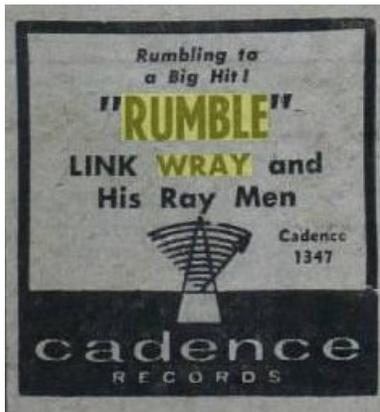


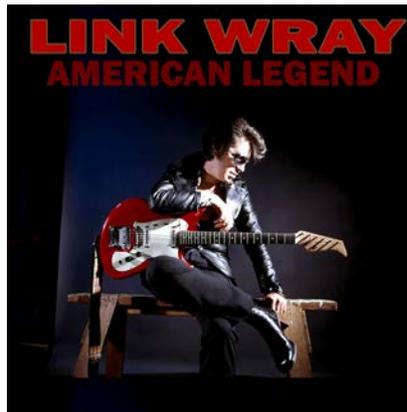
“Rumble”—Link Wray (1958)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Sonya Flowers (guest post)*



Early ad



Link Wray**



Grammy certificate

“Rumble” is the first song to implement the innovative use of power chords with distortion. The unprecedented fuzz guitar tone and undulating tremolo, combined with that controversial title, is the stuff of rock and roll legend. Even though he is the Founding Father of the rock guitar sound, and is among “Rolling Stone” Magazine’s List of 100 Most Important Guitarists, Link Wray, as well as his instantly recognizable trailblazing contribution to modern rock and beyond, is not always recognized by name. That doesn’t change the fact, though, that both have continued to inspire countless would-be superstars of various musical genres for over 60 years. Jimi Hendrix, Pete Townshend, and Jeff Beck, to name a few, have called Link Wray an influence.

Guitarist Slash said, “‘Rumble’ was the rawest form of guitar that all of the guys that I listened to played. It’s where it all started.”

Link Wray was born Fred Lincoln Wray, Jr., on May 2, 1929 in Dunn, North Carolina. He was the second of three sons born to Lillian M. Wray and Fred Lincoln Wray, Sr. There was also older brother, Vernon, who later went by Ray Vernon, and youngest brother, Doug. Their mother, Lillian, was of Shawnee descent, and became affectionately known as Memaw. At the age of 11, a white girl put her knee into Lillian’s back, breaking her spine. Link said of his mother, “She had a strong spirit but weak body.”

At the time, it was not uncommon for Native Americans to identify as Caucasian or Black to avoid further discrimination. “I started to wonder...why are there no other Native Americans in the biz? So after a bit of digging I discovered there were others who people didn’t know about.” -Stevie Salas, Proud Apache musician, and executive producer of the documentary “RUMBLE: The Indians Who Rocked The World.”

Childhood measles diminished Link’s eyesight which led to his signature dark shades. A hearing deficit was attributed to his need to crank up the volume! But those early hardships in addition to the burdens of poverty and racism did little to deter his musical aspirations. Link was eight years old when he had a pivotal encounter with a black circus performer known as Hambone, who showed the young man some pointers. In the 1940s, Link and his two brothers performed music together referred to as western swing. Link later served in the Korean War and contracted tuberculosis. The bout cost him a lung and landed him in recovery for over a year. Doctors told him that he would never be able to sing much less hold a guitar or perform anymore. Again, Link was undaunted.

In the early 1950s, Link was living in Portsmouth, Virginia. Link, along with his brothers, and their cousin, Shorty Horton, formed a band and went by the name of Lucky Wray and The Palomino Ranch Hands. Wray family matriarch, Lilian, and Hank Williams' mother attended church together. When Hank Williams died on January 1, 1953, Link and his brothers performed at the memorial.

By 1957, Link was the leader of the band that played on what was the equivalent of "American Bandstand" on Washington, DC's WTTG-TV. That same year, the singing group The Diamonds had a new song called "The Stroll," to accompany a popular dance of the same name. On July 12th, Link and his brother, Doug, were performing at a record hop in Fredericksburg, Virginia, when the announcer of the show asked Link to play a stroll. Unfamiliar with how a stroll went, Doug, who was on drums said, "I know the beat behind one." As Doug started to play, Link later credited divine inspiration for what he did next. Wray then launched into what has been described as the toughest sounding guitar riff in all of rock music history. The soon to be infamous chord change drove the audience wild. Link recalled how the kids were screaming over his guitar. "We had to play it about four times for the kids. They kept hollering, 'Play that weird song, play that weird song!'" And just like that, the instrumental, with the working title "Oddball," was born.

At the 8th annual Native American Music Awards, or NAMA, on June 8, 2006, E Street Band member Steven Van Zandt inducted Link Wray into its Hall of Fame. Van Zandt said he considered that 1957 record hop to be "one of the most important events in rock and roll history."

Back in DC, Link set out to recapture and record what would become the anthem of attitude that would forever change the way rock and roll was played. But he was unsatisfied with the results using the recording techniques of the day. So, in true Link Wray fashion, he turned to a very unconventional approach to obtain the edgy sound he had tapped into at the Fredericksburg Arena. With a pencil in hand, Link began punching holes in the tweeters of his Premier amplifier until he achieved his totally unique sound. Link said of himself, "I don't consider myself a great musician. I just consider myself an average guitar player who looks for sounds, that's how I made 'Rumble.'"

Ray Davies of The Kinks cites Link as an influence, and called him "the man behind the most important D chord in history."

Once the track was cut, then began the process to find a record label willing to take the chance. Turned down by the major labels, the game-changing Instrumental That Could, sat for a time on the desk of Cadence Records exec Archie Bleyer. But when his teenage step daughter, Jackie, played the record for some friends, they all had the same reaction as the youthful audience who had witnessed its creation months earlier. Jackie not only convinced her stepfather to release the song, but she also gave it its new name--"Rumble." She told Bleyer that the song made her think of the street fights in the recent musical "West Side Story." (As an aside, it is interesting to note that Jackie's mother, Janet, was a member of the female singing group The Chordettes, who had had the 1954 hit "Mr. Sandman." Jackie was later married to fellow Cadence artist Phil Everly of the Everly Brothers, from 1963 to 1970.)

"Rumble" was released March 31, 1958. After being played once by a radio station in New York, the disc jockey promptly smashed the record in front of Link. In disbelief, Link asked why he had done that and the DJ simply said, "I just made you a hit!"

During 1950s America, there were major concerns about gangs and juvenile delinquency. All things perceived as promoting violence were prompting looming legislative censorship, which

thankfully did not come to pass. “Rumble” sounded so dangerous that it was temporarily banned from radio airwaves on the east coast including in the large markets of New York, Boston and Detroit. When Dick Clark introduced Link during his first appearance on “American Bandstand” in 1958, Clark was careful not to say the song title. The attempt to stifle “Rumble” only made it all the more exciting and added to its lore. It had the opposite reaction from Archie Bleyer however; he thought that Link Wray and his Raymen should go country music. That decision was the deal breaker for Link. He was a rock and roller. A fact solidified by “Rumble”!

“‘Rumble,’ [is] the only instrumental in history to be banned for its lyrical content,” as introduced by Rock Hall Inductee Steven Van Zandt, in April 2018 at the Rock Hall's 34th annual induction ceremony. “Rumble” was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's new singles category.

Dubbed “The First Man In Black,” the pompadour hairstyle that Link sported early in his career may have been a nod to Elvis Presley, whom he admired, but his trademark black leather jacket was intended to protect his remaining lung from the cold. Such practicality would round out the look of the King of Cool. While touring, Wray was known to travel with a briefcase full of vitamin supplements to support his health. Not only did he surpass the limiting prognosis after the loss of a lung, he went on to have a career that spanned six decades. It is also worth mentioning Link's impressive vocal prowess on tunes like “Good Rockin' Tonight” and “Fire and Brimstone,” which would challenge singers with a full set of lungs. His cover of Elvis Presley's “Don't,” is sublime, as well as his version of Bob Dylan's “Girl From The North Country.” Link put his own spin on everything he did and that can be heard on his recording of The Animals’ “Born To Be Wild.”

Neil Young has been referred to as the “Godfather of Grunge.” He disagrees by saying “Link Wray...he was the beginning of grunge, way before anyone you know.” The proof being when Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain called Link to ask him for permission to use his “Run Chicken Run” riff, in their song, “Breed,” the ever generous Link agreed. The song appeared on Nirvana's 1991 album “Nevermind.”

Other artists have paid homage to Link by covering his songs, like “Tucson Arizona,” that late great Irish artist Rory Gallagher put on his 1973 album “Tattoo.” In the year 2020, Nathaniel Rateliff released a cover of one of Link's most poignant songs “Falling Rain.”

Others in the entertainment industry have shown Link some love by incorporating his music into their films. A few that have spotlighted “Rumble” include director Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 cult classic “Pulp Fiction.” That movie also contains music by legendary surf guitarist Dick Dale, who performed “Rumble” in his shows throughout the years. The Robert Rodriguez film “Roadracers,” is set in the 1950s, and stars David Arquette and Selma Hayek. That film not only includes “Rumble,” but Link Wray is mentioned by name in the dialogue. “Rumble” is also in the 1996 blockbuster hit “Independence Day.” In 2004, the rockumentary “It Might Get Loud,” shows Jimmy Page playing air guitar to his personal copy of “Rumble.”

Link had been living in Copenhagen, Denmark, since 1980. He wrapped up a tour in the States shortly before passing away at his residence on November 5, 2005 at the age of 76. During their respective shows, Bob Dylan as well as Bruce Springsteen each honored him with their renditions of “Rumble.” The following month a memorial service was held at a church in Fredericksburg, Virginia. The town where “Rumble” was created was chosen as the location so that family and friends in and around the DMV could come and pay their final respects to the Rumble Man.

Neil Young is quoted as saying, “If I could go back in time and see any band, it would be Link Wray and the Raymen.”

Proper credit has not always been assigned to much of Link's early works, and therefore he did not always reap all of the benefits he should have received in his lifetime. Due to the dedication of his eldest daughter Beth Wray Webb, however, the Estate has been restored and his legacy is finally receiving its much deserved recognition. On March 6, 2006, Link Wray posthumously received the Lifetime Achievement Award from First Americans in the Arts.

After the success of "Rumble," Link and his brothers moved operations to Accokeek, Maryland, where three albums were recorded. In a proclamation by Maryland governor Robert Ehrlich, Jr., January 15, 2006 was declared Link Wray Day! On May 22, 2016, Link Wray was inducted into the Maryland Entertainment Hall of Fame.

Local and state representatives gathered in Dunn, NC, along with members of the Wray family to dedicate a historical marker placed 200 yards from Link's childhood home. It states: "Link Wray Inventor of The Power Chord the 'Modus Operandi' in Rock and Roll." A music festival was also held there on what would have been Link's 85th birthday. North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory declared May 2, 2014 Link Wray Day! That same year, Wray was inducted into the North Carolina Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Kannapolis.

Pennington Grass Seed started using "Rumble" in their TV commercial in the spring of 2016.

The documentary "RUMBLE: The Indians Who Rocked the World" was released in July of 2017. A culmination of five years in the making, the film, with the mission to educate viewers about the influence and historical significance of native people in music across the generations, garnered a Sundance award for masterful storytelling, as well as three Canadian Screen Awards, and an Emmy nomination. Executive producer of the film Stevie Salas described it as "the documentary that changed written history in America." In the film, there are tributes to Link and "Rumble" by Iggy Pop, Wayne Kramer of MC5, Dan Auerbach of The Black Keys, and DC-area musician Billy Hancock. In a quote from the film, Mohawk musician Robbie Robertson said, "It changed everything: 'Rumble' made an indelible mark on the whole evolution of rock 'n' roll. And then I found out Link Wray was an Indian!"

Musician, actor, and Rock Hall Inductee, Steven Van Zandt developed a school curriculum titled Teach Rock, wherein "Rumble" is among the lesson plans. Van Zandt said, "It's important people learn Link Wray was more than one song. Although that one song was enough."

A party to celebrate the 60th Anniversary of the release of "Rumble" was held in Greenwich Village, New York, on March 31, 2018. It was organized by Denise Mercedes, the former guitarist of the punk rock band The Stimulators. Denise also has the distinction of being the only female guitarist to share the stage with Link Wray. Link's grandson, Chris Webb, who keeps his grandfather's music going, performed at the event. Jon Paris, a former bass player for Link and one of many fellow musicians who remember Link with fondness, was there. Also in attendance were Steven Van Zandt, along with his wife, Maureen, and their Cavalier King Charles Spaniel.

Uptempo instrumental, and "Rumble" B-side, "The Swag," was used in its entirety in an ad campaign for designer brand Gucci in 2019. It stars Academy Award-winning actor and musician Jared Leto, and multi-platinum singer songwriter Lana Del Ray.

A true musician's musician, Link explained, "I surround myself with good musicians. If I'm doing a show here (in the States) I have Anton Fig, who went to the Conservatory of Music in Boston. He's one of the big session drummers in New York City. He's played with all of 'em. I try to surround myself with good drummers like my brother."

In the information age, the music and memories of Link Wray are constantly shared on social media by his multitudes of fans around the world, and by other musicians who had the pleasure of working with him. People like multi-instrumentalist Rob Stoner, who toured and recorded with Bob Dylan prior to working with Link. Rob shares personal photos and anecdotes of his experiences supporting the two greats who had mutual admiration for each other. Dylan has called “Rumble” “the best instrumental ever.”

“Rumble,” as well as Link Wray and His Raymen were inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame on February 10, 2019. There was an intimate celebration for the creation of “Rumble” on July 12, 2019 near the location of the 1957 record hop in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where it was born. Beth Wray Webb, administrator of the Estate and eldest of her father's five daughters and four sons, was there. She met some local fans of her father, some of whom had been there for the big historic event back in '57. Beth has said, “Daddy's fans are the best in the world. There is even a giant statue of him in Spain.” Beth also says she sees no end in sight when it comes to the legacy and impact of the instrumental that was so far ahead of its time that it still resonates with people everywhere saying, “I don't think it will ever stop. ‘Rumble’ will go on forever.”

Sonya Flowers is a singer, songwriter, music history enthusiast, and longtime resident of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not be those of the Library of Congress.

**Photo of Link by Bruce Steinberg