

BIOGRAPHY

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On August 21, 1939, James Burton was born in Dubberly, Louisiana, but he grew up in Shreveport. His first guitar was a Rex, then a Stella, but it was in a J&S Music store in Shreveport where he first saw the '53 Fender Telecaster and knew that this was the guitar for him. He used to listen to KWKH in Shreveport. Through KWKH, Burton was exposed to Chet Atkins, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddly, Elmore James, Lightnin' Hopkins, etc. At only 14, Burton went professional, working club gigs and private parties. He would skip school just to be able to play guitar.

Money was something he didn't think about, it was just for the thrill of playing. To play in those clubs, you had to go to the police station to get a permit if you were underage. Horace Logan was the producer of the Louisiana Hayride and he asked if James wanted to do some shows and join the staff band. James was 14 at the time. At the Hayride, he played behind guys like George Jones, Jimmy and Johnny, Billy Walker and Johnny Horton. He remained with the Hayride for about a year. He became fascinated with the steel guitar. He and Hayride steel guitar player Sonny Trammell would switch licks, James would play steel licks and Trammell would play guitar licks. His interest in steel guitar would later led him to pursue the slide dobro.

Before recording the song that would put him on the map forever, Burton recorded with a few local artists at Mira Smith's RAM Records in Shreveport. There he recorded many songs with artists like Joe Osborne, Joe then still playing guitar instead of bass, James Wilson, with whom he made his recording debut on lead guitar, Leon Post, Charlotte Hunter and Larry Lincoln, with whom he formed the band Larry Bamburg and The Louisiana Drifters. All these recordings can be found on the album Shreveport High Steppers.

In '55 James was playing with the **Dale Hawkins** band. They recorded a demo tape of "See You Soon Baboon" at the KWKH studio. The owner of Stan's Record Shop, Stan Lewis, was impressed and signed them to a management deal and hawked them to Chess Records. In '57, Burton recorded "Suzie Q" with Dale Hawkins. Burton wrote the lick and Hawkins put the lyrics to it. After he left Hawkins, Burton was playing around town when he got a call from Horace Logan, manager of the Hayride and also **Bob Luman**. Logan felt that Luman had the style and look and he knew Burton had the licks to complement him. Burton, James Kirkland and Luman tested the waters on a few Hayride shows and then started to work together. With a few hit singles released like "My Gal is Red Hot" and "A Red Cadillac and A Black Mustache, Logan arranged for the band to do a movie in Hollywood, called "Carnival Rock". Logan also made sure that Bob Luman and The Shadows, as the band was now called, had a semi regular spot on Town Hall Party. A DVD of Luman's appearances there was released in 2003. [Back to top](#).

While in Hollywood with Luman, **Ricky Nelson** heard them rehearse and shortly after that, James got a telegram, asking him and bass player James Kirkland to meet Ricky Nelson. They were offered to be on the Ozzie and Harriet show as Nelson's backing band. Both agreed to do it, and before Burton knew it, he was living with the Nelson's. Ozzie and Harriet had invited him to stay at their home. Burton lived there for about 2 years, before finding his own place.

During his time with Ricky, James performed at Town Hall Party together with Bob Luman. Their live recording of 'My Baby Walks All Over Me' and 'Milk Cow Blues' can be found on the 'Rockin' At Town Hall' album. Burton's first recording with Nelson was "Waiting in School" / "Stood Up". Joe Maphis played lead and James played rhythm. After this, Burton took over from Maphis and played on every record until 1967. "Believe What You Say" was Burton's first record with Nelson, on which he played lead.

Burton style of playing has always been very distinct. He uses a straight pick and a fingerpick on his middle finger. On this record, James replaced his first 4 strings with banjo strings and moved the A and D string up to D and E. He later had them gauged.

While working with Nelson, Burton also found time to record with Glen Campbell. Burton played dobro on Campbell's 1963 album "Big Bluegrass Special". This is probably the first album on which Burton played dobro. While taking a break from a session with Nelson, Burton and Joe Osborn (Nelson's bass player after James Kirkland left) recorded 3 instrumental songs. "Fireball Mail"/"Daisy Mae"/"Bimbo". The songs were released as **singles** on the Fabor label under the name "Jim and Joe". Also recorded in 1963 was Burton's solo single "Swamp Surfer"/"Everybody Listen's to the Dobro". It was released under the name of Jimmy Dobro.

Still working with Nelson, Burton also found time to record with artists like Dean Martin, Bobby Darin and The Everly Brothers.

Burton was under contract with Ricky Nelson, so he couldn't do much outside work. But because of his work with Ricky on songs like "Hello Mary Lou" and "Travelin' Man", Burton was an increasingly in-demand guitar player. In '65, Burton got a call from Johnny Cash to play dobro on a TV pilot for a new musical show called "**Shindig**". Nelson wasn't too happy about the fact that Burton would leave him, but after a while, Nelson's manager gave Burton the go-ahead.

The television exposure served as a catalyst for James' rising session demand. Calls came in from all sectors of the music field. Burton would be doing 4 to 6 sessions a day and sometimes up to 25 sessions a week! He does regret that he never kept a log of all the sessions he did, and since record jackets from the 60's rarely gave credit to sessionmen, his work is mostly undocumented. "I was busy 24 hours a day, seven days a week," said Burton. "Sometimes I felt like a walking zombie, but all the different styles kept the music interesting."

Burton was called to play on a session with Merle Haggard and Buck Owens, in Bakersfield, California. Burton helped creating the 'Bakersfield sound' while playing with them. On those sessions, he also met pedal steel player Ralph Mooney, with whom he would record his first solo album in 1969. In 1968, James was nominated for the **Country Music Award** for Best Lead Guitar, but it would take 10 years and 7 nominations before Burton finally won the award for Best Guitar Player.

James was asked to feature on the special 'Elvis', better know as the '68 Comeback Special, but at the time, he was working with Frank Sinatra and therefore was unavailable. But when **Elvis Presley** called him in '69 to put up a band for his Las Vegas engagement, he was there. It was a very tough decision to make, since his studio career was very busy and very lucrative. Burton had already turned down an offer by Bob Dylan to go on tour. Sessions were usually booked three months in advance, so Presley gave Burton a few months to get the band together. Burton would remain with Elvis until Elvis' untimely death in 1977. **Back to top.**

In the 70's, Burton was still one of the most in-demand guitar players. In 1971, Burton was in the studio to record with Elvis. When Elvis didn't show up because he was ill, the producer saw an opportunity to record James' second solo album: "The Guitar Sounds of James Burton". Burton wasn't too satisfied with the result. He felt he didn't have enough time to write.

In 1972, Gram Parsons contacted James. Gram had a deal to do an album and he really wanted James on it. It was at these sessions that he met **Emmylou Harris**. Gram died in 1973 and in 1974, Emmylou Harris had signed with Warner Music. They had told her to get a 'hot band'. She did. She recorded her debut album in 1975, titled "Pieces of the Sky". Because she wanted Burton and Glen D. Hardin, who at that time was also working for Presley, on tour with her, she carefully planned her tours around Elvis'. Tough touring with Presley and Emmylou Harris kept Burton busy, he still had much session work. The Hot Band did sessions for producer Brian Ahern, including sessions for Jonathan Edwards, Rodney Crowell, Mary Kay Place and Jesse Winchester. Other sessions included (all) members of Presley's TCB Band for artists like Bob Mosley J.J. Cale and Hoyt Axton.

Presley's death came as a shock to James, but instead of doing nothing, he dove head-on into session work. Shortly before Presley's death, Burton got a call from **John Denver**. He wanted to do a television special with him. During the taping, Denver asked if he wanted to go on an European tour. After Presley's death, Burton got the call for an album. He remained with Denver for 15 years. He was also part of Denver's Wildlife Concert in 1995.

In 1978, The TCB Band, Presley's back up band, recorded an album, called "The TCB Band". Every member sings a few songs on this album. Unfortunately, this album was never released. In '79, Burton recorded an album with Jerry Lee Lewis, another collaboration that would last for years to come. **Back to top.**

As the 70's came to an end, Burton was still going strong. The sessions went on. Artists like Kenny Rogers, Elvis Costello and Johnny Cash were eager to have him on their records. He toured with Jerry Lee Lewis and with John Denver. Due to the amount of storage space on Lewis' Lear jet, Burton toured with only his Paisley Telecaster. With Denver, he carried several instruments, including backup dobro's and a spare Telecaster. The Lear also lacks space for heavy amplifiers, so they had to be provided by the promoter each night, something Burton isn't too happy with. "It isn't necessarily my sound sometimes. I just can't get the sound of a Fender Twin out of something else."

In 1986, Burton teamed up with singer/songwriter Elvis Costello. Burton played on Costello's King of America album and also toured with him. **Here** you'll find a review for one of the shows in '87. Burton would appear on 4 albums by Costello.

In 1987, Roy Orbison did a highly acclaimed television special which was stunningly filmed in Black and White. Elvis Presley' TCB

Band was the back up band with, of course, James on lead. Other guests were, Elvis Costello, Bruce Springsteen and Tom Waits among others. "It's not every day that you get to sing harmony with Roy Orbison and play guitar next to James Burton", said Springsteen after the show. [Back to top](#).

With the 90's came the long anticipated release of an instructional video. In the video, Burton explains how he played his most well known solos, like Hello Mary Lou, and Too Far Gone to name a few. At the end of the video, Burton plays a 3 minute instrumental that is worth the price of the video all by itself.

In the 90's, Burton had a severe accident. He was cutting a limb off a tree, but he lost his balance and slipped. He broke both his ankles. A plate and a half-dozen screws were needed to repair Burton's left ankle, while two long screws were inserted into his right ankle. While in the hospital, he went in a coma for 10 days. Fortunately, he recovered and is doing fine now.

In 1995, longtime conservation enthusiast, John Denver performed this concert in celebration of the 100th Anniversary of the Wildlife Conservation Society. The show was called The Wildlife Concert, and is available on video and dvd.

Sessions aren't as busy as they once used to be. Apart from the sessions he does, he also has time to tour, and make appearances at guitar shows.

August 1997 marked the 20th anniversary of Elvis Presley's death. The idea of doing a live Elvis concert with Presley on a big screen sounded great to Burton. Once again he was playing with Elvis and this time, they would go all over the world. [Back to top](#).

After 45 years in the recording business, the millennium ended, but the 2000's had more in store for James. Burton makes frequent appearances at fan club conventions mostly in Europe. But in 2001 came the recognition he should have gotten years ago: James was inducted into the [Rock and Roll Hall of Fame](#) in March of 2001. Keith Richards, Rolling Stones guitarist and long time Burton fan, inducted James. "I never bought a Ricky Nelson album, I bought a James Burton album".

In 2001, Burton also teamed up with fellow Nelson band mate Joe Osborn, to record Osborn's christmas album: "Joy to the World".

2005 was the year of James' guitar festival. This 3-day benefit featured artists like Steve Cropper, Jerry Donahue, the Nelson Twins, Brad Paisley and many more. The proceeds went to the James Burton foundation. The foundation is dedicated to providing musical scholarships and instruments to children as well as young adults. A website for the foundation was launched and can be found at www.jamesburtonmusic.com. 2005 also saw the release of James' solo project 'God Loves You'. A spiritual album featuring James on both guitar and vocals. The album hasn't been officially released yet, but that will change soon, hopefully.

In March of 2007, James' second guitar festival took place in Shreveport. [Back to top](#).

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