



Book of the Week

Byline: SEAN MACAULAY

Careless Love by Peter Guralnick
Little, Brown £19.99

The first volume of Peter Guralnick's mammoth two-part biography of Elvis Presley, *Last Train to Memphis*, covered the rise from penniless country boy to rock 'n' roll sensation. It was a wondrous tale of struggle and success, which ended in 1958 with Elvis heading off to Germany in his army uniform.

The singer was at his most dazzling: blue-eyed, handsome, 23 years old, an unfettered, instinctive talent in his absolute prime. This, then, is volume two - the rest of the Elvis story.

The 17 months Presley spent abroad in the army are often cited as the watershed in his life. He returned to Memphis in 1960 a changed man: musically blander, but emotionally more complicated. So this book offers the best link between the two key Presley icons: the dazzling, hip-shaking youth of the Fifties and the blimpish, jump-suited wreck of the Seventies.

But Guralnick has done what one would have thought impossible, in view of all the Vegas-era Elvis impersonators. He's restored the pathos to the Elvis story. The 'before and after' images make it funny, but it's the 17 years in between that make it pitiful. Elvis's degeneration into a pop culture punchline is ultimately 'a tragedy', says Guralnick.

Certainly, the image of the fallen King is inescapable - and not just because he died slumped on his throne. From early on, Elvis maintained a retinue of good-ol'-boy courtiers. With their drunken water-pistol fights and go-karting, they alleviated his boredom but not his loneliness. It was the same with the merry-go-round of women Elvis juggled possessively. It's not hard to trace this psychological smorgasbord to the death of his mother, Gladys, in 1958. He never ceased talking of her and visited her grave religiously.

Abandonment would remain his worst fear, and he dreamt continually of being left alone. But the chances of a mature relationship are always going to be remote when your idea of an intimate date is one girl, eight redneck buddies and a two-way mirror in the bathroom.

The cronies on his payroll were at his beck and call, 24 hours a day; literally so after Elvis discovered the energising benefits of 'diet pills'.

Ironically, it was his army sergeant who introduced him to amphetamines, to help cope with all-night manoeuvres. Elvis would press pill bottles on his friends, zealously extolling their lack of side-effects.

It's shocking to see how much of Elvis's typically Seventies

behaviour was in place by 1960 - not just the pills, boozing and food bingeing, but also the violent mood swings. He regularly punched cronies after accusing them, usually wrongly, of disloyalty. Elisabeth Stefaniak, a girlfriend from Germany, remembered: 'He could turn on you in a second. He was suspicious of everybody, and yet his ego caused him to be naive in many situations.' By the mid-Sixties, this susceptibility was a magnet for the quaalude-prescribing quacks and jargon-spouting gurus. When a chapter in an Elvis biography is titled 'Spiritual Awakenings', you just know it's going to go horribly wrong.

One particular messenger of knowledge was a hairdresser called Larry. 'What is your purpose?' Elvis asked, looking into Larry's eyes.

'If there is a purpose,' said the hairdresser, 'then my purpose is to discover my purpose.'

Elvis looked as if he'd been slapped. 'Whoa, whoa, man,' he said. 'What you're talking about is what I secretly think about all the time.'

Such a garbled search for meaning becomes less quaint with the spectacle of Elvis giving up on his true purpose - making great music. On what would be his last tour, in 1977, his voice was unrecognisable, 'a small, childlike instrument, virtually unable to articulate or project'.

The cause of his death was listed as 'polypharmacy', but it was the epitome of an ignominious exit, however delicately one puts it. Elvis was almost certainly taken while 'straining at stool', his gold pyjama bottoms round his ankles. He was found face down in a pool of vomit. But the clinching detail in this tableau is Elvis's nine-year-old daughter, Lisa, having the bathroom door gently closed in her face as she asks, 'What's wrong with my daddy?'

Guralnick's stated aim for his two books was to refrain from any moral judgements, and the result is disquieting: it makes you go back to the songs. Elvis on record remains a timeproof whirl of joyously gauche sexuality and hillbilly swagger. He was a country

boy blessed with a transcendent timbre, but the wine exploded the bottle.

`There are no villains here,' Guralnick writes in the foreword. `The story of Elvis's inexorable decline may have no greater moral than the story of Job or Sophocles' Oedipus Rex: `Count no man lucky until he has reached his journey's end."

Night and Day, Mail on Sunday, 1998.