

RUMBLE: THE INDIANS WHO ROCKED THE WORLD

(Dir. Catherine Bainbridge & Alfonso Maiorana, 2017 – 103mins)

By Chal Ravens

In 1958, a Native American Shawnee named Link Wray released a record that interrupted the course of rock and roll. With its primal beat and vicious distorted guitar, 'Rumble' was a call-to-arms for the oncoming generation of disaffected youth. 'Rumble' had no words, yet its message was powerful enough that some radio stations wouldn't even play it. Iggy Pop, then a student, stopped in his tracks when he heard it in his university cafeteria. "Rumble' had the power to push me over the edge," he remembers, "and it did help me say, fuck it – I'm gonna be a musician."

Wray's "theme song of juvenile delinquency" was a key that unlocked thousands of impressionable young minds in a single turn. The song's raw power has reverberated through rock history, through the ferocious power chords of The Who, the proto-punk snarl of The MC5, the Stratocaster squall of Jimi Hendrix, and all the bands influenced in turn. But for the directors of *Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World*, that shiver of recognition runs deeper, and leads to a history of rock that has never been told until now.

The musical traditions of Native Americans barely survived the genocidal policies of the founding fathers – yet their oral traditions, their songs and dances, continued to trickle down through the generations like a river reaching for the sea. Native Americans were among the first to be enslaved when the European explorers arrived, with the men often sent to the Caribbean or Africa. At the same time, thousands of enslaved African men were arriving in America, and many of them started families with native women. Runaway slaves often found refuge in Indian reservations, too. By the beginning of the 20th century, Native American traditions were believed to be headed for extinction; ethnographers were even sent out to make recordings of their songs for posterity. But by 1924, when Native Americans officially obtained U.S. citizenship, their musical traditions had become deeply intertwined with those of the African slave descendants.

Music is intangible and contagious – traditions fade, but they also adapt. Every rock and roll fan knows that the blues bubbled up from the Mississippi Delta, through the great bluesmen like Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson. But before them all was the singer, guitarist and showman Charley Patton. His light complexion gave away his mixed ancestry, but so did the way he played his guitar like a drum, adding a hollow pat-pat-pat that echoed the steady beat of Native American drums. Patton taught guitar to a young Howling Wolf, whose riffs rubbed off on Rolling Stones guitarist Brian Jones, whose band influenced countless more. And then along came the radical, psychedelic sound of part-Cherokee Jimi Hendrix, whose creative zenith in the late '60s coincided with an explosion in Native American pride. By the time he tore up 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at Woodstock in 1969, he was playing to an audience dressed in fringed suede and feathers.

Half a century later, and rock and roll is still not really understood as a branch of Native American musical tradition. *Rumble* presents a gripping dossier of evidence to right that wrong, while also grappling with music's twin roles, as both an expression of a specific identity and a language that can travel far beyond a single community. There's a tendency to think of indigenous music as an artefact of a particular culture, comprehensible only to those within it. But as Link Wray proved when 'Rumble' catalysed a generation, music also connects us far beyond our immediate surroundings, over great distances in both time and space. A rumble of recognition, carried from the past into the future.