



She styled Elvis's quiff, partied with Jack Nicholson, and counted Elizabeth Taylor, Raquel Welch and Jane Fonda as clients – but then drugs and alcohol made her an outcast. Helena de Bertodano meets Carrie White at 69

PORTRAIT Martha Camarillo

What happened to the original Sixties party girl?

What time is Peter coming in?" Hollywood hairdresser Carrie White asked her assistant Rita one day. "Which Peter?" replied Rita, "Allen, Fonda, Bogdanovich or Sellers?"

All four were clients of Carrie White, once the most famous hairdresser in Hollywood. If you haven't heard of her, you have certainly seen her work. Elvis Presley presented her with a gun to thank her for styling his infamous quiff; Sharon Tate asked her to create the cascade of bows and flowers tumbling down her hair on the day of her wedding to Roman Polanski; Warren Beatty hired her as technical adviser for his satirical movie *Shampoo*.

"It was crazy," says White, now 69, looking back on a typical day in her salon some 40 years ago. "I remember one day I got out of my body and looked at the scene: there was Bette Midler knitting as she waited for me; Vanessa Redgrave was sitting under the dryer reading; on my finger was the big ring Richard Burton had given Elizabeth Taylor, who was round the corner getting a manicure and had asked me to wear it for her. Jane Fonda had just left my chair, leaving me a picture of her hair from *Klute*. And Betsy Bloomingdale was about to sit in. Then Raquel Welch was coming around the corner to tell me about a problem she was having with her hair. I just thought, 'Wow.'"

And yet, a few years later, Carrie White had all but vanished from the scene, losing her salon and almost her life when she became addicted to crack, heroin and alcohol and was reduced to begging money from former clients. "I've been sober now for 28 years," she says proudly. Starting from the bottom, she had to re-earn her licence and a few years ago, as a grandmother of ten, again opened her own hair salon. Now she styles a new generation of stars: Sandra Bullock drops by and even Brad Pitt has come in for highlights. "Poor Brad," giggles White in mock remorse. "He was trying to read a script. Normally you leave a client alone after putting highlights in, but I kept going back to touch his hair. He was very quiet, I was like prying and pulling, but sadly he wasn't there to chat it up with Carrie White."

The rise and fall of Carrie White – and, against the odds, her rise again – is chronicled in her memoir, *Upper Cut, Highlights of My Hollywood Life*. In the book, she describes not only the glamorous façade of her life, but also the lowlights: the miserable childhood at the hands of an alcoholic mother and sexually abusive stepfather; the perpetual disarray of her personal life when she was at the height of her professional success; the spiral into addiction.

We meet at her publisher's office in New York. Within seconds, she gamely announces her age, but you would not guess it to look



'Someone would say, "I never drink before five." I'd say, "Well, you lost the whole day." I couldn't imagine my life without the buffer of bubbles'



Top: Carrie White, far left, with, front row, Richard Avedon, Julie Christie, Warren Beatty. Above: with Faye Dunaway after doing her hair for the 1968 Oscars

at her. She has perky blonde hair à la Goldie Hawn (one of her clients, of course), and is wearing a figure-hugging black top and leggings, teamed with knee-high black leather boots.

White says she has not always been comfortable with her age. “I never told anyone until I hit 65. I kept it secret from everyone: my kids, my assistant, even myself. I didn’t even look at my driver’s licence. But recently I’ve been practising saying my age and it feels empowering and fantastic, because the truth is the truth. And how am I going to be authentic in my book? I can’t talk about getting high with Jimi Hendrix and try to pass myself off as 32.”

She has remarkable energy and a machine-gun laugh that ricochets every few minutes. “Isn’t this so much fun?” or “Isn’t this glorious?” she keeps saying – and it crosses my mind that if she is like this sober, then it must have been quite an experience to hang out with her when she was drunk or stoned. “I have some friends who weren’t alcoholics and are still alive and they see me and say they don’t really see the difference between the way I am now and the way I was then, and I go, ‘Damn, I didn’t even need all that.’ Not long ago, Naomi Campbell brought me to St Tropez for her birthday – it was so darling and beautiful of her – and I was dancing until five in the morning and people would say, ‘What are you on?’ And I would say, ‘Oh, don’t worry about me. It’s just water, but I once took a lifetime’s worth of other stuff and I think I’m still drawing on it.’”

White’s difficult upbringing is chronicled in the opening pages of *Upper Cut*. “I was mixing drinks for my mother – and sipping them – when I was six years old,” she says today. “I remember the sensation: it was warm and sweet and made me feel good. It was also my connection to my mother.” After she confided in a priest about her stepfather’s sexual abuse, he was arrested and jailed. Carrie moved in with foster parents, only occasionally seeing her mother, who did not even keep her promise to visit Carrie on her birthday.

At high school, one of White’s friends dated a flamboyant hairstylist named Jay Sebring, which gave her the idea of becoming a hairdresser too. Through sheer force of personality and an instinctive knack with the scissors, she quickly established herself. Needing money to open her own salon, she modelled for *Playboy*, becoming Miss July 1963, then went on to found the Carrie White Beauty Parlor in her early twenties. “I always fancied myself at the top. I didn’t want to work my way up. I went straight to Beverly Hills. I wanted to do the celebrities; I wanted the champagne.”

At the time, she says, hairdressers were becoming celebrities themselves. “Nobody knew who was cutting Mamie Eisenhower’s bangs,” she says, then erupts with laughter. “Nobody wanted Mamie Eisenhower’s bangs.



‘At Naomi’s party, they said, “What are you on?” I’d say, “Water, but I once took a lifetime’s worth of stuff. I’m still drawing on it”’

But everyone wanted the bouffant that Jacqueline Kennedy was wearing. And everybody knew Mr Kenneth from New York was doing her hair. As a hairdresser there was suddenly a possibility to rise like a rock star.

“When I started I was the only female, so that was my edge. Soon I was the hairdresser that everybody came to. I also did the make-up of my clients and gave them fashion advice. I was like a one-stop shop.”

For much of the Sixties and Seventies, White was behind the scenes of every Hollywood photo shoot and party. In fact she was part of the scene – she smoked pot with Hendrix at John Lennon’s house and had a brief relationship with Jack Nicholson. “He’s the most loyal friend. I always kid his daughter Jennifer, ‘I could have been your mother!’” In her book, she alludes to an even briefer relationship with Michael Caine, describing the “nightcap” she enjoyed with him after Tate’s wedding to Polanski. “He wasn’t married so I didn’t say anything bad,” she giggles today. Well, you left the details nebulous, I add reassuringly. “Oh, did I?” she asks, looking

Carrie White with Naomi Campbell in Monaco in 2004

a bit disappointed. “Well, it’s true: I slept with Alfie – hahahahaha – but it was just part of the landscape, the life I was living.”

Her clients would often take her under their wing. “I had all the ladies from the horse track and they took me racing and taught me how to bet. Then I had the very chic ladies: the Betsy Bloomingdales and Jennifer Joneses, who invited me to their grand houses. There was free caviar everywhere and there would be little champagne splits ready for me when I went over, and I was just happy, happy, happy.”

She never did anything by halves. “Sometimes someone would say, ‘I never drink before five.’ And I’d say, ‘Well, sorry for you, you lost the whole day.’ I didn’t know orange juice came without vodka. There were people I knew who still had cocaine left from a week ago and I’m like, ‘What? What’s wrong with you?’”

At that stage she was, she says, a “functioning alcoholic”. “I couldn’t imagine my life without the buffer of bubbles.” She’d usually kick off with “a little Bloody Mary” around noon. “Actually, you’d start with the diet pill – the wake-up call – and then you’d pump that up with coffee and be a spinning top and then you’d want to chill the edge so you’d start on the champagne and then you’d go out for drinks after work. When cocaine came in you had much more control over the effect than with diet pills. You became like a science project on yourself.”

In many ways, she says, drink and drugs went with the territory. “There was a certain vibe to someone of my ilk, who was a party person and an artist. Look at the history of artists and writers and the connection with alcoholism. I think we’re seekers in a very spiritual way, and drugs are kind of an elixir. I always took alcohol and cocaine to help productivity, to see more out of something.”

By the age of 28, she had had five children and three husbands. Her first husband turned out to be gay: the marriage broke down and later she gave birth to a daughter whom she gave up for adoption. As an adult, her daughter tracked White down and they are now close. Her second husband found her success, not to mention her alcoholism, hard to handle. After having two children, Adam and Daisy, they divorced and she married Richard Alcalá, a fellow hairdresser (who partly inspired the Betty character in *Shampoo*), whose substance abuse matched her own. At first they were blissfully happy, holding parties renowned for their excess, and had two children, Aloma and Pitita. But the marriage fell apart under the pressure of their joint addictions.

Yet her business was still booming. ➔

Sometimes she would have to do careful juggling acts. "I had Iggy Pop and Nancy Reagan in my salon under the same roof at the same time. And Betsy Bloomingdale and Jane Fonda, who were absolutely political enemies. Neither of them was even aware the other was there. But I knew."

One of her abilities, she says, is being able to chat to any client. "Everyone who sits in my chair has a unique story. I don't have time to be shy. I can go from zero to save-my-marriage in the course of a haircut." I ask her if she knows the joke about the man who goes to the barber who asks him how he'd like his hair cut. "In silence," is the reply. "That is English," says White, momentarily stunned, then rallies. "Actually, I do remember doing Jean Shrimpton's hair in London. I was so excited. I asked her where she went shopping; she said she wasn't interested in clothes. I asked her where she went out for fun and she said she didn't really go out. She just didn't want to talk."

Luckily, her Los Angeles clients were far less reticent and White could measure their relative vanity. On one occasion Elvis asked White if she thought she could style his hair like Ricky Nelson. "Elvis," she admonished him, "let's not mess with your success." Tending to Marlon Brando, she suggested treatments for his thinning hair. He declined: "Hell... it's the process of getting old. Who cares?"

By this stage, she was beginning to size up her clients' heads for profit. "You need highlights," I would tell clients, but I was the one who needed money for coke and alcohol."

On the morning after Sharon Tate's murder in 1969 by Charles Manson's gang, word zipped around Hollywood that Tate's hairdresser had been killed with her. "Everybody thought it was me," says White. "I was her hairdresser, but it was Jay Sebring who was at her house that night. Abigail Folger [also murdered] was one of my clients too. It took years for people to assimilate the shock of the massacre. We lost a big piece of freedom and Hollywood was never the same again."

In her book, White is unflinching in describing her descent into hell along with a woman she calls K – whom she describes as a "foreign-born princess" with whom she had a relationship after the collapse of her third marriage. She writes about one day when the couple were having withdrawal symptoms from drugs, persuading White's 12-year-old daughter to bike down the road to the phone box to call their dealer. She writes: "K and I puked in towels; we couldn't get up any more. I had defecated in my pants. I was paralysed in agony, my guts, bones, and muscles were melted. Pitita [her ten-year-old daughter] came out again, distraught from my uncontrollable moaning. 'Mom, you want water?' I sipped the water she brought, then gagged and vomited on myself... The stench

When his assistant brought her the fee, White immediately left – despite having only done one side of Bogdanovich's head

from us was deplorable." As she adds: "I had surpassed my mother's awfulness."

She feels no shame writing this, she says. "People knew I was an alcoholic and addict when I was using. What do I care if they know it when I'm well?"

At one point she tried to dry out at a friend's house – but after drinking all her host's vodka and replacing it with water, she returned to K. Desperate for money, they drove through the smart Los Angeles neighbourhoods where her former clients lived, managing to badger \$200 out of director Melvin Sokolsky, who turned away with the words: "Don't ever come back here and ask me for money again." She tried a less direct approach, ringing director Peter Bogdanovich's doorbell and asking if he'd like a haircut. "Sure, why not?" replied Bogdanovich kindly. When his assistant brought her the \$200 fee, Bogdanovich was on the phone so White immediately left – despite having only done one side of his head. "I'll never see him again anyway," she told K, who was waiting in the car. (In fact, Bogdanovich is a client of hers again – which says a lot for her. Or maybe for him.)

One day, driving to her dealer in a car with no brakes – she couldn't afford to fix them – she experienced a moment of clarity. "I looked down at the blackened fingers on my left hand, the hand that used to cut Elvis Presley's hair. I saw dried blood between my middle and index fingers. I had nodded off last night with a cigarette and had burnt myself to the bone. I didn't feel anything."

She glosses over what was obviously a very difficult battle trying to reverse back from the brink. "It took me six hospitals to get clean – and the sixth one I paid for myself." Her first priority was to try to become a proper mother to her children – her youngest, Pitita, was by then 11. "But it took me probably five years to thaw out. I was trying to function, to live and breathe. I didn't have salt in my house for years – I was afraid I'd want a margarita."

When she opened her latest salon, in 2005, she says she decided to keep it anonymous. "I didn't want to hear brakes squeak when people saw my name go up and said, 'Oh my

God, is she still alive?' I mean, I was very famous and popular and the first lady of hair in the Sixties and Seventies, and then I left in Spandex pants and roller skates, not to return again until the Nineties."

Even in her darkest days, she says, she remained a hairdresser at heart. She says that she analyses the hair of everyone she meets. "The airport is exhausting. I fix everybody's hair that walks past me. I think, 'No, not those bangs. Don't you have a mirror?'"

I ask her what she charges for a basic haircut in her salon. "\$400: it's not crazy." My jaw obviously drops, as she hastily adds: "I suppose I should go up to \$500, but I've never cut hair for money. I've always been into the art of hairdressing. I'm not savvy. I have friends who go and do a blow-dry house call for somebody like Paris Hilton and they charge \$1,000. For a blow-dry."

At this point I am feeling grateful that I have twisted my \$45 haircut back and out of sight. Who does her hair? "I do it myself, then I'll ask [my assistant] Chad if it looks right and he'll fix things for me. I paint any grey hair that shows its little nasty face in there."

White is upfront about her attempts to combat age. "I do Botox a couple of times a year: it just seems like a simple procedure that protects against lines. And 20 years ago I fixed something on my neck. I used to say I'll never do surgery because I saw a lot of very bad surgery. But I kept looking at this thing on my neck and I used to think, 'Don't they slit your throat? I'm not going to do that.' Then one day I thought, 'I'd rather die than look like this.'" She roars with laughter. "So I got it done."

"I must say," she adds, "vanity keeps me sober: a drunken old lady doesn't look good."

White lives alone, but says she has "a special friend". "After three husbands and five children, I left the whole marriage thing when I was 40. But I've had lots of lovely love affairs and kibbles and bits. I believe I will marry again."

She says that she is a much better grandmother than she was a mother. "I'm going to show you a picture that means so much to me," she says, scooting up next to me on the sofa and handing me her phone. It is a photograph of her five-year-old granddaughter Olive gazing adoringly into her eyes as Carrie clasps her face. "It's how I wish I could have been with my own children," she says, tears springing to her eyes.

She shakes her head, marvelling at her own survival. "It's really by inches and seconds that I'm here now and you're not talking to someone else." ■

Carrie White's book, Upper Cut, Highlights of My Hollywood Life (Atria Books), is out in paperback. It is available from the Times Bookshop for £14.99 (RRP, \$16), free p&p, on 0845 2712134; thetimes.co.uk/bookshop