

FENDER PLAYERS CLUB JAMES BURTON



James Burton

Hailed widely as the guitar hero's hero, James Burton has forged a reputation built on blistering yet tasteful leads on records too numerous to mention. He is the archetypal Tele® player and has perhaps done more to explore the possibilities of the instrument than any other player.

Listening to Burton play, it's clear his many accolades are well-deserved, but in an age of larger-than-life guitar virtuosos it seems amazing that this earnest man from Shreveport, Louisiana rose to stardom not as a flashy guitar soloist, but rather as a sideman and a session player, playing always in support of the song.

James took up the guitar at an early age and by his teenage years, he was performing with The Louisiana Hayride. Rockabilly was emerging in the south at the time. Burton's first studio session, in which he laid down that classic guttural lick on Dale Hawkins' 1956 recording of "Suzie Q," showcases James' early rockabilly style.

Burton was an early devotee of the Telecaster®, a guitar that did not in those days enjoy the wide acceptance that it enjoys today.

"When I walked by the music store one day," recalls Burton, "I saw this Telecaster® hanging in the window. I was used to looking at big-body, rounded guitars, so when I first saw that Tele®, I thought, 'Man, that's pretty wild.' It was strange-looking at first, but when I played it, man, that was it. I said, 'That's my guitar.' I think I was 12 then. My mother and Dad bought me that blonde Tele®. They had just changed the name from the Broadcaster to the Telecaster®. I knew that I'd probably play that guitar for a long time."

A short time after recording with Hawkins, James was playing a session at Imperial Records with Bob Luman for the single, "My Gal is Red Hot," when TV teen (and aspiring musician) Ricky Nelson happened to drop by the studio. Ricky was blown away by James' playing and, before Burton knew it, he was whisked away to Hollywood to join Nelson.

James was 17 at the time.

Burton's eight years as Ricky Nelson's lead guitarist, including weekly performances on the popular *Ozzie And Harriet* TV show and regular tours with Ricky, brought his talents to the mainstream audience. As Ricky turned out hit after crooning hit, James turned a whole generation of guitar players on to a new sound, a sound that James and many others find as fresh today as listeners did in the late '50s.

"My personal feeling about what we were doing back then," says Burton, "I would say it was before its time, musically. You can play some of those Ricky Nelson records today, and it's quite refreshing because it's today's atmosphere and attitude."

Burton's wild string-bending on such brilliant Nelson cuts as "Believe What You Say" not only wowed players everywhere but also helped define Burton's trademark style.

Stylistically, Burton blends country-style chicken pickin' with the rowdy tone of rockabilly in its formative years. One distinctive element of Burton's technique is his practice of holding a flatpick with his thumb and index finger and wearing a fingerpick on his middle finger. Picking with both, Burton achieves great chicken-pickin' and two-string effects.

"When I was growing up," explains Burton, "and I listened to three rhythm and blues records from three different artists, I heard this same bottleneck guitar sound. And I know they're not all playing bottleneck, because I could tell the guy was

moving his fingers. I could hear it. So I'm thinking and I pick up my guitar, and I said, 'You know, I'm at this note here. Without sliding my finger, how do I get to that note there?' The strings were too stiff, so something had to give. I experimented with banjo strings, and it became a real nice sound for me."

The Nelson–Burton collaboration was an immensely fruitful one, for all parties involved, but in the early '60s, after eight years playing exclusively with Ricky, James was ready to try some different things.

"Ricky was not doing too much at that particular time," says Burton, "and Johnny Cash called me and asked me to do this show called Shindig. Ricky didn't want me to do it, but I made an arrangement with his dad and his manager. So I went on the show, which nobody knew at that time, and played slide dobro with Johnny Cash."

Freed from his contractual obligations with Ricky Nelson, Burton dove headlong into the busy world of the Hollywood studios, a world where his versatility was appreciated and sought after.

"I was enjoying playing," Burton says. "I was enjoying working with different artists. And that was a real trip for me, because I got a chance to still be me and work with Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Merle Haggard, Wanda Jackson, The Monkees, The Beach Boys, you name it."

Burton bonded immediately with his peers, session guitarists like Tommy Tedesco, Howard Roberts, Barney Kessel and Herb Ellis. "All those guys," says Burton, "I was very fortunate that I got a chance to work with all these wonderful musicians. They were all my friends."

In 1969, Elvis Presley called, and James was a premier part of the TCB (Takin' Care of Business) band from 1969 to Elvis' death in '77. It was during this time that Burton began playing his trademark pink paisley Tele®, a guitar that was made for him by Fender in '69. Burton liked the finish, but he was not sure how the King would feel.

"I took it to Vegas," laughs Burton, "but I played my original Tele® for two weeks. Finally, I got up enough nerve to bring that pink paisley out. I was like, 'Man, what's Elvis going to say if he sees this guitar on stage?' So I took it out and he came over to me. 'Johnny B. Goode,' he says, and I kick it off. He went out and was singing, then I played the solo, and he turned around and did a double-take when the lights hit me and that guitar. After the show, he came up to me and he said, 'Man, where did you get that guitar?' I said, 'Well, I was worried about playing it because it's a little bright.' But he liked it and that was that."

While Burton is perhaps most known as a sideman for Ricky Nelson and Elvis Presley, he has contributed his artistry to the work of countless artists over the years. He worked for many years with the late John Denver, and his work with Merle Haggard on Haggard's "Mama Tried" and his stint in Emmylou Harris' Hot Band have inspired countless country musicians. And he continues to work with such notables as Elvis Costello.

- Eric Kingsbury, from Fender Frontline Vol. 25 (1999)

James Burton was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as a Sideman in 2001.