

JAMES BURTON: GUITAR PRODIGY

Few session musicians have shaken things up again and again as dependably as James Burton. One of the most in-demand musicians of his generation, Burton has a simple philosophy of fitting in. “It doesn’t matter who the singer is,” he said. “It’s about being able to play your instrument and come up with new ideas.”

Burton was born on August 21, 1939, in Dubberly, Louisiana, and grew up in nearby Shreveport. His parents figured he was going to be a guitar player from the moment he started running around the house playing the broom. As a child, he watched Hank Williams play the *Louisiana Hayride*, a star-making country music radio program that broadcast from Shreveport’s Municipal Auditorium.

By the age of thirteen, he was listening to records and the radio to learn to play the guitar his parents bought him. Shortly afterward, his dad drove him to a local nightclub and entered him in a talent show. Burton won first place that night and first place in three more contests soon after. “By the time he was fourteen, Burton was playing in the house band of the *Louisiana Hayride*.”

Burton didn’t take music lessons, and he didn’t read much music. “Not well enough to hurt my playing,” he once candidly explained. James Burton was a master of thinking in the moment, and he was just getting started.

He backed rockabilly-leaning Bob Luman on the *Hayride*, then continued with Luman on the road. In Southern California, Burton began playing on local country music TV show *Town Hall Party*. He was also featured in Roger Corman’s 1957 drive-in film, *Carnival Rock*.

As luck would have it, Luman and Burton were rehearsing a song at Imperial Records in Hollywood, when teen TV



star Ricky Nelson dropped by. Nelson was looking to debut his own rockabilly band on his family’s hit TV comedy, *The Adventures of Ozzy and Harriet*, and he then knew the guitar player he wanted. First playing rhythm behind Joe Maphis, and then taking the lead himself, Burton suddenly had a national platform for his frantic style.

Fans tuned in. Elvis Presley never forgot the guitar solos he heard Burton play on the show; Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards said that when he went to the record store he didn’t buy Ricky Nelson records, he bought James Burton records. Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin started carrying around a photo of Burton in his wallet.

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LISTEN

“Suzie Q” (Dale Hawkins), “Hello Mary Lou, Goodbye Heart” (Ricky Nelson),
“Fools Rush In (Where Angels Fear to Tread)” (Elvis Presley)

JAMES BURTON: GUITAR PRODIGY (CONTINUED)

He was endlessly innovative. Having watched Merle Travis on *Town Hall Party*, Burton applied Travis’s picking style to his own. He studied how blues guitarists bent notes and got the idea to restrung his guitar with banjo strings for the four highest-pitched strings and substitute regular D and A strings for the first and sixth strings. That led to notes he could stretch like chewing gum, twang memorably, and still keep under control. He made the strings move: “Oh, you could bend the string clear across the neck,” he once said with a laugh.

At the core of his art is Burton’s excitable “chicken-pickin’” style, a percussive way of playing. It feels tied to a place and time and yet, in his hands, it was transferred to numerous recordings and shows.

In 1968, Burton turned down Elvis Presley when he asked the guitarist to play on his comeback TV special—

Burton was in a recording session with Frank Sinatra and couldn’t get away. But Elvis persisted, and in 1969 he invited Burton to put together and lead a new band for his shows at the International Hotel in Las Vegas.

Burton brought a pink paisley Telecaster to the TCB Band in Las Vegas, and Presley loved it. When Presley introduced the audience to his guitarist onstage, he called Burton “the greatest guitar player I have ever heard.” Burton played in Presley’s band until Elvis’s death in 1977.

In recent years, Burton has devoted great time and energy into running the James Burton Foundation, which supports music education for those in need.

Burton was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2001 and into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2024.

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In your own words, explain how Burton was innovative. Highlight your evidence.

2. Keith Richards said when “he went to the record store he didn’t buy Ricky Nelson records, he bought James Burton records.” What did he mean? Explain in your own words.

3. In your opinion, what did Burton mean when he explained that he read music “Not well enough to hurt my playing.” Do you think this helped or hurt his career? Explain.
