



## JAMES BURTON: GUITAR GENIUS



One of the most in-demand musicians of his time, Burton has a simple view 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.”

James Burton was born on August 21, 1939, in Dubberly, Louisiana. 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 kid, he watched the *Louisiana Hayride*, a country music radio program. By the age of thirteen, he was listening to records and the radio to learn to play the guitar his parents bought him. By the time he was fourteen, Burton was playing in the house band of the *Louisiana Hayride*, the same show he listened to as a child.

Burton didn’t take music lessons, and he didn’t read much music. “Not well enough to hurt my playing,” he once explained.

He backed rockabilly-leaning Bob Luman on the *Hayride*, then continued with Luman on the road. In Southern California, Burton began playing on a local country music TV show and he also was in a movie called *Carnival Rock*.

Burton played lead guitar on a TV comedy show, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, and fans took notice of his skill. Elvis Presley never forgot the guitar solos he heard Burton play on the show. Jimmy Page of



Led Zeppelin started carrying around a photo of Burton in his wallet.

He was very inventive. Burton studied how blues guitarists bent notes and got the idea to restrung his guitar with banjo strings. That led to notes he could stretch and keep under control. At the core of his guitar playing is Burton’s “chicken-pickin’” style, full of wild energy.

*Continued on back*

### 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 GENIUS (CONTINUED)

In 1968, Burton turned down Elvis Presley when he asked the guitarist to play on his TV special—Burton was in a recording session with Frank Sinatra and couldn't get away. But Elvis kept asking, and in 1969 he invited Burton to put together and lead a new band in Las Vegas.

Burton brought a pink paisley guitar to the band, and Presley loved it. When Presley introduced the audience to Burton, 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. Who called Burton “The greatest guitar player I have ever heard?”  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Circle the phrase “chicken-pickin'” in paragraph 6. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand the meaning of the phrase.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Why did Burton restring his guitar with banjo strings? What was the effect?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_