

# Ric Ocasek – Life on the cutting edge

By Jenny LeComte

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**Ric Ocasek, the lead singer of the cutting-edge synth-pop group, The Cars, has died of natural causes in his New York City apartment. He was 75.**

He was born Richard Theodore Ocasek in Baltimore, Maryland, on 23 March 1944 to a Polish Catholic family. He was expelled from school in the fifth grade, ran away from home a few times and aspired to be a “tough kid”. He fell in love with [Buddy Holly and The Crickets](#) and obtained his first guitar after his grandmother noticed that Ocasek was playing *'That'll Be the Day'* on the record player, over and over again.

Ocasek moved to Cleveland, Ohio, when he was 16. He finished high school and took a stab at university, but dropped out to pursue a musical career. The catalyst for this was when Ocasek saw a bass player called [Benjamin Orr](#) performing with a local group called the Grasshoppers on a musical variety show. Ocasek and Orr soon bonded and formed a

band called [ID Nirvana](#) in 1968, performing regular gigs in and around Ohio State University.

In the early 1970s, Ocasek and Orr moved to Boston and performed in various bands, including a folk-rock outfit called [Milkwood](#). Some of the acoustic songs Milkwood performed were later “tricked up” with synth and became early Cars songs.

During these early years, Ocasek and Orr teamed up with a brilliant keyboardist, [Greg Hawkes](#), and an equally talented guitarist, [Elliott Easton](#), who helped them refine their unique sound. Drummer [David Robinson](#), who had achieved moderate success with [The Modern Lovers](#), completed the line-up.

The Cars topped the charts in the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s with 13 top 40 singles. The band helped kick off the [New Wave](#) movement and Ocasek was inducted into the [Rock and Roll Hall of Fame](#) in 2018.

Watch The Cars play together for the last time at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2018 <https://t.co/lv6WclHBey>  
[pic.twitter.com/AwnaChu7E2](https://t.co/lv6WclHBey)

— Rolling Stone (@RollingStone)  
[September 16, 2019](#)

The Cars achieved breakout success with their first self-titled album in 1978, which legions of rock critics described as “sublime” and “perfect”.

[Robert Palmer](#), a music critic for the *New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*, [said](#) the Cars had

*... taken some important but disparate contemporary trends – punk, minimalism, the labyrinthine synthesiser and guitar textures of art rock, the 50s rockabilly revival and the melodious terseness of power pop – and mixed them into a personal and appealing blend.'*

'*Just What I Needed*' was the debut single from the album, followed by '*My Best Friend's Girl*' and '*Good Times Roll*'. All received substantial airplay and charted on the Billboard Hot 100.

The band's second album, *Candy-O*, was released in 1979.

It featured a top 20 single called '*Let's Go*' and received critical acclaim.

The Cars hit a slight slump in 1980 with the experimental album *Panorama*, which *Rolling Stone* magazine described as '*an out and out drag*'. Ocasek, who liked to be on the cutting edge and cared more about his music than commercial success, dusted himself off and got the guys together in the following year to produce '*Shake It Up*' in Synchro Studio, which they had bought as an investment. The title track was a smash, charting in the top ten.

Following their 1982 tour, The Cars took a break and Ocasek released a solo album called *Beatitude*. They reformed in 1984 and released their most successful album, *Heartbeat*

*City*.

The single '*You Might Think*' won video of the year at the first MTV music awards.

The most popular song from *Heartbeat City* was '*Drive*', which was played during the 1985 [Live Aid](#) concert as backing to footage of the Ethiopian Famine. The video is also significant because it starred an 18-year-old model called [Paulina Porizkova](#), who went on to become Ocasek's third wife and mother of two of his six sons. With this song, Ocasek delegated the lead vocals to Benjamin Orr. While Ocasek and Orr split lead singing and songwriting duties, Ocasek sang lead on the majority of the Cars' songs.

After the Cars broke up in 1988, Ocasek and Orr's relationship became somewhat chilly and the pair were estranged until Orr's death in 2000. Ocasek, meanwhile, launched a successful solo career and produced a number of high-profile acts, including [Weezer](#) and [Bad Brains](#).

Tributes have flooded in since Ocasek's death. [AC Newman of the New Pornographers](#) wrote:

*'I will never stop imitating the first Cars album. His [Ocasek's] influence will always stay with me. RIP and thank you, Ric Ocasek.'*

I will never stop imitating the first Cars album. His influence will always stay with me. RIP and Thank You to Ric Ocasek.

— Carl Newman  
(@ACNewman) [September 16, 2019](#)

Rockstar [Billy Idol](#) tweeted:

*'Sorry 2 hear about Ric Ocasek. RIP. Loved his work with the band Suicide.'*

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[#ricocasek](#) RIP loved  
his work with the band  
[#Suicide](#)

— Billy Idol  
(@BillyIdol)  
[September 16, 2019](#)

Comedian [Tom Scharpling](#) tweeted:

*The first Cars album is literally perfect; there might not be a better debut album ever. The rest of the catalogue is untouchable. Ric Ocasek was the architect. Nobody could combine pop hits with straight up weirdness like he could. What a body of work, what a cool guy. Rest in power.*

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— scharpling  
(@scharpling)  
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