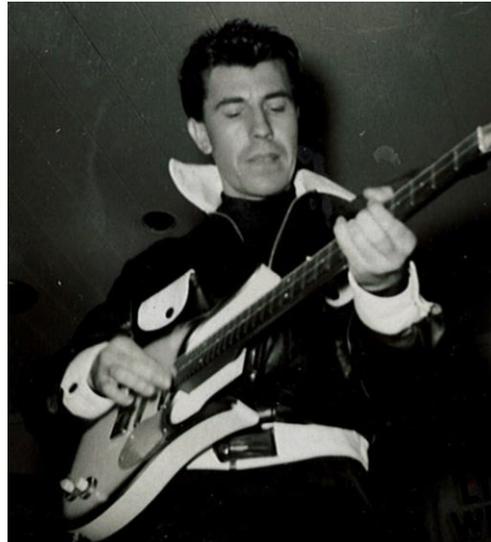


LINK WRAY



<i>Recording years</i>	<i>Main genre</i>	<i>Music sample</i>
<i>1958-2000</i>	<i>Early rock'n'roll</i>	<i>Raw-Hide (1959)</i>

Only Solitaire

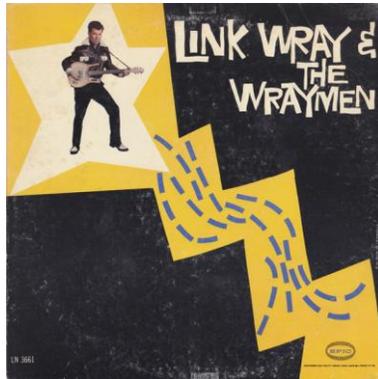
Artist: *Link Wray*

Years: *1958-1960*

George Starostin's Reviews

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LINK WRAY & THE WRAYMEN

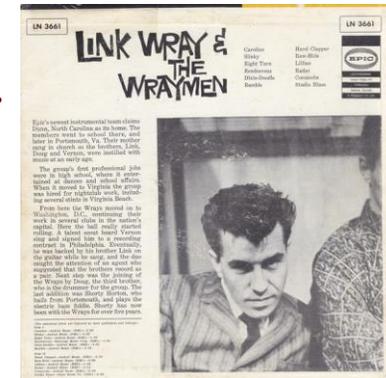
Album released:

February 1960

V A L U E

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More info:



Tracks: 1) Caroline; 2) Slinky; 3) **Right Turn**; 4) Rendezvous; 5) Dixie-Doodle; 6) Ramble; 7) Hand Clapper; 8) **Raw-Hide**; 9) Lillian; 10) Radar; 11) **Comanche**; 12) Studio Blues.

REVIEW

Unfortunately, the most glaring omission on Link Wray's first LP, which, on the whole, does a good job of collecting his early A- and B-sides and supplementing them with album-only material, is the very composition that made the man famous in the first place, and would go on to serve as his calling card for eternity. Unfortunate, but understandable, since the self-titled album came out on the big Epic label, with which Link signed up after 'Rumble' had become a big hit for the tiny Cadence Records in New York. Ironically, Cadence's biggest artist at the time were the Everly Brothers, and legend has it that it was none other than Phil himself who suggested the title of 'Rumble', because the sound reminded him so much of one. Guess those Everlies were actually tougher than they looked, after all...



In any case, it is impossible *not* to begin our story of Link Wray without mentioning 'Rumble' — the only instrumental composition to ever have been banned by radio stations, so they say, although this is a bit of a ruse: no doubt, the ban was due to the title of the song rather than the actual music. Had Link not followed the advice of Phil "Tough Street Kid" Everly and called the piece, oh, I dunno, 'A Day In Paradise', there would hardly be any banning — but then, perhaps, the song

would have diminished returns in the long run, like any piece of forbidden fruit that suddenly becomes un-forbidden. As for the inherent sense of «danger» in the music itself — there is no doubt that, by the standards of March 1958, it was there all right, but were those sounds by themselves truly *that* scary to a bunch of DJs in New York and Boston? If yes, I'd actually like to tip my hat to the deep, sharp sensitivity of those record-spinning types.

Today, it might be hard to understand what was so shattering about the rumblin' sound of 'Rumble'. It's painfully slow and even more painfully simplistic. It repeats the same bunch of power chords over and over again — the same power chords you have heard on countless rock records ever since; plug in any live performance of the Who jamming around 'My Generation', for instance, and there's your 'Rumble' all over the place. It is pretty atrociously produced, too, since Cadence Records in 1958 did not have the best studio technology at their disposal. Honestly, it produces the impression of a quick warm-up for the band rather than a self-standing composition (not too surprising, since Link and his band developed it out of their struggle to master 'The Stroll' by The Diamonds). I myself remember very clearly a sharp sense of disappointment upon hearing the song for the first time: "*THAT* is supposed to be the foundation of the Link Wray legend?" And to be honest... some of that disappointment still lingers on.

Oh, needless to say, the legend of 'Rumble' is fully redeemable when the song is put in context. Who was *the* kick-ass cool cat of instrumental rock'n'roll back in 1958? Duane Eddy. Could Duane Eddy, even with the assistance of his ingenious sidekick Lee Hazlewood, have recorded anything like 'Rumble'? Not on your life — Duane Eddy was all about the art of melodic twang, not of the repetitive distorted power chord. And while Link certainly did not invent the distorted power chord, it was 'Rumble' that dared to put the distorted power chord at the center of the song's melodic structure rather than use it as an auxiliary device, like in the guitar solo on 'Jailhouse Rock' or as an outro flourish on lots of other rock'n'roll tunes. On top of that, there's added effort to make the track feature all possible types of «dirtiness»: shades of feedback, crude-nasty distortion, deliriously choking guitar trills in place of a proper solo, and an increasing tremolo effect toward the end of the track so you could properly experience your brain shattering in little pieces.

Yet even with all of that, I regularly catch myself that whenever I'm in the mood for a bit of that old Link Wray punkishness, 'Rumble' is the song that I almost never put on — rather, it is the song that is diligently stacked on the memory shelf reserved for «respectable classics». Even on this album alone, songs like 'Raw-Hide' or 'Right Turn' are the involuntary choices to which I turn in this matter. 'Rumble' is just a bit too slow for me, and I do not like to overstate the importance of songs based exclusively on their historical significance or symbolic value. As gratifying as it is to watch [old Jimmy Page](#)

[grooving to the groove](#), there is a nostalgia vibe about it — and in some way, ‘Rumble’s being way ahead of its time did a disservice to the tune itself, because the song’s «don’t-fuck-with-us» message would be seriously perfected by the hard rock bands of the 1960s. The cool, lightweight rockabilly vibe of the 1950s would really be gone forever, which is why all those Bill Haley and Elvis Sun-era records are still fun to play; meanwhile, the seriously pissed-off vibe of ‘Rumble’ would be proudly carried on, deepened and improved. (Even by Link himself! Watch this [live recording of ‘Rumble’](#) from a 1974 show at Winterland — even slower than the original, but several times dirtier, as if the collective spirits of Neil Young, Lou Reed, and Tony Iommi crept all the way up into the player’s fingers).

Returning back to 1958, one might also mention the B-side to ‘Rumble’, just as irreverently called ‘The Swag’. Amusingly, it boasts the very element that I sorely miss on ‘Rumble’ — the speed — but the actual melody is less «swaggy» than ‘Rumble’, with Link’s guitar being a little more quiet and the main repetitive riff being rather inobtrusive. Of the two sides of the single, this one, I think, would have been more to the liking of somebody like J. J. Cale, delivering its artistic message in a most nonchalant, «come-see-me-out-if-you’re-really-interested» manner. Now if you took the anger and self-importance of ‘Rumble’ and somehow matched it to the speed of ‘The Swag’, that would have been one hell of a recording! As it is, it’s like watching Ian Anderson stand on one leg for half a minute, *then* blow his flute for the other half minute.

But do not get me wrong: this critique of ‘Rumble’ is not at all driven by the desire to prove that Link Wray is in some way «overrated» in critical circles. To the contrary, its purpose is rather to try to show that Link Wray has had a long, productive and entertaining career, of which ‘Rumble’ was only the beginning, and that his output should be in no way limited to ‘Rumble’, just like the Rolling Stones should not be judged exclusively on the basis of ‘Satisfaction’. The fact that he never again had a hit single comparable to the success of ‘Rumble’ (in fact, he only had two other singles hit the charts at all!) is a crying shame, and I would much rather have my ensuing reviews try to offer a little assistance in rectifying this situation than merely parrot the common praise for ‘Rumble’, repeating the same stale phrases of praise that have already been churned, re-churned, and over-churned out by miriads of sources.

Anyway, given the success of ‘Rumble’ it might have been expected that Wray’s follow-up, now that he’d got a contract with the much more powerful label of Epic, would be something in the exact same vein — and he *did* record another tune in the same vein, appropriately titled ‘Ramble’, set to the same shuffling tempo and also alternating a simple power chord riff with mad guitar trills. However, the slightly more complex riff of ‘Ramble’ ends up sounding not so much kicking sand in your face as gently patting your hair — it’s almost romantic instead of rebellious, and if you play the two tracks back to back you

might even be tempted to throw this evidence in the already overfilled pot of proof of how rock'n'roll was «mellowing out» in the interim from 1958 to 1960. In the larger context of Wray's body of work, this seems more like a coincidence, but there's a good reason why 'Rumble' is the stuff of legend and 'Ramble' is rarely, if ever, mentioned.

In any case, fortunately, the follow-up single to 'Rumble' was not 'Ramble', but rather 'Raw-Hide' — which, as it happens, is (at least currently) my favorite Link Wray piece of all time. It might not have as much defiant in-yer-face minimalism as 'Rumble', or as much use of feedback and tremolo effects, but it's got just as much aggression, it's got more melody, and it got *speed*, baby! Tighter by a mile than 'The Swag', it takes the essence of surf-rock and inverts it with plenty of distortion and feedback — in my mind, I can see 'Raw-Hide' as an inoffensive background dance tune for a beach party (and perhaps Dick Clark could see it too, giving us an exceedingly rare glimpse of [a young Link Wray in /finger-synched/ action](#)), but not with *that* guitar tone, oh no. Throw in younger brother Doug Wray's hyperactive rolls and fills and Ray Vernon's unnerving one-finger-on-the-piano counterpoints, and the track is simply an unstoppable tornado that only keeps gaining and gaining in intensity, with Link going higher and higher on each new solo until that final instrumental break reaches the kind of high-pitched rock'n'roll ecstasy that so few of the rock'n'rollers in the following generations would be able to match (Alvin Lee, perhaps, or Lindsey Buckingham at their best).

Alas, 'Raw-Hide' would be the next-to-last time any Link Wray composition would find its way to the charts. Its June 1959 follow-up was 'Comanche', the first of several tunes named after an Indian ethnos in honor of Link's Native American roots (his mother allegedly was Shawnee, which is, strictly speaking, about as distant from a Comanche as a Hungarian would be from a Basque, but we certainly won't hold this against anybody). Opening with a bit of a «tribal» beat and featuring the first vocal touch ever on a Link Wray record (the entire band yelling "*COMA-A-A-A-NCHE!*" at the top of their lungs as if «Comanche» was the name of a football team), the tune itself is more of a moody blues-rock instrumental than a fast rock'n'roll or «proto-punk» number, but Link's massacring of the strings is just as brutal here as it is on 'Rumble' and 'Raw-Hide', and the composition certainly did not deserve to flop. Of note is that 'Lillian', the B-side, is Link's first foray into the sentimental side of pop music, and a good one, showing how you can express genuine romantic feeling without getting too entangled in the saccharine clichés of easy-going surf music. Instead of sweet, clean tones, Link drowns the listener in a mess of arpeggios and trills that nicely convey the idea of a caring heart under a violent exterior.

By the time Link got to 'Slinky' (October 1959), one could justifiably accuse the man of getting a tad too formulaic — here be another instrumental set to exactly the same pattern as 'Rumble' (main theme = a simple riff sliding across the scale and

ending in a complex, «decisive» phrase; followed up by a couple of hyperactive solos with heavy emphasis on trills and feedback). Then again, 1959 was not 1967, and Link Wray was not Jimi Hendrix: like all the other Fifties' heroes, he'd found his personal cozy groove and he was perfectly comfortable about just going around hanging up new drapes and adding more mantelpiece ornaments. Apparently, diminishing and vanishing chart returns did not bother him in the least. And 'Slinky', if anything, does sound a bit... well, slinky. It's like a thinner, nerdier, a trifle more civilized little brother to 'Rumble', reaching similar goals through subtler musical means. Meanwhile, if you want less formula, there's always 'Rendezvous', the «romantic» B-side that starts out like a kiddie version of 'It's Now Or Never' (with the piano, for the first time, getting as much significance as the guitar), then moves into dynamic blues-rock for the bridge sections — certainly an unorthodox approach to the ballad idiom, though probably influenced by similar tricks on Duane Eddy numbers.

All of these songs, except for the first single, would be included on Epic's first LP for Link, simply titled **Link Wray & The Wraymen** — and the album-only inclusions, while rarely reaching the peak level of the instantaneously memorable singles like 'Raw-Hide', were still noteworthy. 'Right Turn', while very much melodically in debt to 'Raw-Hide', was even more feedback-drenched; listening to the way in which its non-stop guitar crackling interacts with the one-note piano banging brings on inescapable associations with the Stooges' 'I Wanna Be Your Dog' — absolutely no doubt where they got *that* kind of sound from. 'Caroline' and 'Studio Blues' throw some saxophone into the mix, at the risk of being confused with Duane Eddy (well, 'Caroline' is most certainly a Duane tribute; 'Studio Blues' is closer to the 'Rumble' formula). And 'Hand Clapper' is a nice example of how well Link can alternate between «twanging» and «ringing» tones without losing the overall fun vibe. All in all, though, I do admit that things like throwing an extra saxophone into the mix aren't exactly doing much to showcase Link Wray's impressive stylistic range — with surf-rock sax already beaten to death by Duane Eddy by early 1960, it makes Link look more like a panderer than an innovator.

Even so, despite the obvious formulaic limitations inevitably stemming from the overall late Fifties' atmosphere, 'Rumble', 'Raw-Hide', 'Comanche' and even 'Slinky' or quirky ballads like 'Rendezvous' are all an essential part of those years' musical legacy. Contrary to some of the fanboys, I do not seriously believe that the somewhat subdued and formulaic feel of Link's early output was the result of an intentional artistic compromise that made him suffer or anything — the guy was never an avantgarde artist or anything like that, he *wanted* his records to sell, and for that, they had to sound relatively tame and well-disciplined. But even then, they still ended up sounding wilder and dirtier than anything else around; there is virtually nothing like 'The Right Turn' on any of the contemporary Duane Eddy or Ventures albums. Link was far from the first guitarist to toy around with feedback and distortion — but, arguably, he was the first guitarist to make a regular living for

himself with feedback and distortion, reveling in them on a daily basis where people like, say, the Burnette Brothers would typically be saving them for special occasions. How he also managed to give that feedback and distortion a rather polite makeover in order to make it commercially palatable is a part of his genius — although, admittedly, judging by the rapid decline of commercial interest, that kind of makeover was ultimately judged as insufficient by the overly cautious American consumer in the 1960s, who would rather buy a Ventures single than a Link Wray one.

