

The Essentials

The Cars



The Essential The Cars is an alternate timeline discography ©2019 by Adam Stone. All these albums exist, in these forms, on Adam's computer and MP3 playing devices. All these thoughts exist in his head. Feel free to discuss them with him.

If I had to give The Cars their own genre, it would be 8-bit New Wave. They didn't always have squelchy arcade sounds in their music, but when they did, it made sense.

When I was an elementary school student going to my first ever sleepaway camp, we had a lip synch night that was about as close to an elementary school drag show as you could get in the 80s without a Christian Right parent calling the authorities. And while my cabin ended up performing Corey Hart's "Sunglasses At Night", our counselor first made us go through pretty much every song on The Cars' debut album.

The Cars' actual debut album, The Cars, is great as it is. It's thirty-five minutes of songs that, with only one exception, have been played on classic rock stations for decades. The joke is that they could have called their first album Greatest Hits, as neither of their next two albums came close to that level of quality.

I, of course, want the album to be longer, so I've rearranged the order, and added songs from those two albums that I mentioned not being nearly as good. But, for this album, I gave it a proper A-side and B-side, not by quality of song, but providing a break at about the halfway point.

The Cars

LET THE Good ROLL
Times

Side A

You know I love a slow build of music, so Cars aficionados shouldn't be surprised that **MOVING IN STEREO** kicks off the album, with the band singing about the effects as they use them in the song. This is also one of the few routines that I remember from the camp lip sync show because it's the only one where we all had a turn at pretending to be lead singer, each of us strumming our dining hall brooms, except for one kid who was playing a table like drums, and another who was playing keyboards on a pillow, I think. This is a shitty song for a lip sync competition, though, as its strength is its instrumental section, and there are minimal vocals. Maybe our counselor just thought we were bad at lip syncing, and this was to save face.

The song naturally fades into **ALL MIXED UP**. This track has its feet planted firmly in the land of progressive rock. It's barely an octave blow Rush's range, and it's got a nearly Queen section of background vocals at points ... not "Bohemian Rhapsody" Queen, something from the first album. There's also a sax outro, which was unusual for the band, and seems to come out of absolutely nowhere.

We go back to the 8-bit keyboards as the lead instrument as The Cars go for the love and shoes classic, **LUST FOR KICKS**. In addition to the Mario-jumps-over-barrels guitar effects, I like how the song always seems about a half tone from going completely flat, which is a nice way to balance the fact that Ric Ocasek was one of the best terrible singers in rock. Seriously, this song is so 8-bit that I always assume it's going to end with the Q-Bert swearing sound.

The first time I heard The Smashing Pumpkins' cover of **YOU'RE ALL I'VE GOT TONIGHT**, my memory misattributed the song to Devo. It's got that spare quality with the trilling guitars. This song factors into Let Lie The Dogs Of Rock And Roll, so I've been listening to it quite a bit lately, and I'm sad that I'm posting it here as part of a tribute to Ocasek, rather than just part of the fictional rock world I'm working on.

The first super hit from the original album to make this reimagining is **JUST WHAT I NEEDED**, one of my favorite ever New Wave love songs. The balance between synth and guitar is perfect, and Orr on lead vocals, sounding a bit like Ocasek, is a neat touch.

TOUCH AND GO is more spare and less rocky than the songs that precede it. It's the first track I'm using from [Panorama](#), which is a fine rock record but seems mostly boring

compared to the successful risks of The Cars and the mostly unsuccessful risks of Candy-O. This track is a standout, in that it's one of the more boring songs on this album, but it's an upbeat and steady rock song that could easily be a template for any band trying to satirize New Wave music. And yet, it's still a great song.

I'M IN TOUCH WITH YOUR WORLD has a countrified sound, much like some of REM's early work. It's almost difficult not to imagine it being covered by an 80s country musician. Without the keyboard eeps and echoes, of course.

Another unusual song for the album is **YOU WEAR THOSE EYES**, which has a cricket chirping percussion with a thunder drum effect. It almost sounds like it comes from a 70s stage musical. And when the guitar moves to the front, it's electric AND twangy. It's such a weird little ditty, and it fades out as the final track from Side A.

Side B

Kicking off Side B is another one of the megahits from the first album, **MY BEST FRIEND'S GIRL**. The bass intro. The hand clap percussion. The lyrics about watching his best friend's girlfriend dance, his best friend's girlfriend who used to be [his] is written and sung without pangs of jealousy or entitled sense of possession [*used to be mine* is used as shorthand for used to be my girlfriend, which is possessive, but in a way that's ingrained in our language, not meant to imply actual ownership]. It's more of a Wow, She Is Still Wonderful Even Though We're Not Together Anymore, which you don't expect from a late 70s pop song.

UP AND DOWN has heavier guitars than most of the tracks on Side A. It sounds more like a mid 80s video console game than a late 70s arcade game. It could totally have been the background for a level of Contra, especially if they changed the lyrics to Up Up Down Down / Left Right Left Right / BA Start. Which would fit.

The effects spin right into the title track, **LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL**. Our routine for this song was to look incredibly sad (while wearing sunglasses). Each of us standing at different parts of the dining hall, doing a minimal amount of dancing, shoulder rolling and

such, while shaking our heads.

SINCE I HELD YOU is a typical Please Don't Go song. Sort of. While repeatedly lamenting that it's been a while since he's had physical affection, there's no Fuck You, and no begging that she comes back, instead the singer notes *Something in the night, just don't sit right*. So something feels wrong, but it's probably not her or him, it's just the overall situation. What a healthy perspective.

LET'S GO is the first of two songs on this album that is almost a Tom Petty song. Strip away the synth line, and this is absolutely something off Damn The Torpedos. I am sad that neither of these artists is still alive [the lead vocalist on this track, Benjamin Orr died in 2000] to trade vocals. Orr could totally have done "Here Comes My Girl" or "Don't Do Me Like That" with the Heartbreakers, while Petty rerecorded this song with The Cars. What a lost opportunity.

I love the echo delay on **DOUBLE LIFE**. I didn't intentionally keep all but one of the songs I used from Candy-O all together, but I guess they do flow really well.

DON'T TELL ME NO is the second Petty And The Heartbreakers soundalike. This one would sound more at home on You're Gonna Get It.

The synth and guitar trading rhythms on **GETTING THROUGH** before the Galaga sound effects eep through are a really cool balance. And then Ocasek sort of screams near the end!

Wrapping up the album is **IT'S ALL I CAN DO**. It's no more ballady than the rest of their songs, but it has a good fade out to close out the album. I also enjoy that it's a pop love song, but it points out that the reason he is in love with this person is not that they're great, but that he is crazy. Her qualities are never mentioned.

The Cars

Latter
Day
Sins



Side A

HEARTBREAK CITY is the previous album’s sound being swept into a pile of classic rock. The synths are highly reminiscent of Corey Hart’s previously mentioned “Sunglasses At Night”. But it’s much more laid back, with a quiet spoken set of bridges instead of an intense shouty chorus. It probably sounded retro even when it was released.

GO AWAY falls into every category and trope of the last track. It’s a mediocre The Cars track, but it exemplifies that mediocrity in a way that warrants listening to, if you like the band. Of all the songs that just sound like quintessential The Cars album tracks, this is the most memorable.

The first actual hit from this album is **MAGIC**, which returns us to the full blown 8-bit feel of the first album with the wonderful grind of a simple 80s guitar riff. I rank *Uh-oh it's magic* with “Oops, I did it again” for my favorite pop lyrics that acknowledge the need for apology by using infantile language. That this track hasn’t been mashed up with Insane Clown Posse’s “Miracles” is a travesty.

IT'S NOT THE NIGHT keeps its fists wrapped tightly around that 8-bit heart with an almost Hall & Oates vocal. I imagine a video for this song would just include Ric Ocasek

constantly discorporating and reappearing in different eras because of the jingly transition effect that begins the song and recurs throughout. This is The Most 80s Movie Montage Theme the band ever recorded. It should have been the theme for a sci-fi fantasy movie about skateboarding.

COMING UP YOU is obviously meant for an 80s rom com. A bunch of twenty-somethings shrugging after they do something silly, and then throwing their arms around each other, and maybe doing the lean-in, edge of lips kiss that was so popular at the time. It would never make it a single, but everyone would remember the scene fondly, or ironically. It's the closest thing The Cars have to a *Too Many Cooks* moment.

EEPING through the previous song's fade out, **YOU ARE THE GIRL** hits you with an incredibly noticeable but not very memorable bassline, and a soft rock vocal style that hair bands used when recording their one ballad on every heavy metal album from the late 80s. I'm not sure whether it's because they're purposefully so vague, but I really appreciate that every The Cars song about unrequited love or breaking up with someone manages to have aged well. There's never a friendzoney feel or blaming someone else for not loving them enough, it's always more like this song *You are the girl of my dreams even though you point to the door. Why?* It doesn't matter, we're left to assume that it's

probably the singer's fault, but he's not going to be a martyr about it.

WHY CAN'T I HAVE YOU keeps this aesthetic. Oh sure, she's always breaking my heart in two but it's because I tripped and stumbled, not because she's a jerk.

While I appreciate that their love lyrics are never problematic, they're also often not very good. They're inoffensive fluff rhyming *end* and *bend*, *down* and *around*. The highlight of **TOO LATE** is the rhyming of *line* and *clementine*. The rest is pretty standard pop lyrics.

The 2011 track, **FREE**, owes its guitar riffs to 21st century pop punk and its chorus to late 90s Beatles inspired Britpop. With harder vocals, it could be a Vines song. But the 8-bit synth it owes to the band's own legacy.

I'M NOT THE ONE feels like the closing theme for a Legend Of Zelda game with an 80s chorus going *round and round*.

WOUND UP ON YOU has the least smooth transition of the album. It's almost too bright with its synths. I almost cut the song several times. But it has a cinematic depth to it that feels necessary on this album. It doesn't feel like a particular movie. There are parts that

remind me of a traveling scene from a puppet based fantasy movie, and the chorus belongs in a melodramatic film about two Wall Street investors that accidentally fall in love, even though they're both trying for the same promotion.

STRANGER EYES is a kind of steampunk masterwork suited for the opening theme of a cartoon, probably with elves or dwarves. I mean, the song is clearly about sex, but in that way that you could still use it in a kids movie, and they'd have no idea. It would be a better fit than that time they used Third Eye Blind's "Semi-Charmed" to promote The Tigger Movie.

One of the most Carsiest The Cars songs ever recorded is **YOU MIGHT THINK**. I'm not sure it's possible to even like The Cars if you don't love this weird little love song.

Closing out Side A is one of those brooding 80s stalker ballads, **FINE LINE**. Though, with this song, it's hard to tell if it's an unrequited love, or if he's actually singing it to his equally weird partner. I like this track, but it definitely makes me sleepy.

Side B

Unlike the other album, Side A and Side B are nowhere near the same length. Side A being thirteen minutes longer. If it helps, imagine the thirteen minutes of silence are at the beginning of Side A, making the opening Hello of “Hello Again” all the more relevant.

HELLO AGAIN is a fun, bouncy 8-bit song about ... oh, it doesn’t matter, just bop your head and enjoy the weird, little ride.

What if The Cars tried to play a Metallica song? Well, it might sound like **DOOR TO DOOR**. In that it sounds nothing like Metallica, but has furious drums, relatively loud and simple guitar riffs, and it buries the eeps and synths in the mix. Still, it’s The Cars song most likely to get people displaying devil horns.

LOOKING FOR LOVE is another generic love song that benefits from the unusual vocals, and what sounds like a slightly vocoded occasional background vocal. But building out of the end of the track is another The Cars hit, **SHAKE IT UP!** It’s so 80s that every time you listen to it, you’ll find a sweat band or a leg warmer mixed in with your laundry. Jelly bracelets will show up in your sock drawer. The cabinet beneath your sink will fill with Aquanet. It will all be worth it.

Woah. We have left the 80s. Sure, there are some eeps and hand claps in **BLUE TIP**, but it is definitely twenty-first century production. Ocasek is higher in the mix. The rhymes, however, are just as basic as ever. That's a good thing. The world doesn't really want or need a serious, well-crafted, political The Cars song.

Is there some electric glockenspiel mixed in with the chimy keyboards of **STRAP ME IN**? Worth it, if so. They clash so wonderfully with the driving guitars. This almost sound like an 80s remix track. Again, it would work really well for a motivational scene from a movie. This time, it's a time travel adventure, and the last time they used the machine someone died. Will the protagonist survive this trip? It doesn't look good for our hero.

TAKE ANOTHER LOOK thuds out of "Strap Me In" before bright guitars let us know that everything is going to be okay. I mean, someone might have died, but, if so, they've gone to a happier place. Montreal, perhaps. In the summer. You can totally eat cotton candy or poutine to this song. It's your call.

We're still in Montreal. We're with someone we care about. We have healthcare. But, oh, we'll have to return to our regular horror show **SOON**, so we best enjoy this chill moment for as long as we can.

THIS COULD BE LOVE is that point in a video game when you're not quite at the final boss, but you're close enough that you're getting spammed by lesser villains and the music is getting more intense, and your health bar keeps getting lower no matter how many pills, turnips, cheeseburgers, or wrenches you eat. What if you don't even make it to the boss. Oh god, you don't want to have to go through this level again.

VICTIM OF LOVE returns us to the world of hand-clapping percussion. The lyrics seem almost taunting. They talk about a woman who done you wrong, but it almost sounds sarcastic, like, get over yourself. Yea, she broke your heart. Why did you give her your heart? She told you she didn't want it. This is totally your fault.

Closing out the album and the discography is one of my all-time favorite The Cars' songs, **DRIVE**. It's a song about questions. Evaluate yourself. What will happen if you break up with that special someone? Will it be worth it? I mean, you don't have a driver's license. *Who's gonna drive you home tonight?*

The font for this booklet is set in Cone, which just looks like it, too, came from a very basic 80s video game that was way more fun to play than it had any right to be.

