

james burton

By Ben Fong-Torres

HE'S THERE in all those scenes in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* in the late Fifties, when the Nelsons' younger son, budding teen idol Ricky Nelson, would sing and the girls would swoon: James Burton was the lanky guitarist behind Ricky, an easy smile on his face as he accompanied the kid's rockabilly and pop tunes. With Burton as his musical anchor and his dad, Ozzie, putting the power of prime-time television behind him, Ricky offered up a tamer-looking version of Elvis Presley. But with Ricky's straightforward readings and his band's solid backup, the music was authentic. John Fogerty heard it. " 'Stood Up,' " he says, "is such a great lesson in rockabilly. I still get excited just thinking about how good that song is. James starts out with his funky rhythm deal . . ."

Another fan was Elvis himself, and in 1969, when he needed to put together a touring band, he called on Burton. In the years before and since, many others have called on this native of Shreveport, Louisiana. The list includes such diverse artists as Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, Merle Haggard, Rosanne Cash, Carlene Carter, Hoyt Axton, Roy Orbison, the Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, Gram Parsons, Emmylou Harris, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, Travis Tritt and another Elvis - Costello.

And it all began with "Suzie Q," the 1957 Dale Hawkins hit. Although credited to Hawkins, the song began, says Burton, as "a little instrumental I wrote when I was fourteen or fifteen." Burton at fifteen was already playing guitar on the Louisiana Hayride, a weekly country radio show. A few years later, Hawkins added lyrics to "Suzie Q," but it was Burton who composed and played the guitar figure that makes its break.

Soon after "Suzie Q" hit, Burton joined singer Bob Luman, and on a visit to California they were rehearsing in a room at Liberty Records when the label's hottest new star, Ricky Nelson, heard them. "That's exactly what I want," said Nelson, who was looking to form a tour band. Within days, Ozzie had hired Burton, along with stand-up bassist James Kirkland, to work on the family television show, as well as on tours and recordings. Burton began by playing rhythm on "Waitin' in School" and "Stood Up" in 1957; then, as lead guitarist, he piloted Nelson through another twenty-some hits until 1966.

Stationed by Ricky's side, Burton appeared to be a good-natured buddy, a musical loyalist, ever watchful of the singer's moves, deferring the spotlight to the star (though when the song and the moment called for it, he'd allow himself a couple shakes of his shoulders).

But Burton was more than a sideman. He helped establish Nelson as a credible rockabilly artist. As Peter Guralnick noted, "Ricky Nelson could emulate [rockabilly] in California, but the only way he could begin to approach the rockabilly sound was through the hot guitar runs of James Burton, his Louisiana-born lead guitarist."

After leaving Nelson in 1966, Burton became the lead guitarist in the house band on *Shindig*, a mid-Sixties show on ABC-TV.

While working with Elvis, Burton and other TCB members found time for session work. One artist who came calling was Gram Parsons, the country-rock pioneer whose boyhood idol had been Presley. Parsons, who helped steer the Byrds into country music, met Burton during his stint with that band, and in 1972, when he began work on his first solo album, he hired Burton, Glen D. Hardin and company for his sessions. That album, *GP*, introduced Parsons's new singing partner, Emmylou Harris, to the world. Shortly after Parsons's death in 1973, Harris emerged as a solo artist. In need of a backup band, she knew just where to turn.

James Burton was rarely out front. He did join the legendary steel-guitar player Ralph Mooney in 1967 for sessions that resulted in the album *Corn Pickin' and Slick*



Slidin'. And in 1971, during a lull in a Presley recording session in Nashville, he and his sidekicks, along with producer Felton Jarvis, knocked off a dozen tracks, including a couple of Burton compositions, and issued *The Guitar Sounds of James Burton*, an album as amiable and eclectic as the man himself. The recording was made with

Elvis's blessing and on the King's dime.

But Burton's finest moments are etched in the work he did with Presley, Nelson, Parsons and so many more. They are moments - perfect opening statements, brisk, brilliant breaks and runs, neat accents and filigrees - that amount to hours of the best rock & roll ever made. ●