

Let the Good Times Roll

Breaking Down the Legacy of 1978's Slickest Rock and Roll Record

Written by Sean Murawski // SM Music

In 2023, I was a senior at the University of Connecticut. Living off campus on Coventry Lake with five of my best friends, we had a habit of playing music all around the house, usually before heading to the bars on campus. Using my bluetooth speaker, plenty of songs hit the rotation. We played songs by the most popular artists of the day, like Drake or Kanye West. Other artists I personally loved, like Dominic Fike or Spacey Jane, would sneak in. 90s nostalgia artists that our parents loved, like Weezer or Matchbox Twenty, all got regular play at some point. One song, however, *always* made the playlist, and it is unique in that it's probably the only song in the rotation that would have been playing in the same exact spot, at the same exact college, exactly 45 years earlier— The Cars' "Just What I Needed."



The Cars for their 1980 Rolling Stone cover shoot

There was truly something so irresistible about that song. The wonky synth, the layered harmonies, the vivid guitar lines, the call-and-response chorus; this song just *sounded like fun*. In 1978, it was the most refreshing sound on the charts. The Cars won the *Rolling Stone* reader's poll for "Best New Band," and several songs from the debut record were regular players on the radio.

But in 2023, when radio had become obsolete and new wave rock bands were a symbol of the past, why the hell did my friends and I love *The Cars* so much? What made

that record so culturally indelible that, almost half a century later, it still sounded so new and fresh?

The Killers' lead singer Brandon Flowers, when inducting The Cars into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2018, gushed about how "40 years later, they still sound like a new band to me." It still rings true today in 2024; there is an elegant timelessness about The Cars. Their self-titled debut, arguably the best debut rock record ever, came out in 1978, but they pretty much beat the 1980s to the punch two years early. Winding synthesizers, layered vocal harmonies and big, deep, drums; The Cars had the next decade written out on vinyl before the calendar even flipped.

And yet, it isn't landlocked in "classic rock" history. This record could come out *today* and be an absolute smash. There is something different about this record. It could be any one thing: the catchy hooks and big choruses, the energetic guitar playing, or the dual lead vocals under the bright synths. Or, more likely, it is a perfect marriage of all of those elements, gift-wrapped in a new wave bow, destined for decades of dominance.



Ocasek and Orr, 1978

Ric Ocasek, singer, guitarist, and principal songwriter of the band, initially connected with bassist Benjamin Orr in Ohio. After relocating to Boston in the early 1970s, they formed groups under several different names and lineups, including Milkwood and Richard and the Rabbits. They even had an acoustic folk duo, before connecting with guitarist Elliot Easton and keyboardist/saxophonist Greg Hawkes, both of whom studied music at Berklee. It ended up

being their new drummer David Robinson, formerly of the Modern Lovers, who completed the lineup and even named the band. In a poetic coincidence that foreshadowed the band's now timeless mystique, Robinson was attracted to The Cars' name because it "...wasn't tied to any era."

The group played their first show in 1976, and after cutting their teeth at local clubs, they recorded a demo in early 1977. The demo tape contained early versions of what would be the bulk of their debut album. When the demos of "Just What I Needed" and "My Best Friend's Girl" were sent to Boston DJ Maxanne Satori in March 1977, she hit "play" on weekdays from 2-6 p.m. Listeners began to call in with positive feedback. "The Cars' sound was fresh," noted Satori. "It wasn't punk, hard rock, or folk rock."

“My Best Friend’s Girl,” now a classic rock staple, was a hopping, hand-clapped boogie. “Nothing in that song happened to me personally,” said Ocasek to *The Wall Street Journal*. “I just figured having a girlfriend stolen was probably something that happened to a lot of people.” Easton gave the song a rockabilly raunch with his now iconic country-tinged guitar break, lifted partially from The Beatles’ “I Will.”

The song’s guitar, mixed with Ocasek’s Orbison-meets-Dylan vocal style, gave the song a distinctive charm (rockabilly in a pop song— genius!). The more driving, hard rock of “Just What I Needed” showcased Orr’s vocal chops, trading Ocasek’s eccentric sound for his own rough baritone. Easton’s frenetic fills and Hawkes’ keyboards made the song complete, lying in wait to be a major hit (it later became their debut album’s lead single, peaking at #27 on the *Billboard Hot 100*). These demos triggered a bidding war from record labels, which Elektra eventually won.

The group recorded their first record in London with producer Roy Thomas Baker. Then famous for producing the likes of Queen and Journey, Baker employed his well-known layered harmony vocal routine in the studio. You can draw a direct line between the background vocals of “Just What I Needed” and “Good Times Roll” to the operatic section of Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” or the smooth, clean-cut groove of Journey’s “Anytime.”

It wasn’t just the hits on this album that soared. Track by track, this album had a sleekness about it. The one-two punch of “You’re All I’ve Got Tonight” and “Bye Bye Love” is where rock and roll whirlwind meets power pop perfection. If you’ve seen *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, then you’re familiar with the shimmering strut of “Moving In Stereo.” “I’m In Touch With Your World” is a sonic adventure that marries guitar crunch and synthesizers. Every corner of this record is polished and purposeful. By the end of 1978, it had reached over a million sales and climbed to #18 on the *Billboard Hot 100*.

The iconic stature of this record owes much to its aesthetic. In one of the most well-known album covers of all time, Russian model/singer/writer Natalia Medvedeva posed with a wide, lipstick-stained grin. Elektra handled the cover art for this album, unlike the future albums, for which Robinson would design the cover art.

It was actually Robinson who deemed the cover unsatisfactory, saying “I thought that when the Elektra [cover art] came out, it was way too slick.” The band



The Cars (1978)

originally wanted a black and white photo collage, which ended up being used on the inside sleeve. In reality, Elektra had it right. The cover perfectly matches the mood of the album: fun, sexy, glossy and colorful.

The Cars themselves also had a unique look; that is, they carefully straddled the



The Cars (L to R): Robinson, Ocasek, Hawkes, Orr, Easton

line of unrivaled cool and utter nerds. Hawkes had big-frame glasses. Ocasek had the look of a 50s greaser who got the haircut wrong. Orr was the looker of the group, with clear blue eyes and a stylish blond mane. They often looked like the guys at the front of science class; and yet, they also had a particular swagger about them. Once they strapped up their guitars and plugged in, The Cars had an unmatched feel of

simplicity and style. The songs, the shades, and hooks. The melody power of The Beatles, the hooky chops of Badfinger. This band was destined to fly.

A lot of The Cars' appeal can also be attributed to the times. By the time 1978 had rolled around, rock and roll was in a renaissance. New wave was in. Bands like The Police, Styx, Bee Gees, and the Commodores were finding success across genres like rock, R&B, pop, and disco. The Rolling Stones were treading new ground with *Some Girls*. Van Halen, Bruce Springsteen, and Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers were all quickly gaining steam.

When *The Cars* came out in June 1978, it was completely out of left field. Shiny, pop melodies with big rock guitars and wild synthesizers. It sounded familiar, but it was also incredibly new. The album's success in 1978 propelled the band to a huge 1980s, spawning hits from future albums like "Let's Go," "You Might Think," and "Drive." "You Might Think" even won the first ever MTV Video Music Award for "Best Music Video," beating out a small, indie horror short film called "Thriller" by Michael Jackson. The Cars were one of the first rock artists to embrace the music video. Sure, they seem a little worn out and cheesy now, but during the height of MTV's success, videos like "Shake It Up" and "Drive" helped provide new visual canvases for the band to paint on.

On the back of a near-perfect debut album, The Cars' legacy today is an intriguing one to examine. There are numerous bands out there that may as well write The Cars a Christmas card every year. The aforementioned Brandon Flowers found magic in The Cars' melodies that inspired his band, The Killers, to think big and anthemic for their modern rock stardom. One of the final songs Nirvana played live before Kurt Cobain's death was "Moving In Stereo." Weezer needed a producer for their debut album, and they decided to enlist one of their heroes to do the job— Ric Ocasek. Fountains of Wayne scored one of the 2000s biggest pop rock hits, "Stacy's Mom," by riding a true Cars chugging chord groove— they even had a young boy dressed as Ocasek in the music video to pay homage. Indie rock bands today owe their pop rock prowess to The Cars.



Brandon Flowers of The Killers

"Just What I Needed," "My Best Friend's Girl," and "Good Times Roll," could all be smash radio hits today, and that's probably because they sort of already are. It doesn't matter what year these songs came out; pretty much everybody can clap along to "My Best Friend's Girl" or sing background to the chorus of "Just What I Needed." The Cars are a major part of the American musical songbook. Their songs are infectious in the best way. You hear them once, and you're instantly sucked in. By the second chorus, you're practically singing backup for the band. In 1978, *The Cars* was pop rock's *Wizard of Oz* moment— the moment when the music went from black and white to technicolor.

The Cars were the definition of more than the sum of their parts. Ric Ocasek was undoubtedly the engine: he wrote the songs and pioneered the grooves. The secret weapon was Elliot Easton's turbo overdrive guitar: he put notes where you wouldn't expect them, pushing The Cars into sport mode. David Robinson and Benjamin Orr were the wheels: this band doesn't run without that rhythm section. It was tight, it was concise, and it made you move. Greg Hawkes' keyboard was the convertible top, the paint splatter that made them stand out.

Together, they are one of rock and roll's coolest bands. Sometimes cool can fade, but The Cars' cool is timeless. It's a classic Chevy with a motor that won't quit. It's the kind of cool you can't touch.