

Link Wray: Nov, 3, 1997

In the vast rock 'n' roll landscape there stands a distorted guitar that sounds like the distant roar of a dozen motorcycles. It can only mean one thing. Link Wray has landed.

The Fender Bender is back in the saddle due in great part to the use of his gnarly instrumental "Rumble" in the films "Pulp Fiction" and "Independence Day," and the use of "Jack The Ripper" in Robert Rodriguez's "Desperado." Wray, 68, appears tonight at the House of Blues in his first Chicago gig since 1978, when he performed with rockabilly revivalist Robert Gordon at the Park West.

Part Native American of Shawnee extraction, Frederick Lincoln Wray was born in Dunn, N.C., and reared in Portsmouth, Va. Since 1979, he's lived in Denmark with wife, Olive Poulsen, and their 14-year-old son, Oliver Christian, on a remote island where fairy tale author Hans Christian Andersen used to live.

"I live quietly in Denmark," Wray said in a call last week from an Econo Lodge in Pittsburgh, Pa. "I don't have a phone. I don't play gigs there. I don't want Danish kids and teachers to think Oliver's daddy is a wild rock 'n' roller with black leathers and shades. They don't even know me as Link Wray. They know me as 'Mr. Andersen.' "

"Mr. Andersen" grabbed a magical piece of rock 'n' roll history with his rebel instrumentals like "Rumble," "Rawhide" and "Slinky." Wray also has released a new record, "Shadowman" (Hip-O Records) that features his gnarly covers of Creedence Clearwater's "Run Through The Jungle" and Hank Williams' "I Can't Help It If I'm Still In Love With You."

Although Wray cites rhythmic minimalists such as Chet Atkins and Les Paul as influences, he doesn't consider himself a great guitar player.

"I'm average," he said. "I was looking for sounds. I was punching holes in my speakers (with a pen) to get (fuzzed-out) sounds because I couldn't sing. I got tuberculosis and had a lung taken out in the Korean War. So I put all my soul and energy into trying to find different sounds."

The experimentation worked great with "Rumble," which he played on a 1953 Les Paul. Other times the gimmicks didn't click. "I once put a rubber pipe in my mouth," he said. "I took the speaker off and put the pipe to the head of the speaker. Instead of the sound of the amplifier going to the speaker,

it would go into this rubber pipe. It made a wah-wah-wah sound, like a guitar. But it really didn't work." Wray offered a hearty laugh, revealing the spirit of a man who gets revved up about the past.