



Link Wray, “Rumble,” and Growing Up “Shawnee Poor”

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What does Link Wray’s biography say about how Native Americans lived in the first half of the 20th century, and what role did Wray’s upbringing have on his music?

OVERVIEW

Many would argue that Rock and Roll has historically been the music of rule breakers. It turns out that Rock and Roll is also the music of guitar amp

breakers. Beginning in 1953 with guitarist Willie Kizart’s crackling part on Jackie Brenston and his Delta Cats’ “Rocket 88,” which was performed on a “broken” guitar amp, many guitarists in the emerging genre of Rock and Roll sought to overdrive and distort their sound. The Rolling Stones’ Keith Richards used a hi-tech new “fuzzbox” to achieve the menacing distortion heard on the 1965 hit “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction.” And, like many young guitarists did at the time, The Kinks’ Dave Davies slit the speaker cones on his amp to get the fuzzy tone of the 1964 hit, “You Really Got Me.” However, it likely wasn’t another British rocker, or even Kizart that Richards and Davies were emulating. It was Link Wray, a Native American from rural North Carolina.

In January 1958, brothers Link, Doug, and Vernon Wray were performing as the house band in Fredericksburg, Virginia for a record hop organized by local DJ and TV personality Milt Grant. Shortly into the show, audience members requested the band play “The Stroll,” a song released a month earlier by The Diamonds. Link, the group’s guitar player, had spent much of the previous year in the hospital recovering from tuberculosis, and didn’t know “The Stroll.” Doug, the drummer, counted the song off anyway. Link had no choice but to play *something*. That something, which they named “Rumble,” was mostly three chords and a riff, sustained above Doug Wray’s lumbering 12/8 beat by the crunchy tone of Link Wray’s deliberately slashed speakers.

“It changed everything,” says Robbie Robertson in the film *Rumble: The Indians who Rocked the World*, “‘Rumble’ made an indelible mark on the whole evolution of where Rock and Roll was going to go.” Wray’s guitar part, simple to the ears of many, encapsulated the powerfully defiant attitude that would become a defining characteristic of future Rock subgenres such as Hard Rock, Punk, and Heavy Metal. Both Pete Townshend of The Who and Led Zeppelin’s



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

Jimmy Page cite "Rumble" as a defining influence. Vocalist Iggy Pop remembers, "'Rumble' had the power to push me over the edge...it helped me say, 'I'm going to be a musician.'" Pop wasn't the only person who felt "Rumble," an instrumental, might push one "over the edge." Fearing that "Rumble" could inspire juvenile delinquency, it was banned by several radio stations, even in major cities such as Boston and New York. Though the song is nearly 60 years old, "Rumble" continues to evoke strong feelings in many, and it has been placed in films and TV Shows such as *Pulp Fiction*, *Independence Day*, and *The Sopranos*.

Some suggest the raw emotional power of "Rumble" is a musical reflection on the Wrays' tumultuous childhoods. The Wray brothers were born in Dunn, North Carolina, to a Shawnee mother. "While Elvis grew up white-man poor," Link often said, comparing himself to one of his idols, "I grew up Shawnee poor." His mother was crippled by racist violence she experienced as a child, his father shellshocked by his experience as a soldier World War I. As a child, Link sometimes hid with his brothers under their beds as the Ku Klux Klan terrorized their segregated neighborhood. But at the same time, Link's childhood in Dunn positively contributed to his musical development. His mother, a street preacher, instilled in him a love of song, and a local blues musician known as Hambone gave him his first guitar lessons. As filmmaker Antonino D'Ambrosio suggests in *RUMBLE*, these musical influences might have allowed Wray to take his difficult past and translate it in proactive ways.

In this lesson, students watch clips from *RUMBLE: The Indians Who Rocked The World* and explore Link Wray's position as an influence on later Hard Rock and Heavy Metal musicians. Students will investigate the history of the Shawnee Tribe, and use Wray as a case study to consider what life might have been like for a Shawnee in the American South during the early 20th Century. Finally, students debate ways Wray's early life might have contributed to his future musical achievements--particularly "Rumble."



OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How racism affected Native Americans in the mid 20th century
- A basic history of the Shawnee tribe
- About Shawnee-U.S. Government interactions under Presidents Jefferson and Jackson
- About the Shawnee role in the War of 1812
- About The Indian Removal Act and the Trail of Tears
- How segregating communities resulted in tight family units and the transmission of culture among different minority communities
- The effects wars can have on American veterans
- Connections between poverty and health in the United States
- The role faith and religion played in Link Wray's development
- The extent to which a musician's personal life might influence their music

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- By examining videos and autobiographical accounts of Link Wray's early life students will be able to imagine what life for a Shawnee person might have been like in the first half of the 20th Century, and how such an experience might have impacted Wray's music.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Tell students that they will begin with a free writing exercise. Ask students to choose a musician, actor, athlete, or other public figure, and to consider how what they know about that person's upbringing might have contributed to their current career. If students do not know much about the biographies of their choices, encourage them to write creatively and imagine what that person's young life might have been like. Then, ask students to volunteer to share their responses.

2. Ask the class:

- In what ways do you think a person's childhood might affect their future?

PROCEDURE:

1. Explain to students that in this lesson they will be learning about Link Wray, half-Shawnee Native American from North Carolina who was a major influence on Rock, Hard Rock, Punk, and Metal guitarists. Play Clip 1, "The Birth of Rumble." Ask students:

- What is it about the guitar sound of "Rumble" that seems to have influenced so many guitarists, including those interviewed in this clip?
- How would you compare the guitar playing on "Rumble" with the early footage of Wray that opens Clip 1? (Considering replaying the first few moments of Clip 1 if necessary).
- How might you describe the sound of "Rumble"? How might you describe Wray's demeanor on stage in Clip 1? What about this might have influenced young musicians in the late 1950s?
- Though it is an instrumental song, "Rumble" was banned on many radio stations, including those in major cities such as New York and Boston. What about the song do you think some found so threatening? (*Note to teacher: The song title, "Rumble," was thought to reference gang fighting--West Side Story was popular at the time--and many thought the sound might "contribute to juvenile delinquency"*).

2. Tell students that you will now consider how the "distorted" sound of guitar was developed, and what it might have represented to some at the time. Play Clip 2, "Soundbreaking - The Development of the Fuzz Tone," and ask students:

- How do the musicians in this clip describe the sound of the guitar? What are some of the terms they use to describe this unique sound?
- Can you think of a song you like that has a distorted guitar?

- Why might a guitar that sounds "distorted," "aggressive," like a "monster" or a "villain" be a desired quality for musicians?
- (Optional: ask students if there are any guitar players in the class, and if they use distortion on their guitar, and why)
- When do you think this sound might have first been created? Do you think it happened before the creation of the fuzz pedal mentioned in the clip?

• *Note to teacher: If you would like students to have a hands-on experience with guitar effects, try the TeachRock Guitar Effects TechTool.*

3. Tell students that to consider Link Wray's early life in North Carolina as a Shawnee, they will first explore Shawnee history. Distribute Handout 1 - "The Shawnee," and read it aloud as a class. Then ask:

- Where do you think the Wray ancestors fit in among the Shawnee who grappled with the limited options they faced throughout the early 19th century? (*Encourage students to recognize that because they remained on the East Coast, Wray's ancestors must have chosen to attempt to "assimilate."*)
- What do you imagine life for an "assimilating" Shawnee in the American South may have been like in the 19th and early 20th century? Do you think Shawnee people would have easily fit in within existing communities? Why or why not?

4. Tell students they will be thinking about how Link Wray's upbringing as a Shawnee may have inspired "Rumble," and the distorted guitar sounds that Wray helped pioneer. Split students into groups, and give one copy of Handout 2 - "Questions for Stations" to each group. Tell students they will be moving as a group to three different stations. In each station there will be a sheet of quotations from Link Wray, his daughter Beth Wray Webb, and his niece, Sherry Wray. Have each group read the quotes and then discuss the questions. Stations are as followed:



- Station 1: Health and Poverty
- Station 2: Racism and Segregation
- Station 3: Faith and Family

5. As a class, discuss each of the questions in the handout. Then ask students:

- How might each of these factors in Wray's life be interrelated? (*For example, discuss how the racism of the time might have influenced Wray's health, or how Wray's close family might have been a result of poverty and segregation*).

6. Play clip 3, "Antonino D'Ambrosio on Rumble." Ask students:

- In the clip, what does D'Ambrosio suggest was the motivation behind Rumble? (*If necessary, remind students of D'Ambrosio's comment that Wray was "annoyed and disappointed" by the fact that as Shawnee his family had been treated so badly*).
- What does D'Ambrosio mean when he says that Wray took the bitterness he felt about his childhood and created something not "reductive, but proactive"? How was Wray's response "proactive"?
- Based on what you read in the activity, do you think Wray would agree with D'Ambrosio's argument that Rumble isn't about fighting, but more about "disrupting" and "being active?"

7. Pass out to each student Handout 3 - "Debating the Inspiration of Rumble." After completion, ask students to share what they wrote.



SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- Can you think of another musician that, like Link Wray, came from a marginal setting and faced discrimination? Is their music a "proactive" means to address these issues, as D'Ambrosio describes of Link Wray?
- Why might people from marginal places who have led difficult lives be inspired to create music?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Beyond Link Wray, the Shawnee have contributed to American culture in a myriad of ways. Have students choose one of the following figures, and write a short biography on them, including their influence on American society, culture, or history.

- Benjamin Harko, Jr. (Artist)
- Big Jim (Politics)
- Heidi Bigknife (Artist)
- Black Bob (Politics)
- Catechahassa or Black Hoof (Politics)
- Tecumseh (Politics)
- Weyapiersenwah or Blue Jacket (Politics)
- Yvonne Chouteau (Artist)
- Cornstalk (Politics)
- George Drouillard (Explorer)
- Ruthe Blalock Jones (Artist)
- Keith Longhorn (Artist)
- Nas'Naga (Writer)
- Nonhelema (Politics)
- Ernest Spybuck (Artist)
- Tenskwatawa (Politics)



STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Reading 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Speaking and Listening 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity



Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 9: Global Connections Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

NEW JERSEY STATE LEARNING STANDARDS FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading

NJSLSA.R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences and relevant connections from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

NJSLSA.R6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

NJSLSA.R8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

NJSLSA.R9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Writing

NJSLSA.W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

NJSLSA.W7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects, utilizing an inquiry-based research process, based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.



NJSLSA.W9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Rumble – Link Wray: Birth of Rumble
- Soundbreaking – The Development of Fuzz Tone
- Rumble – Antonino D’Ambrosio on Rumble

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: The Shawnee
- Handout 2: Questions for Stations
- Handout 3: Debating the Inspiration Behind Rumble
- Handout for Station 1 - Health and Poverty
- Handout for Station 2 - Racism and Segregation
- Handout for Station 3 - Faith and Family