, by Bob Luman  
 A Child's Claim to Fame, by Buffalo Springfield  
 Someday Soon, by Judy Collins  
 Too Far Gone, by Emmylou Harris  
 Working Man Blues, by Merle Haggard  
 Open Up Your Heart and Let the Sun Shine In, by Buck Owens  
 Las Vegas, by Gram Parsons  
 Mystery Train (live, 1970), by Elvis Presley

## Recommended Reading

"Play It, James!"  
 Colin Escott. *Goldmine* (October 4, 1991): 14-18  
 +.

"James Burton: First Call for the Royalty of Rockabilly."  
 Steve Fisheli. *Guitar Player* (June 1984).



**David Bowie's Red Vinyl Platform Boots, 1970s**

*Photo by Design Photography  
 Collection of David Bowie*

Burton served as Presley's lead guitarist and bandleader from 1969 until his death in 1977. Burton also played with Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris, joining the latter's Hot Band during his downtime with Presley. Burton subsequently toured for many years with John Denver and also became part of Jerry Lee Lewis's road band in the early Eighties. In the course of his career, he released one duet album (with pedal steel player Ralph Mooney, of Buck Owens band) and one bonafide solo album (The Guitar Sounds of James Burton). But he steadfastly remained a consummate rock and roll sideman the best in the business, according to many, demonstrating versatility, taste and technique.

According to Burton, who has lately returned to session work, the secret to making a great record is teamwork. No one guy in the group is making it happen, Burton told writer Steve Fisheli. It's team playing. As for his own approach to the guitar, it's not how much you play; it's what you play and where you play it. It's usually what you don't play that makes it.

## TIMELINE

August 21, 1939: James Burton was born.

1955 or 1957: Dale Hawkins' swamp-rock classic, "Susie-Q," is released. Guitarist James Burton provides the snaky signature riff and searing solo.

1956: [Ricky Nelson](#) hears James Burton playing guitar in the office of Imperial Records in Los Angeles. Burton is asked to join Nelson's backup band and regularly appears in the closing musical segments on the Ozzy and Harriet TV sitcom.

April 6, 1965: The TV show 'Shindig' debuts, featuring guitarist James Burton as a member of the house band, the Shindogs.

1966: 'Corn Pickin' and Slick Slidin', by guitarist James Burton and pedal steel player Ralph Mooney, is released.

1969: [Elvis Presley](#) returns to the road. His guitarist and bandleader is James Burton, who will remain with Presley until his death in 1977.

1971: James Burton's lone solo album, 'The Guitar Sounds of James Burton,' is cut with the cream of Nashville session musicians and [Elvis Presley's](#) producer, Felton Jarvis.

1977: After the death of [Elvis Presley](#), James Burton begins a long-term association with John Denver as his guitarist and bandleader.

March 19, 2001: James Burton is inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at the sixteenth annual induction dinner. Keith Richard is his presenter.