

Link Wray,
1984



LINK WRAY

THE LIFELONG JOURNEYMAN'S
INCENDIARY SOUND SET THE STANDARD
FOR ROCK & ROLL GUITAR.

BY DAVID FRICKE

It's as simple as this. There was rock & roll guitar before "Rumble" – the fleet, country picking and blues intonation of Scotty Moore at Sun Records for Elvis Presley; the jubilant precedent in Chuck Berry's chugging twang and spikes of treble; Cliff Gallup's stabbing poise and slashing precision with Gene Vincent and the Blue Caps.

But then there's everything that happened after "Rumble," Link Wray's seismic 1958 single, the most influential and enduring rock-guitar instrumental of all time: the serial revolutions in riffing, distortion, and power chords; the cycle of thrills in garage rock, psychedelia, heavy metal, and punk; the full six-string alphabet of mayhem from AC/DC to ZZ Top.

Released by Cadence Records in March 1958, Wray's slow-rolling fury of crusted fuzz, tremolo shiver, and pummeling, staccato strum was a ton of prophecy in two minutes and twenty-three seconds – and so irresistible in its audacity that it went to Number Sixteen on *Billboard's* Hot 100 despite widespread banning at AM radio because of the implied juvenile violence in the title. For that censure alone – a remarkable achievement for a record without lyrics – Link Wray has long deserved induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, an absence finally addressed with his entry this year as a Musical Influence.

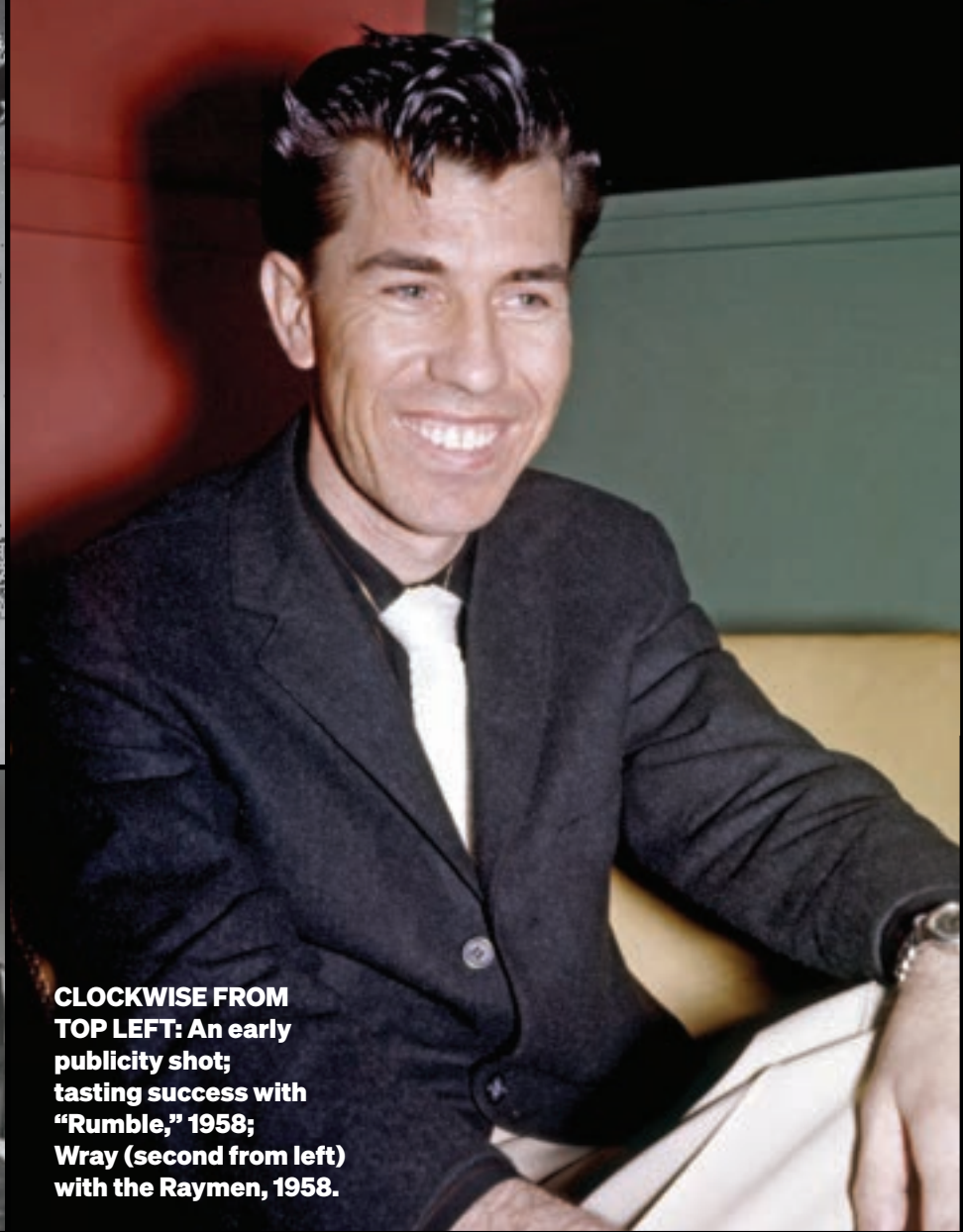
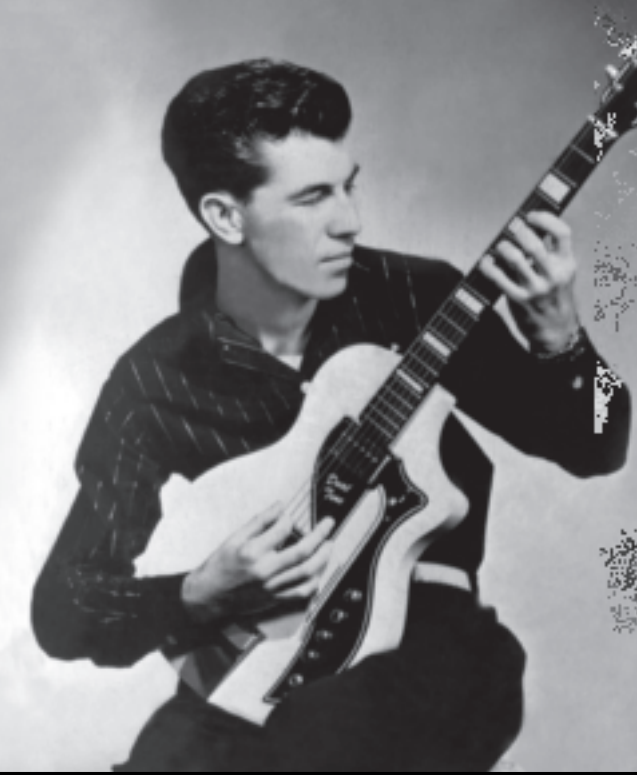
Most of the guitarists already inducted were originally his students and disciples. In the 2008 documentary

It Might Get Loud, you can see ex-Yardbird and Led Zeppelin founder Jimmy Page drop the needle on a vintage U.K. pressing of "Rumble," acknowledging that record's blueprint for Zeppelin's power-blues success with a broad grin. During a 2013 television interview with Stephen Colbert, Iggy Pop of the Stooges recalled hearing "Rumble" for the first time in the student union at the University of Michigan. "I left school emotionally at that point," he said, "the moment I heard 'Rumble.'"

And in 1971, when the Who's Pete Townshend unexpectedly met Wray in a New York recording studio, Townshend "approached the man, knelt down before him, and bowed deeply," according to a report in *Rolling Stone*. "If it hadn't been for Link Wray and 'Rumble,'" Townshend declared that day, "I never would have picked up a guitar."

Wray's time in the Top Forty was brief, ending with the jangling swing of "Raw-Hide," which peaked at Number 23 in 1959. But the guitarist – often in league with his brothers Vernon and Doug as his Raymen bandmates and studio hands – kept up a barrage of exciting singles through the sixties, on a dizzying variety of labels, which affirmed Wray's eclectic aggression and melodic invention: the striking fusion of rockabilly and proto-raga in "Jack the Ripper"; the barn-dance-Yardbirds effect of the clucking-treble hook in "Run Chicken Run."

In the early seventies, Wray got a head start on two



**CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT: An early
publicity shot;
tasting success with
“Rumble,” 1958;
Wray (second from left)
with the Raymen, 1958.**

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important movements – the home-studio phenomenon and alternative-country music – reinventing himself as a singer-songwriter in a converted chicken coop, Wray’s Three-Track Shack, on brother Vernon’s Maryland farm. A run of roots-rock LPs (including *Link Wray* in 1971, which almost came out on the Beatles’ Apple label) did not sell at the time but found the guitarist in admiring company; session musicians included Boz Scaggs and the Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia. Those records are now considered classic early Americana by younger artists, such as guitarist Dan Auerbach of the Black Keys and singer Chris Robinson of the Black Crowes.

Then in the late seventies, Wray – nearing his fiftieth birthday – got another, surprising turn in the limelight, playing guitar on two albums by singer and rockabilly

purist Robert Gordon. In a 1977 *Rolling Stone* interview, Gordon recalled the night in the late fifties when, as a schoolboy in Maryland, he saw Wray in concert at the height of his “Rumble” fame. “The cat was outside,” Gordon raved. “When I listen to music, my mind usually focuses on the singer. But when I heard Link, I knew he was one of a kind.”

Another compelling reason for Wray’s induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame: He was the first Native American rock star. The guitarist was born Fred Lincoln Wray Jr. on May 2, 1929, in Dunn, North Carolina, a small town in hardscrabble country. Fred Sr. struggled to make ends meet; Link’s mother, Lillian Mae, was full-blooded Shawnee. Link, the middle of their three sons, often referenced his indigenous heritage in song



Johnny Winter, Dave Edmunds, Wray, David Gilmour, and Brian Setzer (from left) at the “Guitar Greats” concert, Passaic, New Jersey, 1984



At Ponderosa Stomp with guitarist Mike Vernon, New Orleans, 2005. LEFT: With Robert Gordon (far left) and Bruce Springsteen, 1977.

titles (“Days Before Custer” on a 1972 album, *Mordecai Jones*; “Shawnee Tribe” on *Beans and Fatback* in 1973).

He also remembered the poverty of his childhood – the family’s home was a shack with a dirt floor and no electricity – and the racism. “The Klan would come with their capes and burning crosses,” Wray told writer Jimmy McDonough, “pull out the Black people . . . and beat the shit out of ’em. We’d hide underneath the bed, hopin’ they wouldn’t come for us.”

Wray was just out of his teens when he got his first guitar in 1949, striving to play like his hero Chet Atkins, although the rough, volcanic sound of “Rumble” – partly achieved by Wray punching holes in his amplifier speakers with a pen – was arguably closer to the raw hallelujah of his favorite singer, Ray Charles. After two years in the Army (and a bout with tuberculosis that left him with a damaged lung), Wray played country music with different bands, recording two singles for the Texas label Starday in 1956 and ’57.

“Rumble” arrived by accident, according to legend, at a teen dance in Fredericksburg, Virginia, where Link Wray and the Raymen were trying to play “The Stroll,” the Diamonds’ 1957 single. Wray wasn’t too sure how the original went. But his rewiring of the song – droning chords and an avalanche hook in the turnaround, powered by the heavy menace of Doug’s drumming – caused the audience to rush the stage, especially after Vernon put a mic in front of Link’s

amp, cranking up the distortion. By the end of the night, by popular demand, Wray had played that impromptu dynamite “four or five times,” he told McDonough.

Wray cut “Oddball,” as it was called at first, in a Philadelphia studio for seventy-five dollars (including the B side). An acetate made its way to Cadence boss Archie Bleyer who – more comfortable with the country harmonies and malt-shop appeal of his big act, the Everly Brothers – passed the disc to his teenage stepdaughter. She loved it and suggested a better title, “Rumble.”

The single ensured Wray’s legend if not his fortune. A lifelong journeyman, the guitarist released nearly two dozen albums over four decades and stayed on the road until his death in November 2005 at 76 in Denmark, his adopted home since the early eighties. “Record companies would never let me do what I wanted to do,” Wray said in 1971. “They’d get me in the studio and say, ‘Okay, Link, let’s try something like this.’ . . . They never seemed to realize that good music just happens. That was the way we did ‘Rumble.’”

More than a half-century after that night in Fredericksburg, Wray’s signature fireball became the title of an acclaimed 2017 documentary about the secret history of indigenous rock & roll, *Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World* – and rightly so, because he was the first. Link Wray is now, at last, in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Get ready to rumble.