

Burton for Certain

For the man with the paisley Telecaster, working with Elvis, Ricky and Emmylou has just been one big hayride.

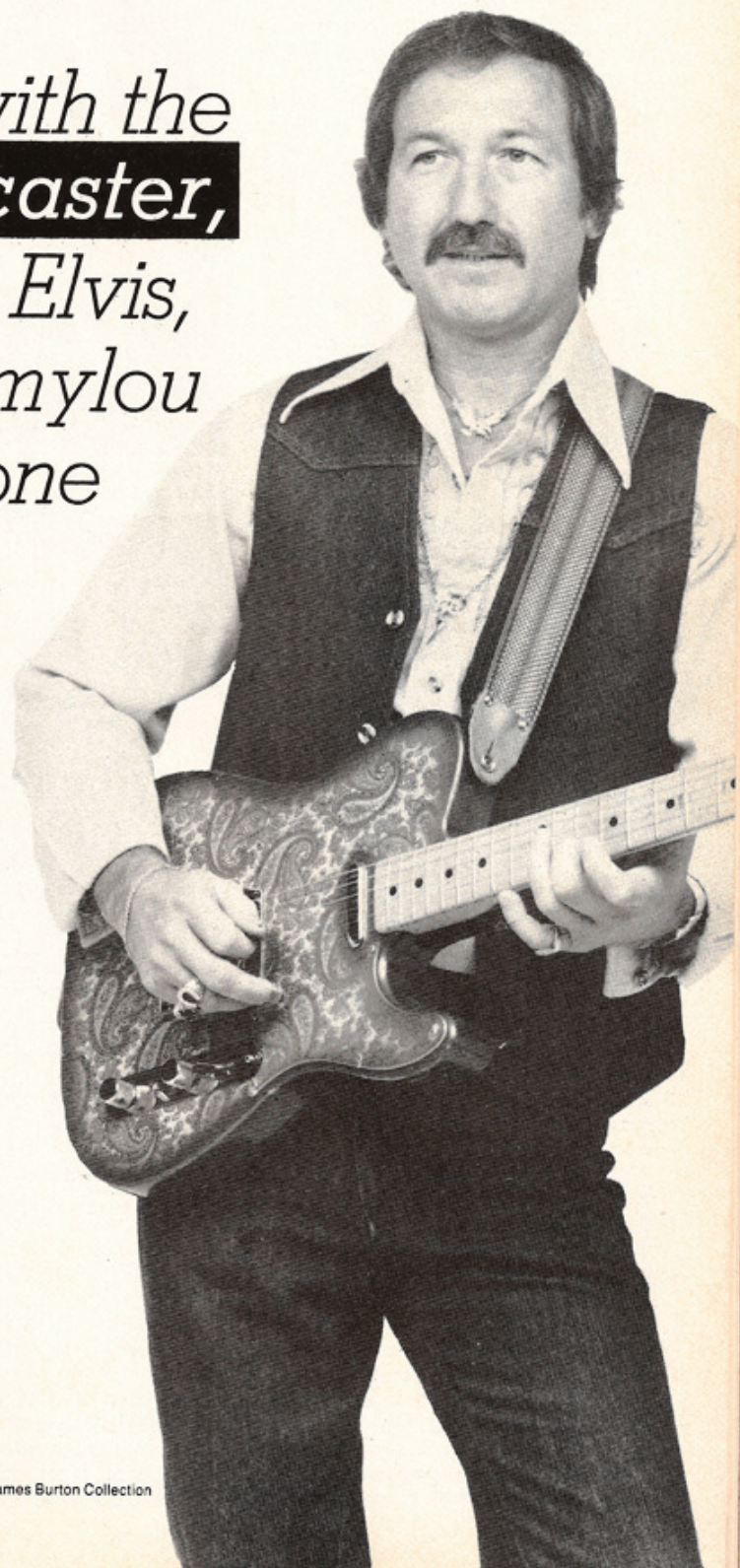
BY TIM BRADLEY

Question: What do Elvis Presley, the Osmonds, Tina Turner, Nat King Cole, Waylon Jennings, the Ventures, Buffalo Springfield, Dean Martin, Johnny Lee, Hoyt Axton, the Commodores, Andy Williams, Judy Collins, Henry Mancini, the Byrds, the Everly Brothers, Frank Sinatra, Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Merle Haggard, Steve and Eydie, Emmylou Harris, Shorty Rogers, Kenny Rogers, Ricky Nelson, Willie Nelson, Jack Jones, Tom Jones, Mazda, Kentucky Fried Chicken, John Denver, Buck Owens, Jerry Lee Lewis, Don Ellis, Mel Tillis, the Supremes, Pat Boone, the Monkees, Shindig and Urban Cowboy have in common?

Answer: All have at one time or another employed the services of one James E. Burton, guitarist extraordinaire. And that's not even half the list. In trying to remember everyone, James laughingly said, "Just put down everybody you can think of, then cross off Barbra Streisand. I haven't played with her."

Courtesy of the James Burton Collection

Guitar World/November, 1983



Born August 21, 1940 in Shreveport, Louisiana, James Burton began playing guitar at the age of thirteen. "For some reason, I just loved music ever since I was old enough to walk. It was just born in me, I guess. When I was around eight or nine, I had some friends who played guitar and I was real interested in it. I'd go around beating on anything I could get my hands on, pretending it was a guitar." Burton's first real guitar was a Rex acoustic, followed by an off-brand electric supposedly made by Gretsch. It wasn't long before he got the guitar that was to become his trademark, a Fender Telecaster. "It just felt like it was made for me."

From that time onward, Burton's life has been the stuff of legend. Inspired by blues players like Lightnin' Hopkins and Howlin' Wolf, whom he heard on KWKH's late night show, and country heroes like Hank Williams and Chet Atkins, the guitarist was a quick study. By age fifteen, he was the staff guitarist on the *Louisiana Hayride* and a member of Dale Hawkins' band. In fact, James was a co-writer of what was to be Hawkins' only hit, the oft-recorded rock classic "Suzy-Q."

"I didn't get writer's credit for it. At fifteen, what do you know about the business? You're doing something you really love and enjoy. But as far as the actual guitar lick, that's mine. You live and learn in the business. When you're starting out, there's an awful lot to know and it takes time."

Next came a two-year stint with country singer Bob Luman that included recording "A Red Cadillac and a Black Mustache" and "My Gal Is Red Hot." Luman's band came out to L.A. in 1956 to do a movie called *Carnival Rock*. The trip included a stop at Imperial Records to record. In one of life's fortuitous twists of fate, Rick Nelson came into the studio and ended up staying to listen for three hours. The next day, James Burton was invited to meet Ozzie (Nelson, not Osbourne), who in turn invited him to join the band on their television show, *Ozzie & Harriet*. In fact, the guitarist lived in the Nelson home for nearly two years.

How did the Nelson off-screen home life compare with their TV household? "Well, basically, it was pretty much the same. Ozzie was strictly business. He was a great businessman and his work was real serious to him. But the home life, they were just great people."

The Burton guitar graces many of Ricky Nelson's early hits, like "Poor Little Fool," "Believe What You Say," "Fools Rush In," "Travelin' Man" and "Hello, Mary Lou," as well as a lot of "great album tracks that a lot of people didn't get to hear." James stayed with Nelson until the mid-sixties and during that time worked only on Nelson projects. "They didn't want me to do outside work at the time. It got to the point that I really wanted to get out and play more. We'd only go out a month or two months out of the year. All the other time



With the King: Onstage in Vegas in 1969, the relationship between headliner and right hand man is in the spotlight.



Around the Back: Burton rocks out at a music festival with Emmylou Harris.

was wasted time for me. So after I left Rick, I just went into doing nothing but studio work with everybody."

A slide dobro call from Johnny Cash led to work on the pilot for the TV show *Shindig* and the lead guitar chair in the Shindogs, with Delaney Bramlett, Joey Cooper, Glen Hardin and Chuck Blackwell. "Guys like Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, people like that, would come to town and we'd be the rhythm section and do all the solo work."

Soon producers were specifically requesting that "James Burton sound," a percussive, crisp, chicken-picked lick. "Basically, I had a lot of freedom. There was a lot of chart work, and guys like Tommy Tedesco would do the reading. The producer would say to me 'you just do your thing, stretch out, ad lib.' It was great."



Oooh, Ricky: James is on the right from the set of the *Ozzie and Harriet* show.

IN 1969 CAME THE PHONE CALL THAT would assure the guitarist a perennial place on music's Mount Rushmore. The caller was Elvis Presley, who asked James to put a band together and come on the road with him.

At this point in our dialog, your intrepid reporter, fueled by several servings of Corona Extra, "la cerveza mas fina," cordially proffered by the interviewee and consumed strictly in the interest of fine journalism, asks the original question of the decade: What was it like to play with Elvis Presley?

"It was great. I enjoyed every minute of it. The music was great, the excitement, the energy that flowed through the music, the feeling with everybody, it was super. I got to stretch out more so than was usual



In the Fifties: James is looking clean cut (far left) in this pose with Hoyt Axton and band on the set of a movie, *Heart on Wheels*.

in most bands, because he did a lot of uptempo bluesy stuff and we worked out great country things. It worked out great, too, because when Elvis wasn't working, I could do studio work with everybody.

Talking to James Burton is like taking a magical history tour of American pop music.

When the conversation turns to Presley's death, Burton becomes subdued. "We had just left Vegas that morning on our way to Portland, Maine. They called us in the chartered plane and told us to turn back. We couldn't figure out what the problem was, so we told the pilot to return to Vegas. He told us there wasn't enough fuel, so we had to stop in Pueblo, Colorado, to fill up. When we got down, Marty Harold the trombone player called Vegas. I decided to call my wife while he was doing that. Everyone was walking around, kind of stretching, and I headed to the phones. I didn't quite make it. Marty was on his way back from the phones and there were tears in his eyes. He put his arms around me and said, 'Elvis passed

away this morning.' God, chills went all over me and I couldn't believe it. Well, that plane flight back to Vegas was one of the longest flights I've ever been on. Everybody was just all tore up. It was such a shock to the world. When I got to Vegas, I called my friend Jimmy Wakely and said, 'Jim, is there any way you could come pick me up?' It was raining here in L.A. and he came over and picked me up at the airport. He brought me home, stayed with me a few hours, and I made arrangements to go to the funeral in Memphis."

Work is probably the best antidote to grieving and James plunged ahead with work on an album for John Denver entitled *I Want to Live*. The guitarist assembled the band and toured with Denver for several years, all the while maintaining a busy studio schedule. At times, there were as many as twenty-five sessions a week and many twenty-hour days.

Talking to James Burton is like taking a magical history tour of American pop music, with many stops along the way for colorful anecdotes and inside stories, all good, on just about everyone who has set voice to vinyl in the past twenty-five years. Words like "sweetheart" and "a great bunch of guys" are used to describe every member of Burton's extended musical family.

On Emmylou Harris: "Great lady, super lady. I really enjoyed working with her. I met her when I was with Gram Parsons. She was singing harmony on the albums, and after Gram passed away, Ed Tickner, who was Gram's manager at the time, took Emmy and put the deal together with Warner Brothers to hire a good band, go on the road and promote an album. It worked

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BURTON

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out great. Emmy was such a sweetheart. I mean, she just deserved it."

On Gram Parsons: "Gram was with the Flying Burrito Brothers...see, I played with the Byrds, too...I mean, we're talking hits! Actually, I'd known Gram for a while. He called me one day and said, 'I spoke to Merle Haggard and he shows some interest in doing an album.' Then Merle called me and asked me to work on the album and I said, 'sure. Then they lost touch [Merle and Gram] and a few months later, Ed Tickner got Gram on Warner Brothers and I got another call to be on the same album!"

**The James Burton sound
is a percussive,
crisp chicken-picked lick.**

On the new Johnny Cash album: "Real nice. Real nice album. It was great. Johnny came in, the songs were good. He was real enthused with the musicians. The energy was great, the feeling. It was just like a little family."

On Clarence White: "I met Clarence when he came out here with his group, the Kentucky Colonels. Clarence called me one day and said, 'I want to learn to play electric guitar' because he played flat-top. He wanted to get a Telecaster and to play that style. So we got together and he just took off with it. And he invented that StringBender. We did a lot of sessions together. Clarence and I and Ry Cooder were doing a session together with Arlo Guthrie, and Ry and I got into a little discussion about who was going to play what. The tape was rolling and our discussion ended up on the record!"

On Michael Nesmith: "Oh yeah, we did lots of stuff together. The television show, records. I did an album with Michael one time...something about the First International something. A great album. We did it on a weekend. He had everybody in town on it. On one song, he wanted everybody to just freak out, play whatever they wanted during their solos. Tom Tedesco took his solo and he was getting down to the end of it, so he just took his guitar and threw it across the room [laughing uncontrollably]. It hit the floor and broke in a thousand

pieces. But it sounds great on the record!"

Though he has over a hundred guitars, dobros, mandolins and banjos, Burton favors his Telecasters, notably the pink paisley one he played with Rick Nelson and Elvis. He uses Fender pickups slightly modified by Seymour Duncan and Red Rhodes. "A lot of guitar players like to make a lot of changes. It's like one day Seymour Duncan's got a great pickup and then the next day someone else has a great pickup. If somebody has a good sound, there's no reason to change unless you're not getting exactly what you want."

"Strings I switch off a lot. I used Ernie Balls for a while and I do like GHS. My little E is a .09, the B is a .10, the G is a .12, then .24, .32, .38. That's real nice for a Telecaster, real even all the way across. The sizes don't jump from string to string."

Amplifier? "I've been using Music Man a lot, a 210. I have a Yamaha amp that I like real well. And the old pre-CBS Fenders are incredible."

"DON'T USE AN AWFUL LOT OF effects. I use the Yamaha echo and a Boss chorus that I like real well. And I have a few MXRs."

Burton's picking style involves both picks and fingers. Usually, he holds a regular pick with his thumb and forefinger and uses the remaining fingers for plucking and chicken-picking. To enhance the chicken-picking, he uses a finger pick on

his second finger. He gets the effect by playing the dead note with the regular pick and the sounded note with the finger pick, often playing the dead note on one string and the sounded note on another.

After all this, what could possibly be left on the James Burton agenda? "Norway's coming up in August. There's an Elvis Presley festival there and they invited me to come spend a whole week there. Then I plan to work on a solo album. The future thing that I'm really looking forward to is putting my own band together, going out and doing some personal bookings and getting some good albums out there. You know, just getting the chance to say, 'hey, JB's here doin' the pickin' and singin' for you.' My fan club is doing real well [The James Burton Fan Club, 101 Silver Leaf Drive, Trussville, AL 35173] and next year I'm hoping to do the Fan Fair in Nashville [International Country Music Fan Fair, the annual convention of fan clubs]. Linda's such a great lady [Linda Hurd, fan club president]. Everybody's trying to get her. They want her to be president of all the fan clubs in the world. But she sticks by me 100 per cent."

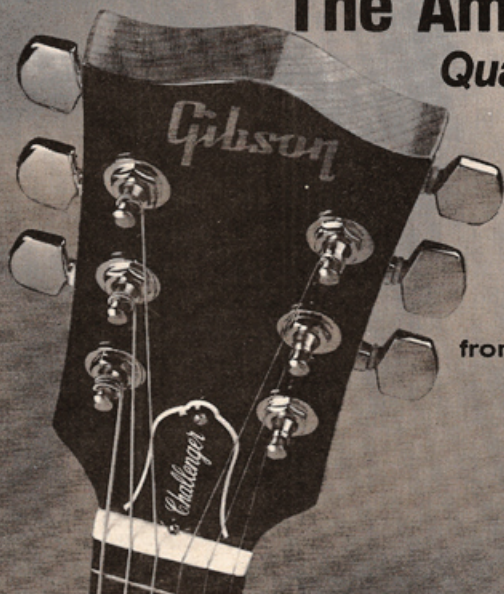
"And I've been thinking real seriously about writing a book and doing a documentary for MTV or HBO using the videos and photographs I have of people I worked with. You should see some of those *Shindig* tapes. Ian Whitcomb said he could get me copies."

There are also plans for a James Burton signature guitar and a production company. "I'm looking forward to really promoting and working with some new talent. If there's anyone interested or if they have songs, they can contact me through the fan club. I guess the world's full of good talent and I'd like to see it all get out there."

Is it possible for young guitarists to follow in Burton's footsteps, to make their mark in the face of today's fierce competition? "First off, you have to be a player, a good musician. And I think it's very important being at the right place at the right time and having the right contacts. And attitude is so important. People don't spend money because you think you're the greatest. They want to know you're the greatest and they don't have to hear it from you. It's good to be recommended by someone and it's good to have your own personal thing, your sound. Everybody has his own special way to do things and I think that's the key to it. Having that personal identity, that personal style, that touch that it takes to be you. Competition is great, too. I think people work or perform their best job when the competition's heavy. It makes you really stretch that extra little bit."

"And it's not how much you play, it's what you play and where you play it. The secret is simplicity, style and individuality. You don't walk on stage and play for other musicians. If you did, you'd starve to death. You play for the people." ♥

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