



The Cars in
Amsterdam,
1978: Ben Orr,
Greg Hawkes,
Ric Ocasek,
David Robinson,
and Elliot Easton
(from left)



THE CARS

IN JUST TEN YEARS, THE BOSTON-BORN BAND CUT SIX STUDIO ALBUMS THAT PRODUCED THIRTEEN TOP FORTY HITS, WHILE ITS SINGULAR SOUND INFLUENCED A DIVERSITY OF FUTURE ARTISTS.

BY ASHLEY KAHN



Every now and then, a band hits the ground running with a sound so developed, brash, and beyond established categories that it redefines them. In 1978, the Cars were that band, arriving at a time of discord more than harmony, when musical tribes were at odds with one another: old-school rockers, punks, and New Wavers, pop music enthusiasts and fans of disco and other dance-floor sounds — each staking out territory to preserve and protect its own. The Cars' brilliant, self-titled debut — all handclaps and quirky vocals, crunchy guitars, and futuristic synth lines — defied the divisions of the day and reminded us what rock was all about.

Ric Ocasek, Elliot Easton, Ben Orr, David Robinson, and Greg Hawkes came together in 1976, rapidly maturing into a cohesive sum of musical experiences. Their hard-driving mix acknowledged rock's roots but pushed the envelope. They looked and sounded weird — which helped them lead the charge into the MTV era: a beanpole lead singer/guitarist in sunglasses who could hiccup a lyric like a modern-day Buddy Holly. Another lead singer (and bassist) with a voice that could purr or growl. A left-handed lead guitarist with precise, concise solos. Their lyrics were clever and offbeat. Their love tunes were sly and acerbic. Their hard-driving songs traded in both the peril and pure joy of rock abandon. "Let the good times roll," demanded the Cars, and the world followed. "Let's go," they sang, and along we went.

The Cars were born out of Boston's fertile musical scene, a cauldron that mixed guitar-driven, arena-filling established bands

like Aerosmith with stripped-down newer groups like Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers. There were music-makers of all stripes, from Berklee College of Music students to the self-taught, cutting their teeth in the city's bars and clubs. As teenagers, Ocasek and Orr had played together in Cleveland, before leaving for Boston in the early 1970s. They first made it nationally as the short-lived folk-rock outfit Milkwood, then focused on rock in Richard and the Rabbits with Berklee-trained keyboardist Greg Hawkes. Next was Cap'n Swing, an acoustic guitar group in which Ocasek and Orr wrote many of the Cars' first tunes; Hawkes was out with comedian/singer Martin Mull's band, so another Berklee student, guitarist Elliot Easton, started jamming with Cap'n Swing.

"They seemed like a good pop band that hadn't formed its focus yet," recalled Easton. "We were more of a jamming band — if you can imagine the Velvet Underground crossed with Steely Dan." As Ocasek said, "All of the work before the Cars was just getting to where the songs were good enough."

Still, a musical looseness remained, as did a sartorial mismatch. "One guy looks like he should be in the Velvet, and another one looks like he's in the Grateful Dead . . . it doesn't make a lot of visual sense," said Kiss manager Bill Aucoin after their unsuccessful audition with him in 1976.

Influenced by punk's rising popularity, a harder-punching sound and more consistent image began to congeal within the group. Orr switched to bass, Hawkes returned, and they recruited their only Massachusetts-born member, drummer David Robinson. A veteran of the Modern Lovers, Robinson brought visual focus to the group's wardrobe and, later, album covers. "Black and white were our colors at first," remembered Easton. "It was a big deal when we introduced red."

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



The Cars
1978 (Elektra)



Candy-O
1979 (Elektra)



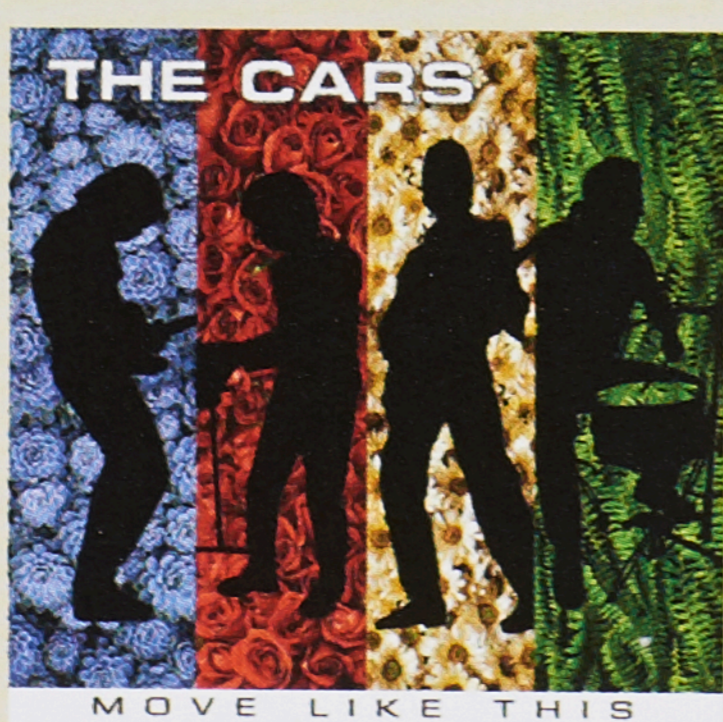
Shake It Up
1981 (Elektra)



Heartbeat City
1984 (Elektra)



**The Cars Anthology:
Just What I Needed**
1995 (Elektra)



Move Like This
2011 (Hear Music)



Robinson also posited a new group name — simple yet powerful, singular yet plural. The Cars played under that moniker for the first time on New Year's Eve 1977 at an Air Force base. Within a few months they recorded demos with fully realized arrangements and a well-developed musical identity — though it was still a year before they'd find explosive success.

The Cars knew they were onto something good, something different, with all elements in place: Easton's distinct, informed rock guitar; Hawkes' cutting-edge electronic keyboard; Robinson's unfussy, steady backbeat and penchant for drum machines. Most notably, the group benefited from two solid songwriters and distinctive vocalists each hitting their stride — Orr usually on the sensitive ballads and Ocasek on the rockers. The songs were to-the-point, as catchy in melody as in the details, balancing styles old and new: from rockabilly to arena rock, punk to synth pop.

Early demos of "Just What I Needed" and "My Best Friend's Girl" found their way into heavy rotation on

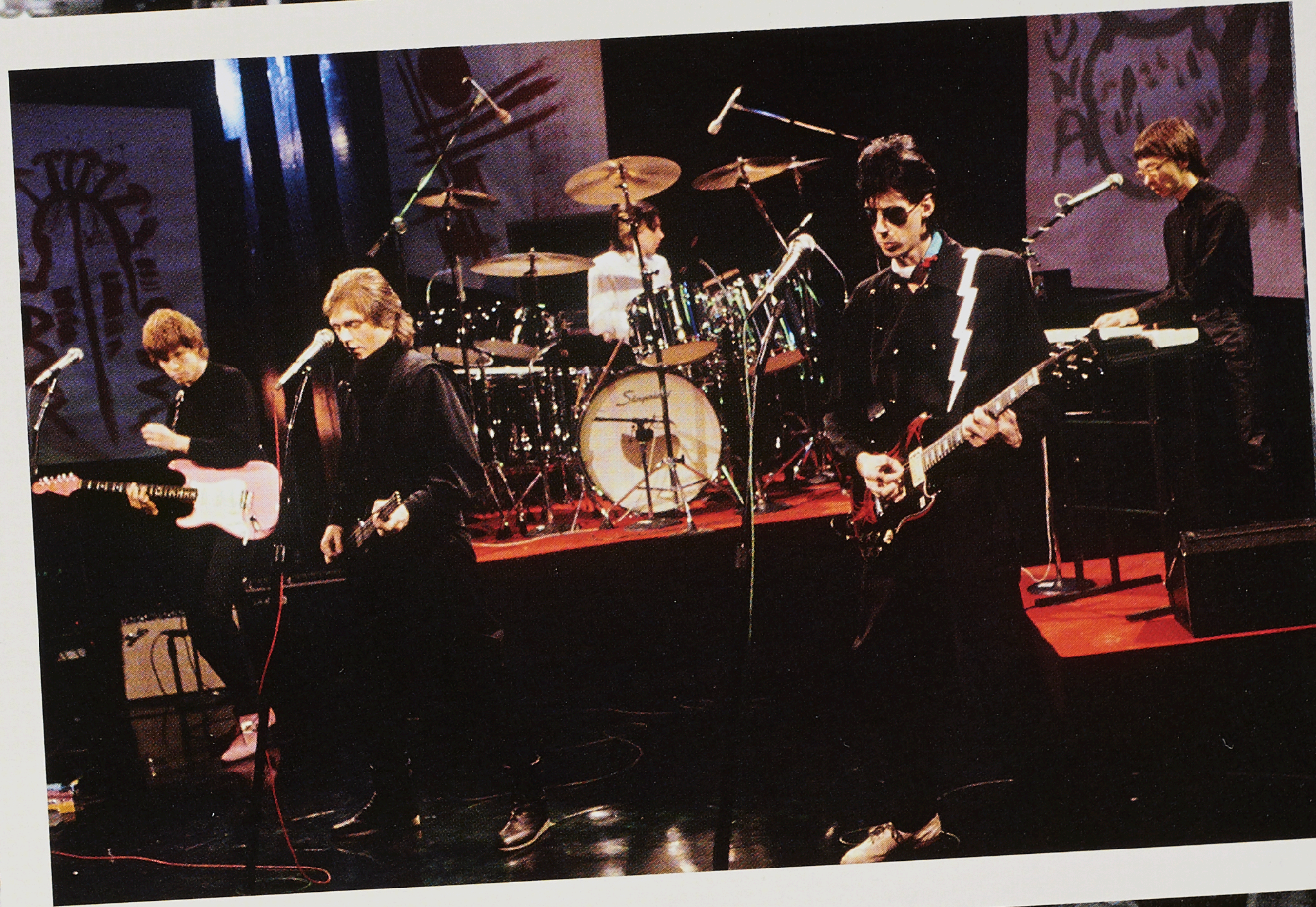


TOP On the air in 1979.
RIGHT Bros with brews:
The Cars
in Germany,
1978.



TOP Ocasek at the controls, producing Suicide in 1980.

BOTTOM A record store meet-and-greet for the debut album, 1978. **INSET** Live on *Tomorrow Coast to Coast*, NBC Studios, 1981. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Orr and Ocasek, 1978.





“I’M GLAD WE’RE ALL FRIENDS, AND LIVED THROUGH ALL OF THAT FOR ABOUT TEN YEARS. IT’S BEEN GREAT FUN.”

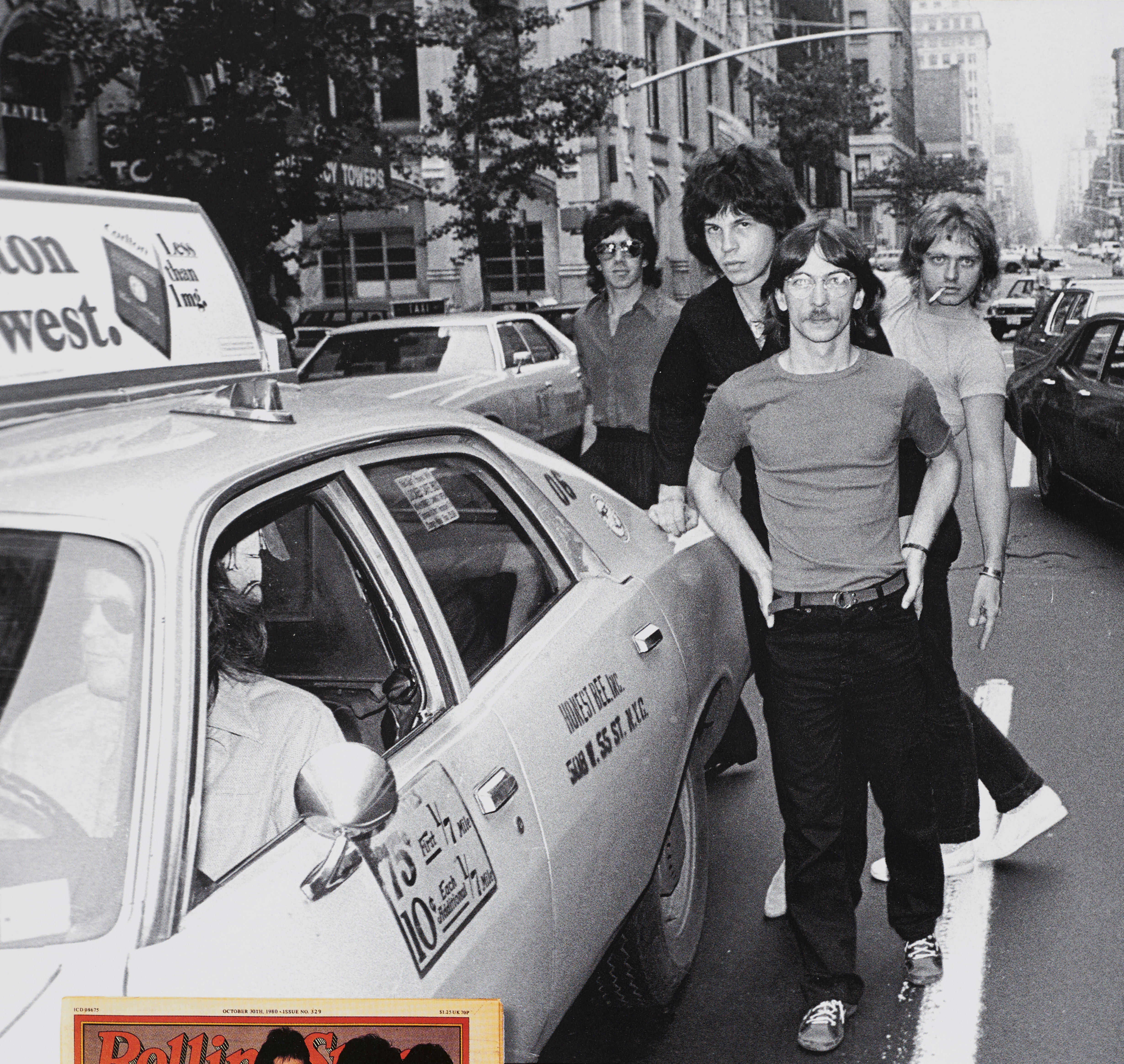
Boston’s leading rock stations, leading to a bidding war between Arista and Elektra, which Elektra won. Soon the group had the vital troika of support for a successful 1970s music career: a major-label contract, big-time representation in Elliot Roberts’ Lookout Management, and a well-credentialed producer in Roy Thomas Baker, of Queen and Journey fame. Baker wisely held back, primarily enhancing harmony vocals but preserving the songs’ stripped-down feel.

Elektra released *The Cars* in June 1978. By the end of the summer, three singles — “Just What I Needed,” “My Best Friend’s Girl,” and “Good Times Roll” — cracked *Billboard*’s Top 100. “You’re All I’ve Got Tonight,” “Bye Bye Love,” and “Moving in Stereo” were favorites on album-oriented radio, proving the range of Ocasek’s and Orr’s songwriting power. The album reached Number Eighteen on the U.S. charts and a million sales by the end of the year,

launching the band nationwide and then into Europe.

From the start, timing both elevated and challenged the group: The Cars appeared as generations of music fans were still divided by the punk revolution. At the close of the seventies, the question that seemed to matter most to critics, radio programmers, and listeners was how to categorize each new band that came along. Rock audiences were unsure of the Cars’ reductive name and New Wave look; punk rockers distrusted their polished sound. But the band transcended such arguments, drawing fans from different quarters, which says much about their undeniable appeal. By the end of 1978, *Rolling Stone* readers voted them Best New Artist, and they were on their way.

Their second album, *Candy-O*, sported a saucy pin-up painted by noted *Playboy* artist Alberto Vargas. It hit stores in June 1979 and reached Number Three; the





TOP Cars in traffic, 1978.
BOTTOM Easton and
 Ocasek onstage, 2011.

anthemic “Let’s Go” hit the Top Twenty, followed by “It’s All I Can Do” and “Double Life.” A year later, *Panorama* — another Baker production that showed the band’s darker, more experimental side — reached Number Five, with the help of the Top Forty single “Touch and Go.” The song-friendly *Shake It Up* (1981), the last album Baker produced for them, yielded their first Top Ten hit with its title track. “Since You’re Gone,” “Think It Over,” and “Victim of Love” also charted.

By then, some felt the Cars had grown increasingly pop-oriented and less edgy, and no one confused them with punk or labeled them New Wave anymore. If any label applied, it would be power pop: Their dedication to rock’s energy and roots was steadfast. The *Shake It Up* sessions included two telling covers, with Orr dropping his voice to an Iggy Pop register on “Funtime,” and Ocasek singing a sixties garage band oddity, the Nightcrawlers’ “The Little Black Egg” (both were later issued in 1995). The album’s two original closing tracks, “Think It Over” and “Maybe Baby,” consciously borrowed titles from Buddy Holly. Other artists began to reach out to Ocasek for his in-studio talents, and he was soon producing Bad Brains, Suicide, and Romeo Void — typical of his

off-center taste. He also stepped out as a solo act in 1983, recording his first album, *Beatitude*, for Geffen.

In 1983, producer Mutt Lange, of AC/DC and Foreigner fame, came on board. The band wanted to fully leverage the sounds and technology of the day, including digital synthesizers and sequencers, drum machines, and various studio techniques. Eight months later came *Heartbeat City* (1984), more in tune with the times than any Cars album to date. It proved the band’s biggest triumph. With its synth-pop feel and radically mature songwriting, it was a stunning balance of artistry and commerciality.

The album catapulted the Cars to international stardom, a Top Ten seller in all major territories around the world, with five Top Forty singles: “You Might Think,” “Magic,” “Drive,” “Hello Again,” and “Why Can’t I Have You.” Major film and cultural stars directed their videos — actor Timothy Hutton handled “Drive,” and Andy Warhol did “Hello Again.” Their video for “You Might Think” took home MTV’s very first Video of the Year award.

The Cars took off for a stadium tour, including Live Aid in Philadelphia in July 1985. They had another Top Ten hit that year with “Tonight She Comes,” off *Greatest Hits*. With such sustained achievement, they seemed destined to stay atop rock stardom, doing as other legendary groups do: record a new album every few years, tour the arena and shed circuit, collaborate with other star performers, release solo projects. In fact, Ocasek, Orr, and Easton each recorded albums. But 1985 was the high water mark in the group’s career. After a brief hiatus, the band returned with the self-produced *Door to Door* (1987), noted less for featuring their last major hit “You Are the Girl,” and more for being the original lineup’s final appearance together. The following February, after a show in Minneapolis, the Cars called it quits and drove off down separate roads.

Over the following decades, Ocasek and Orr pursued solo careers, performing on their own or with other bands. Ocasek continued producing, best known for Weezer’s groundbreaking debut. Hawkes and Robinson stayed in the Boston area: Hawkes played with Paul McCartney, and Easton was an in-demand session player.

Any hopes of a reunion were sadly laid to rest when Orr succumbed to pancreatic cancer in 2000. Five years later, Easton, Hawkes, and Todd Rundgren formed the New Cars and toured, performing Cars classics. In 2010, the Cars’ surviving four members reunited to record the ten-song *Move Like This*, followed by a well-received tour that connected them to a new generation.

For a band whose time in the spotlight lasted just ten years, the enduring impact of the Cars’ music is remarkable. But it’s also remarkable by measure: six studio albums, thirteen Top Forty singles from 1978 to 1987, more than seventeen million discs sold in the U.S. alone. Cars classics have been covered by artists ranging from the Smashing Pumpkins to Ziggy Marley, the Scorpions to Nirvana. (Reportedly, “My Best Friend’s Girl” was one of the first songs Kurt Cobain learned on guitar, and he sang it in his final performance.)

But the Cars’ legacy is best described by the Cars themselves. As Ocasek said, “You can never put together too many bands,” but once they found the right formula, “I wouldn’t trade [the Cars] for anything.” “For me,” said Robinson, “the test is to put on the CDs now and listen to them, and they sound better to me than they ever did.” Orr said, “Still having [our music] recognized by the kids of the kids who used to be at our concerts . . . I’m glad we’re all friends, and lived through all of that for about ten years. It’s been great fun.”

Tonight, we remember Ben Orr and wish he were here to stand with his friends. We celebrate the induction of the Cars into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, knowing it further ensures that their music is long remembered — resonating beyond categories, on all frequencies.