

Introduction to Speedy West and Jimmy Bryant (Excerpts from Richie Unterberger, *All Music Guide*)

Speedy West

One of the greatest virtuosos that country music has ever produced, Speedy West bridged the western swing and rockabilly eras with eye-popping steel guitar. Besides contributing to literally thousands of country sessions, West cut many of his own instrumentals, as a solo act and with his guitarist partner Jimmy Bryant. Adept at boogie, blues, and Hawaiian ballads, West played with an infectious joy and daring improvisation that, at its most adventurous, could be downright experimental. It's doubtful whether anyone could collect all of Speedy's solos under one roof, but it was his sessions of the 1950s and early '60s -- especially those with Jimmy Bryant -- that found his genius at its most freewheeling and dazzling.

Jimmy Bryant

With steel guitar wizard Speedy West, guitarist Jimmy Bryant formed half of the hottest country guitar duo of the 1950s. With lightning speed and a jazz-fueled taste for improvisation and adventure, Bryant's boogies, polkas, and Western swing -- recorded with West and as a solo artist -- remain among the most exciting instrumental country recordings of all time. Bryant also waxed major contributions to the early recordings of singers like Tennessee Ernie Ford, Merrill Moore, Kay Starr, Billy May, and Ella Mae Morse, and has influenced country guitarists like Buck Owens, James Burton, and Albert Lee. While he enjoyed a career that spanned several decades, it was his sessions with Capitol Records in the early '50s that allowed him his fullest freedom to strut his stuff.

Bryant was a prodigy on the fiddle while growing up in Georgia and Florida. He only took up guitar when he got wounded while serving in the Army in 1945, mastering the instrument quickly during his recuperation. In the late 1940s he moved to Los Angeles, hooking up in jam sessions with West, the first pedal steel guitarist in country music. Bryant soon joined a group of musicians, also including West, that played on Cliffie Stone's Hometown Jamboree radio show, and the West connection also helped him land session work at Capitol Records (though he'd previously done a bit of work for Modern Records). It was only natural that he and West began to record under their own names for Capitol too, while continuing to back other's acts in the studio. During this time Bryant was also one of the first musicians of note to play the electric Telecaster, a model that's become legendary and hugely influential in the sound of the electric guitar throughout popular music.

Bryant became harder to work with by the mid-1950s, in part because of his heavy drinking, and he did his last Capitol recordings with West in late 1956. He'd never be as active in the studio again, and most fans regard his 1950s Capitol output as his best by far. But he did continue to play live and in the studio, doing quite a bit of obscure recordings in the 1960s in Hollywood and Nashville, mostly for the Imperial label. (A lot of his post-West material finally found wide circulation in 2003 with Sundazed's three-CD box set *Frettin' Fingers: The Lightning Guitar of Jimmy Bryant*, which was about evenly divided between the West and post-West eras). He only did a little recording after the 1960s, dying of cancer in September 1980 back in his native Georgia.