

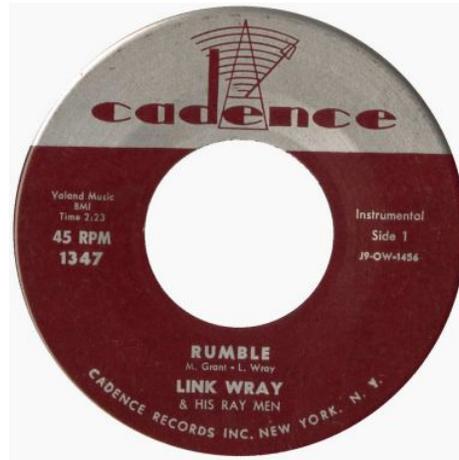
“Rumble”—Link Wray (1958)

Added to the National Registry: 2008

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Link Wray, c. 1958



Original label

He has been called the “missing link” in rock guitar, the connecting force between the early blues guitarists and the later guitar gods of the 1960s (Hendrix, Clapton, Page). He’s the father of distortion and fuzz, the originator of the power chord and the godfather of metal. He seems to be as well the reason the word “thrash” was invented, or at least applied to music.

Link Wray (1929-2005) had a long rock career and released several successful, critically-lauded albums, but his legend is largely tied to his 1958 two and a half-minute instrumental “Rumble.”

When Wray debuted it, “Rumble” rocked like almost nothing before it. “Rolling Stone” later said, “Its ragged, ominous chords, overdriven and dragged to a crawl, sounded like an invitation to a knife fight.” And rock critic/historian Dave Marsh said, “[It] hits you straight through the central nervous system, glazes your eyes, and drops you in your tracks. Short. Nasty. Potentially lethal. So much fun it may even be addictive—and it’s one habit you’ll never want to kick.”

Wray was born Fred Lincoln Wray Jr. in Dunn, North Carolina, the son of a street preacher. His mother was Shawnee Indian and it was not unusual for Wray to encounter racism in his youth. Wray once said, “Elvis, he grew up white-man poor. I was growing up Shawnee poor.” During his childhood, Wray and his family often had to hide out from KKK raids.

A youthful bout with measles weakened Wray’s sight and hearing (it’s supposedly one of the reasons he always played so loud). A later bout with tuberculosis ravaged Wray’s voice and made singing difficult. But, still, nothing stopped him from embracing music, especially the guitar. He took up the instrument early. After serving in the Korean War, Wray, his two brothers, Vernon and Doug, and some friends formed their first band, Lucky Wray and the Lazy Pine Wranglers. Later, they renamed themselves Lucky Wray and the Palomino Ranch Hands. The band specialized in country dances and rock ‘n’ roll sock hops in and around the Washington, DC area.

This was around 1957.

It was in 1957, at a record hop in Fredericksburg, Virginia, that Wray came to “compose” his most famous work—“Rumble.” It was largely improvised, done on the spot while on stage. Wray remembered later that it came about when his boss, local DJ Milt Green, asked Wray and the band to play something that they could do the new dance craze “The Stroll” to. Not knowing

the chords to the recent song of the same name by the Diamonds, Wray began to improvise on his guitar. Then, when someone grabbed one of the mikes and stuck it up to one of the amps, creating the tune's signature distortion, a modern classic was born. "The kids just went ape," according to Wray.

That night, Wray and his band played their new tune four times in a row to appease the suddenly feverish, interested listeners. "Play that weird song! Play that weird song!" chanted the crowd.

Days or months later, when Wray and cohorts went to reproduce that live sound in the studio, sheer ingenuity, and a bit of desperation, took over. Wray later told "Guitar" magazine, "when we went to record it, I didn't get that live sound like I did in Fredericksburg.... [So,] I got a pen and started punchin' holds in the tweeters. I didn't mess with the big speaker. So I started playing and got that distorted sound, plus I had a tremolo. I used a combination of that at the end."

Originally (accurately?) the piece was called "Oddball." When Wray and Milt Grant approached record companies Capitol and Decca to release it however, they both turned him down. But Archie Bleyer, of the Cadence label, surprisingly, decided to take a chance on it. Though Bleyer's independent label was best known for releasing Andy Williams and other more middle-of-the-road stars, he branched out when he signed the Everly Brothers in 1957. He further broke out of the box after listening to his daughter who had heard the Wray recording and liked it. Legend has it that she also renamed the tune. After she and her friends decided that its sound called to mind street gangs, fights and "West Side Story," she rechristened it "Rumble." It was the name that stuck.

Released in April 1958, "Rumble" by Link Wray and His Ray Men was a major hit in the spring and summer in both stores and on jukeboxes--but not on radio. Interestingly, though "Rumble" contained no lyrics, many radio stations banned "Rumble" for its incendiary title. The nation at that time, anxious over sudden spikes in juvenile delinquency, was eager to drum out anything that could be cited as an instigator. Industry charts of the time show that "Rumble" scored just as strongly, if not more so, with young black audiences, as it did with white teenagers, no doubt adding further to the furor.

And, true, there is something progressive sounding, envelope-pushing, even a little...*dangerous* in this musical solo. It's been said that it made the guitar sound "dirty." And, frankly, it's hard to argue. Meanwhile, the repeated climbing scales within the work do create an eager anticipation. It's an escalation that can drive a listener to a frenzy of un-exorcised excitement. Did adult authorities at the time of "Rumble's" release fear what the youth of America might be inspired to do by this wild music?

Furthermore, the incorporation of sound distortion within the track—which would lay the groundwork for a million punk and metal works to come—made "Rumble" incredibly anti-establishment. What is more rebellious than when the music is turned back on itself?

Nevertheless, dangerous or not, "Rumble" endured, and greatly influenced other musicians. Pete Townsend has said "Rumble" was the reason he first picked up a guitar. Bob Dylan called it the "greatest instrumental ever" and Bruce Springsteen and Paul McCartney have also praised it. As have The Kinks, The Cramps, Jeff Beck, Duff McKagan, Jack Rose, Jimmy Page, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Marc Bolan, P.J. Harvey and Neil Young, among others.

"Rumble" has also endlessly resurfaced. The track has been incorporated into the soundtracks of such films as "Pulp Fiction" and "Independence Day."

After the success of “Rumble,” Wray (as Link Wray and the Wraymen) recorded some smaller, less controversial hits, such as “Raw-Hide” which came out in 1959. But Wray never repeated the success of “Rumble,” though he and his band remained a popular live attraction for many years. Later, Wray singles included “Jack the Ripper” in 1961 and “The Shadow Knows” from 1965.

During his career, Wray released over 20 albums for various labels (though, notably, “Rumble” was his lone release for Cadence). He also worked prolifically as a sideman and in various rock ‘n’ roll stage revues, was a superstar in the DC music community and always a worldwide underground rock hero. He was introduced to new audiences in the late 1970’s when he teamed for a time with neo-rockabilly singer Robert Gordon and the duo released two albums.

Nevertheless, Wray periodically quit the music business altogether. He quit first in 1965 in order to become a farmer and, later, scaled back most of his American work when he married a Dutch woman, Olive Poslov (the last of his four wives), and moved to Denmark. He died in November 2005.

In his career, Wray was known as music’s other man in black for his onstage attire which always consisted of black leather, dark shades and a hairstyle that altered a pompadour with a pony tail. His persona fit his music well—the animated sounds he got out of his guitar, his go-for-broke style would foster a whole new attitude in rock; it’s hard to imagine The Who ever having the courage to smash their instruments on stage without the impulse beget by “Rumble.”

Still inspiring musicians, and still sounding stunningly modern, “Rumble,” now fifty some years after its birth, has fully lived up to its name.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).