

# CARS MADE IN USA



Greg Hawkes Benjamin Orr  
Elliot Easton Ric Ocasek David Robinson

Anyone with half an ear to put near a radio can't help but notice that an ounce or two of quality has oozed lately through the disco slush. You have to listen hard, but it's there. The art of making good radio music seems to be undergoing a small, but energetic revival, pushed along by such bands as Blondie, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, and The Cars.

The Cars make a sound that is pure magic, filtered through a four-inch speaker. Great bouts of solid bass and guitar, right where it hurts, mannered vocals that would give Brian Ferry a complex, and an android choir in the background, reminiscent of Queen on downers. Couple that with a finely-honed feel for a catchy chorn, and lyrics about good times and love won and lost, and the Cars are onto a winning formula. The singles, "Just What I Needed" and "My Best Friend's Girl", have made a sizeable dent in the Top 20, and the album has gone platinum in the States.

Visually, The Cars are memorable too. Centre of attention is chief songwriter Ric Ocasek, a great gaunt piece of exhaust pipe, standing umpteen centimetres tall and possessing the voice of a foghorn. Pretty boy bassist Benjamin Orr handles much of the upfront work on stage, while Ocasek hovers around in the rear, looking like a dispossessed traffic light, clutching a guitar. Lead guitarist Elliot Easton and drummer David Robinson do a nice line in the mean n' moody looks, while keyboards and sax player Greg Hawkes plays it strictly for laughs, a perfect foil for the slightly-reserved Ocasek.

The Cars are a product of Boston, like that city's zillion-selling namesake, Aerosmith, J. Geils, and The Modern Lovers. Robinson drummed for Richman for a while, but Richman said he was too loud, and kept cutting down his kit until he was left with a solitary snare, and he was only allowed to tap the side of that. It was still too loud, so he quit.

So what's so great about Boston, surely the bastion of New England conservatism? Ocasek says it's "progressive", while still being able to mix the old with the new. It's reasonably close to New York (about 500 miles), meaning record company execs don't have too far to go.

"They come in once a year, take one band and leave," says Ocasek.

But Boston does boast a thriving club scene, especially The Rat, its own equivalent of CBGB's and Max's Kansas City. Most of Boston's prodigies got their start in such clubs.

Also a great help is a lady named Maxanne Sartori, who regularly plays tapes of local bands on radio station WBCN. It was Sartori who gave The Cars their early exposure, which attracted the record companies. But we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves here. Cue nostalgic music for a little history...

Richard Ocasek (the 't' was dropped to make it snappier) is of Polish extraction, born

in Baltimore. His introduction to the heady world of modern music was Buddy Holly's "That'll Be The Day", and a guitar his grandma gave him when he was 10. He was writing songs while in his teens, as an alternative to university study.

"After I started writing songs, I figured it would be good to start a band," he says. "Sometimes I'd put a band together just to hear my songs."

Orr (his original name is unpronounced Polish) comes from Cleveland, where he played in the house band for a local TV show. Ocasek's father transferred to Cleveland to work...and the two got together. They played songs as a duo for a time, drifting and starving from state to state. Ocasek once pawned Orr's guitar to buy food.

After being threatened with physical violence in several midwestern venues, the two headed back east, finding their niche finally in

Boston, with a folk trio called Milkwood. Their one album, in 1972, is best forgotten, by all accounts, but the recording sessions introduced them to Hawkes, and another loud click was heard.

Ocasek and Orr formed a group called Cap'n Swing, with Boston axeman Elliot Easton, while Hawkes undertook session work. Cap'n Swing made one abortive trip to New York, bombed magnificently, returned to Boston, and split.

Ocasek, Orr and Easton decided to give it one more try, calling Hawkes to the fold, and recruiting Robinson with the promise that he could play as loud as he liked. They spent half of 1976 in Ocasek's basement, writing, arranging and rehearsing. When they re-emerged, Sartori taped them, Elektra said "sign here", and The Cars were on their way.

Robinson, who has a background in fine arts, coined the band's name, a memorable one which conjures up all sorts of images. He also

designed their flashy stage gear and did the graphics for the inner sleeve of the album.

The Cars' sound is more English than American in its influences, and the band wanted a producer who could mix their sound well for radio play. Roy Thomas Baker, whose major work has been with Queen, was the choice. A surprise to some, who felt Baker's work to be a little sterile, but the right choice, as it turned out.

Recording and mixing the album, at London's A.I.R. studios, took only 21 days, and everyone went home happy. The dense, heavy sound mix gives The Cars a distinctive air, like those ostentatious American automobiles of the '50's; all chrome and fins. All for show, and great fun.

Don't expect hidden depths from The Cars. None of them is into changing the world. Ocasek, despite his highbrow appearance, only listens to music while driving, rapidly flipping from one station to another till he finds something that sounds right, that fits his mood. He's not even very illuminating about the lyrics of his songs.

"Good Times Roll": "It's not really about good times at all. Actually, it's about paying for things twice and not knowing it."

"My Best Friend's Girl": "I suppose it puts the one night stand in a slightly different perspective. It became the song everyone wanted to hear on the radio."

"You're All I've Got Tonight": "When things get too quiet, and you're willing to put up with any company, or you're not willing to accept the prospect of being alone, you might find yourself needing what you've got."

See? Analysis doesn't help. But then, good music doesn't need it, and often defies it.

"Cars are great," says Ocasek. "They go through all the changes that musicians do, too. They all wear out, they get broken parts, some are better than others, and some go to the junkyard..."

Their debut album put The Cars in the inside lane, where the tough competition is. Good first albums are notoriously hard to follow up. At the time of writing, their second album is well under way, and all reports so far have been thumbs up.

Let the good times roll.  
Duncan Campbell

## 4TH TRICK FULL HOUSE



Cheap Trick  
Cheap Trick Live At The Budokan  
Epic

Mercifully the spate of double live albums, which had followed the success of Peter Frampton's effort, seems to be coming to an end. Appropriately Cheap Trick, perhaps the finest band to come out of the USA in recent years, leads the return to the pithy single live set. On this one Cheap Trick continue to impress. At *The Budokan* provides a neat statement of the band's live excitement.

Casting a glance back over Cheap Trick's two year career, two features really become obvious. First there is the band's commitment to simple rock'n'roll fun and second there is their prolific rate of output. Cheap Trick's brand of pop metal is both lively and uncomplicated, owing an apparent debt to the British sixties, especially The Beatles. Lead by zany guitarist Rick Nielson their idea is simply to have a good time. Arguably this is the reason that they have not yet turned out any truly great songs. Not everyone can write a "My Generation" or

"Satisfaction" and maybe Rick Nielson is not even interested in trying.

As for the second feature, turning out three solid albums in under 14 months is a prodigious output by anyone's standards. Cheap Trick also have the reputation of being one of the hardest working touring bands currently operating out of the States. Putting these two features together the obvious question is can they keep it up? Well, if this display is anything to go on, the band's live performance certainly hasn't slipped any.

The set contains most of the highlights from Cheap Trick's three studio efforts. On side one the band races with little ceremony (as any repartee between songs would be lost on the Japanese audience) through lively renditions of "Hello There", "Come On" and "Look Out". Closing the side, the version of "Need Your Love" does drag a little but then the band has been pushing the pace all the way and are bound to be feeling it. Side two fires away with a spirited cover of Fats Domino's "Ain't That A Shame" and then — "I Want You To Want Me", "Surrender", "Goodnight Now" (a

reprise of "Hello There" with the obvious alteration) and "Clock Strikes Ten". A good stuff and the only regret is that there isn't more of it.

Though his painfully slow enunciations of the song titles for the benefit of the audience become grating after a couple of listens Robin Zander's singing voice has a real edge of excitement throughout the set. Rhythm men Bun E. Carlos and Tom Petersson get down to the work right from the start and don't let up. With the emphasis as it is, on simple fun rock'n'roll Rick Nielson keeps his soloing pretty well under wraps for most of the night but what he does let fly is choice stuff. Pity we can't see the onstage antics that go with it.

Here it is a fourth offering from Cheap Trick in under 18 months. Still the band has yet to disappoint. My angle on Cheap Trick is simply this, they are a band looking fit to burn themselves up by giving too much too soon so get into them while the going is good.

Dominic Free

TEX PRODUCTIONS PRESENT

## CITIZEN BAND SUBURBAN DANCES



SUPPORT GROUP: ELECTROBEAT

18 MAY TAKAPUNA RSA HALL  
19 MAY TITIRANGI WAR MEM. HALL  
CB FANCLUB, PO BOX 15329, NEW LYNN.

WE BUY AND EXCHANGE QUALITY  
USED ROCK, JAZZ & CLASSICAL  
RECORDS AND CASSETTES.  
WE PAY TOP CASH PRICES!

ROCK & ROLL  
RECORD EXCHANGE  
436 Queen St. Ph 797-899  
PO Box 6836, Auckland 1.