

## Link Wray: The Dark Guitar Hero

Dirty, ringing chords that hang in the air like omens; a primitive, numbing bass line creeping along eerily, drums that might have been played on upended trash cans. Like the purest of all rock 'n' roll, Link Wray's 1958 hit "Rumble" was mystifyingly simplistic. Four chords and a guitar solo that was more a wall of white noise than a picking party; any teenager with the barest knowledge of their instrument could technically play it. But to be technical about it was to miss the point entirely. One couldn't simply *play* "Rumble," one had to conjure the song's underlying menace, that ethereal mood that made it the perfect sound track to a gang fight; the very thing that got it banned for being obscene although it had no lyrics.

Cadence Records President Archie Bleyer despised the song, but trusted his daughter's teenage intuition and released it anyway. Selling four million copies, "Rumble" (and its follow-up "Rawhide") jump-started the guitar instrumental revolution popularized by the Ventures and Shadows while laying the blue print for future phenomena such as garage, punk, metal, glam and grunge. Yet despite his overwhelming influence, Wray dwelt in the shadows rather than the spotlight for most of his career; his stalking, sinister sound too raw and relentless for mass consumption.

Born May 2, 1929 in Dunn, North Carolina, Wray came from Shawnee Indian stock and grew up dirt poor. "Elvis came from welfare," he once cracked, "I came from below welfare." He stumbled upon his signature sound when Washington D.C. promoter Milt Grant asked his band to play a stroll song. Not knowing one, the Wraymen rhythm section began laying

down a slinky back-beat while brother Vernon placed the vocal microphone in front of Link's guitar amplifier. "Rumble" got four encores on the night of its creation.

Unable to duplicate the grungy force of a guitar blasting through a P.A. system at the subsequent recording session, Link shoved pencils through his speaker cone. It was a premonition of sorts; the Wray wrecking crew later miked a studio floor in order to substitute stamping feet for drums.

Plying his trade in the rough D.C. clubs, Wray's black leather image and outlandish guitars went hand in hand with song titles that were as foreboding as their dark sounds: "Ace Of Spades," "Jack The Ripper," "Run Chicken Run," "Black Widow," "Comanche." On the rare occasion that Wray sang (he was left with one lung after contracting TB while serving in Korea) his voice was as terrifying as his guitar style: he stripped Jimmy Reed's "Ain't That Lovin' You Baby" to its rawest nerve, yelping, growling and shuddering in a style that simultaneously prefigured both Mick Jagger and Lux Interior; while he amped Howlin' Wolf's "Hidden Charms" into a roaring wail of garage punk mayhem.

Though his praises have been sung by everyone from David Bowie and Bruce Springsteen to Marc E. Smith and Billy Childish, he's never been inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall Of Fame. In death, as in life, Link Wray remains an outsider, but perhaps that's as it should be. Coming from a time when rock 'n' roll had yet to be divided into the sub-genres that he trail-blazed, his sound was truly his own, and he was still destroying audiences right up until his death on November 5.

"He is the king," wrote Pete Townsend in the liner notes to one of Link's early '70s LPs. "If it hadn't been for Link Wray and "Rumble" I would never have picked up a guitar."