



[Elvis Home](#)

[Elvis Reviews](#)

[Elvis Articles](#)

[Elvis CD News](#)

[Elvis DVD News](#)

[Elvis Book News](#)

[Elvis News](#)

[Elvis Shop](#)

Audio & Video

[Elvis Music & Video](#)

Quick Links

[Elvis Interviews](#)

[Elvis One Billion Records](#)

[Australian Album Charts](#)

[Australian Singles Charts](#)

[Elvis' Australian Chart Facts](#)

[Elvis Movies](#)

[Elvis Biography](#)

[Colonel Tom Parker](#)

[Lisa Marie Presley](#)

[Priscilla Presley](#)

[Elvis Presley Ringtones](#)

[Elvis Presley In Concert](#)

[Graceland](#)

[Graceland Cam](#)

Articles by Author

[Geoffrey Mc Donnell](#)

[Scott Jenkins](#)

[Nick Keene](#)

[Paul Simpson](#)

[Mark Cunliffe](#)

[David Neale](#)

Services

[Contact Us](#)

[Help](#)

[RSS Newsfeed](#) | [About](#)

[Subscribe RSS Email Update](#)

[News Feed for Websites](#)

Search

All Categories

Pictures



[Elvis Pictures](#)

© Elvis Australia 2007

[Previous page](#) | [Home](#) > [Elvis Articles](#)

James Burton - First Call For The Royalty Of Rockabilly

By: Steve Fishell - March 20, 2004
Source: Guitar Player

James Burton is the consummate sideman of his generation. As a lead specialist, he virtually set the standard for country-rock a decade before the genre even existed. A master of understatement, he has elevated the lead guitar fill to art form status. And Burton is one of the few guitarists (if not the only one) to forge a lucrative session career after tasting fame as a teen guitar star. Unlike the Larry Carltons, Steve Lukathers, and Lee Ritenours, who catapulted from distinguished studio careers to pop and rock stardom, Burton shifted gears into reverse, from high visibility as Ricky Nelson' right-hand man onstage, in the studio, and on television to the less glamorous confines of the recording studio-playing on TV and film scores, radio jingles, and record dates.

His first recording session was Dale Hawkins' 1957 hit 'Suzy-Q', featuring James' hypnotic signature riff and searing, string-pushing solos. Since then, Burton has played on one ground-breaking session after another in a career that spans almost 30 years - an imposing length of time to remain successful in any business, let alone the rarified, high- pressure atmosphere of the studio.

In the '50s, he was the smiling Telecaster- slinger at Ricky Nelson's side every week on *The Adventures Of Ozzie And Harriet*, one of the first television series to regularly feature rock and roll. With country singers Merle Haggard and Buck Owens, he helped define the now-famous 'Bakersfield sound' in the early and mid '60s. Then it was back to the TV screen, as a member of Shindig's house band, the Shindogs. A few years later, visionary singer/songwriter Gram Parsons hired Burton's services for what was to become one of the seminal country-rock albums. Shortly thereafter, he helped Emmylou Harris' *Hot Band* live up to its name. In 1969 when Elvis Presley decided to go back on the road for his first live appearances in years, James Burton was the logical choice to lead the band.

These days-juggling the touring sche- dules of John Denver and one of Elvis' contemporaries, Jerry Lee Lewis - he continues to inspire the guitar community at large. Albert Lee, three-time winner of the Guitar Player Reader's Poll as Best Country Guitarist, told GP in his May'81 cover story that James' velvet touch made big waves in England in the late '50s: "I thought, 'How was he doing that?' I never knew that anyone could play with an unwound third string. All of those solos [on Ricky Nelson's records] just knocked me out, everything he did, because it was really alien to me at the time."

From the King and the Killer to the Chairman Of The Board, Burton's studio and road credentials are a veritable who's who of the pop, country, and rock and roll genres. Although he is best known as a country and rock specialist, his studio chops have fueled a wide range of projects by artists as diverse as Nat King Cole, **Johnny Cash**, the Byrds, **Tom Jones**, **Waylon Jennings**, Henry Mancini, Judy Collins, the Supremes, Johnny Mathis, Buffalo Springfield, Ray Charles, the Commodores, the Monkees, Kenny Rogers, **Dean Martin**, and Frank Sinatra. "I play many different types of music", he explains, "and I think that's the secret of being a studio musician - making a smooth transition from one style to another. Being a rock and roller doesn't mean specifically that you're only into rock and roll".

Being a 'versatile specialist' may seem like a contradiction in terms, but over the years Burton has laid down one example after another of an immediately identifiable stylist fitting into a variety of settings. Who can forget the sputtering, syncopated solos on Merle Haggard's 'The Lonesome Fugitive' or 'Working Man's Blues', the subtle fills on Emmylou Harris' 'Too Far Gone', or the trademark chicken pickin', spitting style on Elvis' live comeback version of 'Mystery Train'? Burton has refined his country and rock and roll chops with equal mastery: He is equally poised curling a tasty signature flourish around a ballad's chorus line or plunging pell-mell into a double-time country cooker.

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 baffles 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.'"

The northern Louisiana town of Shreveport, near the east Texas border, is about as far removed from the recording studios of Burbank and Hollywood as one could imagine. James Burton was born there on August 21, 1939, and because of his early interest in the local radio station, his parents bought him a Silvertone acoustic guitar "to beat on" at the age of 13. "I listened to KWKH in Shreveport," he recounts. "Clarence Gatemouth Brown had a night show there that was all blues and rock." Through KWKH, Burton was exposed to blues greats such as Lightnin' Hopkins, Muddy Waters, and Howlin' Wolf, as well as country music heroes, including Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell, and Chet Atkins. Learning quickly, he acquired his first electric, a Rex copy of a Gretsch cutaway electric, and studied furiously. "I'd listen to records, and I could hear all of these ideas," he states. "I'd hear a lick and learn to play it, but I'd do it my own way. Also, I really admired the way people like Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell sang, and I got into their style of singing and overall feeling. I thought that this was how a lead instrument should treat a line - like a lyric - and that was always my approach to playing a solo."

The Rex only lasted three months. James wandered into J & S Music in Shreveport and experienced love at first sight: "When I saw my first Fender Telecaster, I said, 'That's it; I gotta have one of these.' It just felt so right to me. "The brand-new blonde '53 maple-neck proved James' instincts to be right. It wound up on innumerable hjs by Dale Hawkins, Ricky Nelson, Bob Luman, and others. It is now safely enconced in the James Burton collection for life.

"I went professional when I was 14, just working private parties and club gigs, and actually getting money for it," Burton remembers. "Money was something that you didn't think about - it was always just for the thrill of playing. I'd skip school to be able to play guitar." His parents remained musically supportive, but, in his words, "I'm not sure that they were real happy about my working clubs at that age. To play in those clubs, you had to go to the police station and get a permit if you were underage. You'd go in, play the gig, and leave."

He became familiar with other musicians around town, including some members of the staff band for the popular regional radio program, the Louisiana Hayride. Similar in format to the Grand Ole Opry, the Hayride was a live concert broadcast to several surrounding states from Shreveport Municipal Auditorium over KWKH on Saturday evenings. "Horace Logan was the producer and co-emcee of the Hayride," James reminisces, "and he asked if I would do some shows and join the staff band. I was 14 at the time. We played behind guys like George Jones, Jim And Johnny, Billy Walker, and Johnny Horton. The musicians had to be up on the records - we stayed on top of that. There were very few rehearsals. I ended up playing for almost a year with the staff band."

[\[elvis presley\] \[rca studio 1\] \[the complete sessions\]](#)



[Elvis Presley Articles](#)

[Email this article](#)
[Printer friendly page](#)



Elvis Articles

[Carl Perkins - Blue Suede Shoes and Elvis Presley](#)

[Elvis Presley at the Pan Pacific Auditorium October 28 & 29, 1957](#)

[Led Zeppelin & Elvis - Robert Plant Talks about Elvis Presley](#)
[Elvis Presley, Cadillacs and Don Kinney - Vail, Colorado 1976](#)

[Jan Gillan of Deep Purple Talks about Elvis](#)

[Elvis, Sherlock and Me: How I Survived Growing Up in Hollywood](#)

[Interview with Jerry Schilling - Discover the real Elvis](#)

[Bass links rock and roll royalty](#)

[Elvis touched it! - Stories from the King's concerts in Seattle](#)

[Interview with Sheila Ryan Q & A With Winfield Scott About I'm a Roustabout](#)

[Jimi Hendrix & Elvis Presley](#)

[Tom Petty's love for rock 'n' roll began the day he met Elvis in Ocala](#)

[Donnie Sumner - Gospel according to Elvis](#)

[Interview with Ann Ellington](#)

[Eric Clapton meeting Elvis Presley](#)

[Brian Wilson of The Beach Boys](#)

[Raised on Rock / For Ol' Times Sake & Elvis and Priscilla](#)

[Jerry Schilling - Elvis' meeting with President Richard Nixon](#)

[Interview with Joe Esposito](#)

[Friends Remember Elvis Presley - Part 2](#)

[Friends Remember Elvis Presley](#)

[The mystery of Jesse](#)

[For The Billionth And The Last Time - Lifting the Lid on the King's record sales](#)

[Interview with Scotty Moore](#)

[Reinventing Elvis: The American Sound Studios Sessions](#)

[Interview with J.D. Sumner of The Stamps Quartet](#)

[Interview with Milton Berle - Elvis on National TV 1950s](#)

[General Colin Powell on Elvis Presley the soldier and patriot](#)

[Elvis and Ali: Two Sides of the Same Coin](#)

[Steve Binder Talks about Elvis and The '68 Comeback Special](#)

[Interview with Colonel Tom Parker](#)

[Interview with Marty Pasetta](#)

Young James became fascinated with the bending, vocal qualities of the steel guitar: "I got into playing steel about a year after I started on the electric; I just wanted to try a little bit of everything. I got into playing single-note steel - 'Steel Guitar Rag,' and that type of thing." Soon he was injecting that sliding, sustaining tone into his guitar playing: "I worked the Hayride with a fantastic steel player named Sonny Trammell. He had a touch on the steel that could make it sound like a guitar. We started switching licks - I would play steel licks, and he would play guitar licks."

James' interest in steel 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.

Through his work on the Hayride, Burton met and worked with a flurry of great early rock and country artists. He recorded "Suzy-Q" with Dale Hawkins in 1955, at age 15. "We actually recorded that in the radio station at KWKH," James details. "It was very basic. We had three microphones for the drums, bass, guitar, and vocals - not unlike a bunch of guys just sitting around your living room." James originally wrote the song as an instrumental before Hawkins put words to it. Burton's now-famous guitar lick is one of the most instantly recognizable lines in rock music. "That's the basic style that I enjoy playing," he offers. "It's like the Chet Atkins style, but he does more of a country-pop type of picking with the bass, rhythm, and the lead at the same time. I took the same idea, but did it my way, in more of a blues bag. It's just a style I created for myself."

Hawkins and his band played clubs and roadhouses with names like the It'll Do Club in Louisiana, but James soon grew tired of that and joined Bob Luman's band before Hawkins hit the road in 1956. Things started happening faster and faster. He played guitar on Luman's hit singles "My Gal Is Red Hot" and "Red Cadillac And A Black Moustache" (both covered by neo-rockabilly singer Robert Gordon) and worked the Hayride steadily with him. Horace Logan, Luman's manager, arranged for the band to travel to Hollywood in 1956 to play in a movie called Carnival Rock. While in California, Ricky Nelson met James. Ricky recalled the moment in *Guitar Player's* September '81 issue: "The first time I heard him was in the office at Imperial Records. He came from the Louisiana Hayride, and I was looking for a band at that time. I was 16, and so was James. I heard this guitar playing at the end of the hall and thought, 'Wow!' I loved the way he played."

The Ozzie And Harriet show was a national pastime in 1957, watched weekly by millions of viewers. Ricky began appearing on the shows in 1952, portraying himself on the family series. Starting in 1957, he often closed the segments with a two-minute "live" vocal performance. Ozzie Nelson invited James to join the on-camera backup band for these segments, and this eventually led to James' full participation in Ricky's recording career.

Before James' timely trip to California, renowned country guitarist Joe Maphis had played on all but one of Ricky's earliest 1957 hit recordings for Verve and Imperial, including "Be Bop Baby," "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You," and "I'm Confessin'." (Barney Kessel was lead guitarist on Nelson's first hit, "I'm Walkin'.") Upon James' arrival, several tunes were recorded with both guitarists onboard: "Joe Maphis played on the very first sessions that I recorded with Ricky, which were 'Waitin' In School' and 'Stood Up.' He played the solos, and I only played the rhythm chinks." Eventually, the Nelson road schedule became too hectic for Maphis, and he was replaced permanently by Burton.

The 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 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."

Jimmy Haskell, Imperial Records' A&R man, was responsible for capturing on tape what the band played. James Kirkland, who left Bob Luman's band with Burton, played bass, and Earl Palmer was on drums on the early sessions. Later Joe Osborne became the regular bassist. "I had a lot of freedom," says Burton, "but everything was very precise. The main thing that we were concerned about was, 'Is the tone right?' I'm a tone freak. You've got to have the right tone to make it work. I think if you do a ballad, you should have a nice mellow tone. With a good tone and good playing, you're way in the ballgame."

Along with the recordings came those wonderful television appearances - with Ricky and band burning through "Believe What You Say," "It's Late," and other current hits each week. And always there as Ricky's guitar-slinging right-hand man was James Burton, with his penchant for inching two steps forward and grinning directly into the camera while soloing. "You know, Rick used to like to close his eyes a lot when he was singing and getting into the feel of the song," James recalls. "I guess that was one of his trademarks. And I'd be over there and get to cuttin' up, and Ozzie would say, 'Hey, you're going to have to cool it.' [Laughs.] He wanted us to have a good time but not to overdo it." On some segments, Burton sported a new Gretsch Chet Atkins model or a Rickenbacker: "I switched off a lot with the Gretsch and other guitars, but that was just for fun and looks. My main guitar was always the '53 Tele, and I used it on all the records."

The hits just kept on coming into the '60s. James enjoyed the security of his lead guitar niche with Ricky, but his exclusive contract prohibited any outside work and he began to feel stifled: "It got to the point where Ricky stopped traveling altogether. We'd only work one month out of the year during the summer, so it got to be very boring for me. When the phone would ring, I'd have to say, 'Well, no, I can't do this or that.'"

The situation reached a head in early 1965 when the increasingly in-demand guitarist was called by Johnny Cash to play dobro on a TV pilot for a new musical show called *Shindig*. "I called Rick to ask him if he would mind if I did the show," the guitarist recounts. "The producers said they wouldn't even put me on camera, just put me off to the side. Rick seemed to be unhappy about this and said, 'I wish you wouldn't do this, because your sound is my sound.'" Eventually, though, Nelson's manager called Burton back with the go-ahead, and James began doing session work.

[Review - I Sing All Kinds The Nashville 1971 Sessions CD](#)
[A Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On at Dodger Stadium](#)
[Priscilla Presley Talks About Life With the King](#)
[Elvis Feared He'd Be Forgotten](#)
[Lisa Marie Presley and Riley Keough on Oprah](#)
[Chuck Norris - Elvis, Priscilla, martial arts and me](#)
[Silver Screen King: Elvis' Acting Career](#)
[What makes Elvis still the King, 30 years on](#)
[Video Premiere: Elvis and Lisa Marie Presley's 'In the Ghetto'](#)
[Interview with Lisa Marie Presley](#)
[Married at 21, Priscilla Presley Recalls Her Time With Elvis](#)
[Father and Daughter Together Again](#)
[Lisa Marie Duets With Elvis](#)
[Elvis - 30 years on ... and the world turns ...](#)
[Why Elvis? By Paul Simpson](#)
[Elvis Presley - 30 Years On and Still The King](#)
[A personal Presley pilgrimage](#)

The Shindig pilot was an instant success and the show was picked up by ABC in April 1965. Burton became the show's permanent lead guitarist as a member of the Shindogs, along with Delaney Bramlett on bass, Glen D Hardin playing piano and arranging, Joey Cooper on rhythm guitar, and Chuck Blackwell on drums. "We would go in three days a week and do the tracks in the studio," Burton details. "Some of the stuff would be done live during the taping, but we prerecorded almost 90% of the tracks for lip-synching." The show presented a broad cross-section of music, with artists such as Muddy Waters, Ray Charles, Howlin' Wolf, and Chuck Berry, along with the cream of the British Invasion bands - the Rolling Stones, the Dave Clark Five, and the Beatles.

The high visibility of television served as a catalyst for James' rising session demand in the later '60s. Calls came in from all sectors of the pop music field. "I was doing like four to six dates a day and sometimes up to 25 sessions a week," Burton declares. "It was day and night." These were the halcyon days of the record date "specialist"; players with a unique identity and style were called in to sweeten and embellish specific tracks on an artist's project. Burton participated on countless such record dates, but several stand out as musts in any essential James Burton discography. His twisting, hound-dog style slide dobro meshed perfectly with Buffalo Springfield's seminal country-rock vision on "A Child's Claim To Fame" [Buffalo Springfield Again, Atco, 83-226], recorded in 1967. The song perfectly blends James' fretted dobro work with his seemingly endless vocabulary of rising and falling slide dobro slurs for a timeless double-tracked dobro duet. The record introduced a generation of rock listeners to the dobro sound outside of its traditional bluegrass mold.

Judy Collins' 1968 hit "Someday Soon" [Who Knows Where The Time Goes, Elektra, EKS-74033], is a marvelous example of country ensemble teamwork, perfectly meshing Burton's graceful, economical Telecaster fills with steel sage Buddy Emmons' impeccable accompaniment. "That was a great album" James says. "Buddy and I had a feel together that was real nice. That's how you make hit records - teamwork. No one guy in the group is making it happen; it's team playing." James is specific about his lead and fill requirements: "You have to let your playing breathe; I think you have to treat it like a lyric. 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."

Burton also made some classic contributions to deep country at that time. Capitol Records producer Ken Nelson called him to add some snappy Tele bite to several Merle Haggard and Buck Owens projects in Bakersfield, California. These early sessions teamed James with the influential pedal steel stylist, Ralph Mooney. Their early collaborations on songs such as Haggard's "The Bottle Let Me Down" led to their own duet instrumental album for Capitol in 1966 called Corn Pickin' And Slick Sliding. The LP showcases both players' bright, crisp, decidedly Fender guitar tones, with James also joining in on dobro for a colorful blend of styles.

The Haggard sessions produced other milestone tracks, including "The Lonesome Fugitive" and "Workin' Man Blues". "I guess I cut several albums with Merle," says Burton. "The first thing I did was real country, with me and Ralph doing 'The Bottle Let Me Down.' There was a song that I played on with Ricky called 'I Just Can't Quit'; it had a horn sound on it like twin horns, and Merle wanted to know if I could play some of that style on his record." The cut "Workin' Man Blues" - whose solo closely resembles Burton's earlier effort on Nelson's version of "Milkcow Blues" - features another style James had perfected during his days with Nelson - the muted, staccato, "chicken pickin'" string attack. He explains: "It's that spitting on the strings. It's sort of like being a drummer, playing the notes and the drums at the same time. You can hear it on a song of Ricky's called 'Sneakin' Around.'"

Burton also graced hit singles by Buck Owens, including "Open Up Your Heart And Let The Sun Shine In." The guitarist remembers one incident during those sessions: "We cut one song with a 6-string bass, and were getting ready to do a second tune when Don Rich, Buck's lead guitarist, suggested to Buck that I should do a lead on it. So I took out my Tele, and we started running it down. I played an intro and we got into asolo, aturnaround, and Buck got to listening to my solo and forgot to come back in singing. There was a big pause there, and Buck just started laughing - he blew the take. It was that chicken pickin' type of sound that had captured Buck on 'Open Up Your Heart.'"

A busy and highly lucrative studio career would seem to be very difficult to forsake, and in 1969 the decision was a tough one for James when he got the call. Joe Esposito, aide-de-camp to Elvis Presley, phoned to say that Elvis would like to speak with James; moments later the King was on the line. They chatted for two hours like lifelong friends as Elvis explained his wish for James to help him assemble a road band for his forthcoming tour. Burton agreed. "It was a tough decision," he admits, "but I thought it was a good one at the time. Actually, the concert schedule with Elvis still gave me time for session work. We'd go out for four to five weeks at the most."

James played with Elvis at the Las Vegas International Hotel comeback in August '69 and continued with the King until his death in 1977. "I did all of his studio work, movies, everything. It was great," he enthuses. "In the studio, he preferred singing live when cutting the tracks, to capture the live feel. He never did like to overdub, unless it was very necessary. Rather than overdub, he would just go in and do another session. He wouldn't spend a lot of time on one song either - maybe three or four takes. If it didn't happen for him, he would move on to something else. We did several albums at his house at Graceland in Memphis. Mobile units from New York came in. They parked the trucks out back, and we all set up in the den. Just a little family deal."

In spite of a hectic touring and recording schedule, James managed to record a solo album for A&M Records in 1971. James Burton was cut in Nashville with the help of Elvis' longtime producer, Felton Jarvis, and a host of session regulars, including Jerry Carrigan, David Briggs, Norbert Putnam, Charlie McCoy, and Chip Young. Burton served up a tasty version of Presley's "Mystery Train," along with a wall-of-sound rendition of Leon Russell's "Delta Lady," and a snaky cover of "High Heeled Sneakers" on dobro.

In 1972 yet another connection was made that would result in far-reaching musical consequences. Gram Parsons, the visionary of country-rock, contacted Burton regarding an upcoming album project. "Well, Gram said, 'I think I've got a deal to do an album, and I really want you on it,'" Burton recounts. "Merle Haggard was originally going to produce, but that fell through." Parsons manager, Ed Tickner, put together a deal with Warner Bros. that provided for Gram to hire the studio band to go on the road, beginning with the second release. The band Parsons put together for the first album, GP [Warner Bros., MS 2123], included three members of the Presley backup band (Burton, Glenn D Hardin on piano, and Ron Tutt on drums). Emory Gordy, Jr., Elvis' bassist, joined them on the second album, Grievous Angel [Warner Bros., MS 2171]. The records are modern country treasures, and their futuristic impact continues to this day.

A Grievous Angel tour never took place, due to Parsons' untimely death in late 1973, but the groundwork was laid for a hot touring band led by the album's harmony vocalist, Emmylou Harris. "Emmylou was singing on the album," recalls James, "and when Gram passed away, Tickner started managing Emmylou he had made the same plans for her that he had made for Gram."

The following year, Emmylou and producer Brian Ahern began work on Pieces Of The Sky [Warner Bros., 2284], using the same core of musicians from the Parsons sessions. The resulting album features some of Burton's most profoundly lyrical playing on songs such as "Boulder To Birmingham" and "Too Far Gone." The touring band assembled in support of the album was dubbed the Hot Band, and the subsequent live dates, driven by James' hot-rod Tele, were nothing short of blazing.

Burton recorded a second LP with Harris and the Hot Band before departing in 1976, due to conflicts with Elvis' tour schedule. *Elite Hotel* [Reprise, 2236] captured the full spirit of the band, mixing live cuts with studio tracks. Burton's melodicism is captured throughout. The album highlights compositions by Rodney Crowell, Buck Owens, and Hank Williams, and Gram Parsons' "Las Vegas" with its exploding guitar support. Regarding the song's rapid-fire, staccato intro Burton laughs, "I always wanted to play banjo. I just love doing stuff like that. I feel good when I play something that I'm excited about. I used the same thing on Gram's version of the tune, and I thought, 'Well, there's nothing I could do that would feel any better.'"

The crack Hot Band also participated in a number of outside album projects with producer Brian Ahern, including sessions for Jonathan Edwards, Rodney Crowell, Mary Kay Place, and Jesse Winchester. James remembers the dilemma he faced on the title track to Winchester's *Nothing But A Breeze* [Bearsville, BSV 6968]: "Brian wanted me to play bottleneck on my Tele, but it's hard to do because of the arch in the round neck. I didn't have a dobro bar with me, so I asked around and somebody there had a Zippo lighter. I laid the Tele on my lap like a dobro, and played the solo with the Zippo for a slide. It was pretty neat."

Understandably, Elvis' death in 1977 came as a crushing blow to Burton. Rather than sink to inactivity, however, he dived headlong into more session work. One of his first projects was with John Denver on an album entitled *I Want To Live* [RCA, AFLI-2521], which led to yet another tour offer. "Just before Elvis died I was called to play on a John Denver television special," he recounts. "During the taping, John asked if I would consider going out on a European tour. I said I was working with Elvis, but if scheduling permitted, I would be glad to go. Elvis died in August of 1977, and very shortly I was contacted about John's album. I went in to do the sessions, and John said, 'I want to talk to you about a band.' I hired Glenn D and Emory, and that's how it started. I've been with him for seven years."

Now James' rock and roll shoes have run full circle with his recent onstage association with Jerry Lee Lewis. Suddenly he's rocking with the abandon of a 16-year-old at his first sock hop gig. Burton revels in the new excitement. "I've never had a rehearsal with this band," he points out. "Basically, I went in cold turkey, and it's great. The arrangements aren't locked in, and sometimes it's hard to figure out what Jerry Lee will do next. Instead of a complete solo, he might play half, and then bring me in for the last half or something. Or he'll look at Kenny Lovelace [Lewis' guitarist for 19 years] and me and say, 'Let me hear some twin guitars.' [laughs] so away we go. It keeps the music exciting. It's good to change things around. When the spotlight falls on you, you say, 'Wow, what do I do now?'"

Burton still lives for those nights when everything falls into the pocket and the band plays over its head "When it happens like that, it's not just for you; it's happening for everybody," he gushes. "I mean, the guitar is in tune, the sound is right, you can't play a bad note, and the people are loving it. Things just come out of the woodwork!"

His flamboyant pink paisley Fender Telecaster has been a James Burton trademark since he acquired it in 1969. "Chuck Widener [vice-president] of Fender called and said, 'I have a guitar here that's you.' And I said, 'Really? It's got my picture on it, huh?' He said, 'Well, no, not exactly, but I think you'd like to have one.' So I went down to Fender and picked it up and played it. It just felt great, and I knew that was it." He owns an estimated 150 guitars, but the '69 paisley Tele still endures as Burton's favorite studio instrument. "The front pickup is stock, but the back pickup is a dual winding that Red Rhodes did for me," he explains. "I was looking for just a boost, but not necessarily a change in the sound of the guitar."

Was there much reaction to its loud appearance? "Boy, there sure was. People said, 'Wow, what is this?' It was like MTV - well maybe not that exotic. I'm in negotiations now for a limited paisley endorsement with Fender. If everything works out, it will be available very soon."

Due to the amount of storage space onboard Jerry Lee's Lear jet, Burton now tours with only the paisley Telecaster. With Denver, he carried several instruments, including backup dobros and a spare Telecaster. The Lear also lacks the space for heavy amplifiers, so they must be provided by the promoter each night. The results are sometimes frustrating. "I don't like that," moans Burton, "because it's not necessarily my sound sometimes. I just can't get the sound of a Fender Twin out of something else."

James has also been known to bring his original 1953 Telecaster out of retirement for special dates. "I recently used it to overdub for Johnny Lee on an old Ricky Nelson tune called 'It's Up To You.' I told Jim Ed Norman, the producer, that I wanted to bring in my original Tele and play the solo that I played on Ricky's record. He was so thrilled that he had something written up in *Billboard* and *Cash Box* about it." Showing his preference for Cadillacs, James refinished the guitar with stock Caddy colors: first Coronado red (a couple of years after he got it), then Firethorn red (used on El Dorados), and eventually back to Coronado.

To avoid locking in to any one sound, James keeps a bevy of amps on hand. "Mostly I've been using the Music Man 210-150, and I have several of them," he details. "For most of the stuff produced by Brian Ahern, we used a little '64 Fender Deluxe black-faced amp that is just incredible; it's the sound on 'Too Far Gone.' Brian would always insist on that amp for his stuff. I also have a Fender Twin that's amazing. It's an old brown one with K model Lansings, and it's probably the hottest Twin you'll ever play through!" Settings vary from one given situation to the next: "If your guitar has a good tone, there's not a hell of a lot you can do with your amp. Presence is very important, but the main thing is that you don't want to get too many highs or lows without some midrange. Once you lose your middle range, you've got nothing; so I'm a real bug about that."

Burton normally favors Fender or GHS strings with gauges similar to the banjo setup he devised for "Believe What You Say." Good dobro tone is another of James' obsessions: "I have several dobros, but being a player, you get attached to one particular instrument. It has a lot to do with the sound and the way it feels."

He is also adamant about expressing his own individuality: "I treat it the way it feels to me. I don't play a solo the way that Ralph Mooney would, because I want my solo to say, 'This is me.' But I respect everybody's playing - there are so many great guitarists out there. You can learn from other players - not by copying, but by paying attention. That is important to me."

James fondly remembers his very first "dobro" as just an acoustic guitar laid on his lap. "It was a big-bodied Stella that I bought from Red Rhodes for six or seven dollars. It finally gave way, but I still have pieces of it somewhere. I used it on a bluegrass album with Glen Campbell and on many dates with Lee Hazelwood. It got to the point that every session I'd do for Lee, he'd want that particular guitar."

His current first choice for slide work is an OMI brand wood-bodied 1964 square-neck Dobro that was used on Buffalo Springfield's recording of "A Child's Claim To Fame." His favorite fretted resonophonic is also a 1964 Dobro model. "I treat the fingerstyle dobro in a very similar way to the slide dobro. I like to play a lot of bends and move one string against another."

For onstage dobro amplification, Burton uses a system designed for him by repairman John Carruthers. Two pickups have been installed inside the body of the guitar: a Sony ECM-50, which goes directly to the house system, and a miniature Gibson humbucking pickup that is plugged into the onstage guitar amp

for monitoring.

James incorporated the same flatpick/ fingerpick technique on dobro that he uses on standard guitar. "Maybe that's why my sound is different," he suggests. "The steel players say, 'Man, you're doing that wrong, but I just never got into playing with a thumbpick. That's very limiting to me, because you can't backstroke.'" He is currently using standard G-tuning string gauges on his dobros, but prefers to tune them up a whole-step to open A (A C# E A C# E, low to high). "You get a little better tone and more punch that way," he feels. James also occasionally uses open tunings such as C, E, C, and D.

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.

Burton remains cautious of effects devices: "I'm not a big fan of them. I use a Yamaha E1010 analog delay, an MXR Phase 90, a Roland Boss Chorus, an Electro-Harmonix Small Stone pedal that gives a sweep like a flanger, and sometimes a volume pedal. I don't like to use that stuff unless the producer calls for it. If you're doing a movie date they might say, 'Give me some fuzztone.' Being a studio musician, I feel that it's important to state your opinion musically if it's needed. But you must remember that the guy is paying you to do what he wants you to do."

Player camaraderie and a willingness to cooperate are two essential traits for any successful studio musician, according to Burton. "It's important to listen to everybody and key off what's going on around the room musically," he stresses. "If the feel is wrong, I automatically suggest a discussion to help solve the problem. It's all timing, feel, and mood; you have to make that happen."

Burton has a deep respect for LA's finest studio players, but he seems to harbor a special affection for Tommy Tedesco. "Tommy's such a cut-up," he chuckles, "but he's so aware of what's going on and is such a great reader. He'll make it a point to walk in just as the conductor is counting it off. On one session, the arranger, Jack Nitzsche, had written a guitar part that was incredible - millions of notes. It was for a Jackie De Shannon record, and the section was only her voice and one guitar. Tommy walked in, had a cup of coffee, sat down, put his cigarette down, picked up his gut-string guitar, and hit a chord on it to check the tuning. He opened the book, Jack counted it off, and that was it - a take. It blew me away. Tommy's one of my best friends, and he's helped me in so many ways in the studio."

A production and publishing company are both in the upcoming plans for the tireless James Burton. He is especially eager to work with his son Jeffrey. "He sings, plays guitar, and fronts a band called Influence. He's a dynamite talent." James is also planning another solo LP and tour with his own band providing backup. He still has plenty to say on an instrument with limitless potential: "If you treat a violin like a violin, that's all you'll get out of it. The guitar is made to do what you want it to do. You can either limit yourself on an instrument, or you can do the impossible."

- [Interview with James Burton](#)
- [Interview with Glen D. Hardin](#)
- [Interview with Ronnie Tutt](#)
- [Interview with Jerry Scheff](#)
- [Interview with John Wilkinson](#)
- [Elvis Presley & the TCB Band](#)

© Copyright by [Elvis Australia](#)

[Top of Page](#)

Elvis.com.au © 1996 - 2007 Elvis Presley Australia