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Shots in the Dark

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Flash: The Making of Weegee the Famous

by Christopher Bonanos
Henry Holt, 379 pp., \$32.00

Extra! Weegee: A Collection of 359 Vintage Photographs from 1929–1946

edited by Daniel Blau
Hirmer, 336 pp., \$55.00



Weegee/International Center of Photography/Daniel Blau, Munich

Firemen at Coney Island, New Year's Eve, 1940

Weegee's people are generally funny-looking and badly dressed. Many of them are murdered—the blood pooling around their heads, some with their ankles oddly crossed as if they are taking a nap in the gutter. Their cars are wrecked, their tenements gutted by fire, their loved ones sobbing in the streets. Even their pets look morose. The rare happy ones are celebrating Hitler's defeat or stampeding through the lobby of the Roxy Theatre in Times Square to score seats for Jimmy Dorsey's big-band show. All of the pictures Weegee took with his Speed Graphic camera are in high-contrast black-and-white, like scenes from Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*.

He snapped his mesmerizing photographs in a sweaty frenzy between seventy and eighty years ago. There are two haughty dowagers accosted by a shabbily dressed drunk woman at the opening of the Metropolitan Opera; children sleeping on a fire escape in a slum; a man arrested for cross-dressing grinning and baring his thigh in the back of a paddy wagon; a panoramic mob filling every inch of sand at Coney Island; an anguished mother in a black kerchief staring at the tenement fire in which her daughter and granddaughter are perishing. These familiar images were captured by an immigrant working in the depths of the Depression and wartime for a couple of dollars per newspaper shot. The alchemy of time and evolving taste has transmuted more than a few of them into art.

Weegee was less concerned with art than with fame. "A picture is like a blintz," he liked to say. "Eat it while it's hot." He was so obsessed with celebrity that he proclaimed himself Weegee the Famous when he was no more than a legend in his own mind. When his work and relentless self-promotion finally won him recognition, his photography veered off into idiosyncratic and schlocky tangents. The man whose images were in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art churned out tits-and-ass shots for a pair of men's magazines called *Hi* and *Ho!*, which were each half the width of a regular magazine—the better to hide in a raincoat.

Self-taught and self-propelled, Weegee has a singular place in the pantheon of street photographers that includes such masters as Brassai, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Berenice Abbott, Robert Frank, Ruth Orkin, and Diane Arbus. Only Arbus routinely used flash, as Weegee did, to capture her menagerie of odd subjects, and none shot with Weegee's Speed Graphic press camera. His prints were raw, sometimes overexposed, often repetitious. They have none of the austere serenity of Orkin's pictures of snowy Central Park from her window or the creepy pathos of Arbus's portrait of the young giant and his tiny parents in their claustrophobic flat or the finesse of Cartier-Bresson. Instead, Weegee's punks and grotesque car wrecks have the brassy clank of a Coney Island shooting gallery or the garlicky tang of a fresh grilled hot dog at Nathan's Famous.

Where did they come from? In his new book, *Flash: The Making of Weegee the Famous*, Christopher Bonanos, an editor at *New York*, tells the story of this tormented little man with an outsize camera and similarly inflated ego. Scrupulously researched—no small

feat with a serial fabulist like Weegee—and fluently written, Bonanos’s book is an unsentimental yet sympathetic account of a bizarre life and career, an American Dream contorted as if by one of the trick lenses Weegee loved to fool around with.

He was born Usher Fellig in 1899 in the Galician shtetl of Zolochov, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father yearned to be a rabbi but wound up working in his in-laws’ business, selling food to Emperor Franz Josef’s army. With his fourth child on the way, Berisch Fellig set off for the New World in steerage with the equivalent of four dollars in his pocket. A cousin greeted him in New York, and he settled in a fetid tenement on East 7th Street and worked a pushcart. Still, he managed to eke out enough to send for his wife and children, and in the summer of 1909 they sailed for New York. At Ellis Island, Usher was handed a banana. He’d never seen one before and had to be shown how to eat it.

The boy, now called Arthur, spoke no English and could not read or write in any language. But he was smart and was soon making his way at school and, prophetically, selling newspapers to help support the family. One day when he was fourteen, a street photographer with a big view camera on a tripod took his picture. With that addicting click of the shutter, although Fellig didn’t know it at the time, his life’s work began.

He quit school in the middle of the seventh grade and started out with a tintype kit bought by mail-order from Chicago. It took pictures not on film or glass, but on sheet metal coated with black enamel. When he couldn’t make a living, he got a job as an assistant at an industrial photo studio—the first of several low-paid apprenticeships in his trade. In between, he worked the Lower East Side with a pony he named Hypo (for the fixative used in developing negatives). He’d snatch kids off the street, hoist them onto Hypo, snap their picture, and try to sell a print to their parents for a nickel. Most of the children were dark-skinned immigrants. Fellig made his prints on the highest-contrast paper he could find, turning their teeth and faces alabaster—a technique he practiced for the next five decades.

Hypo ate up most of his meager take, so Fellig took an entry-level job in the photo lab at *The New York Times*, where his coworkers nicknamed him “Squeegee Boy” for the tool used to dry off finished prints. Later, when he joined the Acme photo agency, he once developed rush prints in a vacant motorman’s compartment on a speeding subway train; another time, ever ingenious, he did the job in an ambulance specially hired for the occasion. He became the best printer in the shop—so good that they promoted him to “Mr. Squeegee.”

In later years, the Weegee origin story evolved. Someone remarked that his magical gift for anticipating a gangland rubout or deadly tenement blaze was like that of a Ouiji

board. Hence, Squeegy/Weegee or Ouiji/Weegee. He seemed to prefer the Ouiji version, but nobody really knows which, if either, is true.

Weegee labored on in the Acme lab, getting stray assignments on the street. He became the night man for spot news stories, racing uptown one spring night in 1931 when cops questioned Dutch Schultz, a principal in Murder Inc. At the precinct, he slipped the mobster a couple of aspirins and a cigarette, a kindness that paid off later. He got to shoot Vincent “Mad Dog” Coll, Dutch’s rival, in October when police hauled him in. By now, he was using the Speed Graphic and newly invented flashbulbs instead of risky flash powder. He practiced obsessively with the bulky camera, slipping the frames that held the individual sheets of film in and out of the camera and swapping in fresh flashbulbs on the run. Sometimes he accosted random folk on the street and shot their portraits; sometimes he resorted to “dry” shooting, without film in the camera, to sharpen his reflexes. He perfected a method of capturing most of his subjects at six or ten feet to avoid having to fiddle with his settings in action. By 1935, he was ready to go out on his own and began freelancing for the New York papers.

It’s hard to imagine now how limited news images were in the Depression years. There were newsreels, of course, as well as newspaper pictures and weekend rotogravure sections. Readers loved them, and the papers competed for sensational shots from their own staff photographers, freelancers, and photo agencies like Acme. Then, in 1936, Henry Luce’s *Life* showcased photojournalism, quickly copied by *Look*.

The New York newspapers that ran Weegee’s pictures are a lost world of their own—nine metropolitan papers all along the spectrum from sober and authoritative broadsheets (the *Times* and the better-written, starchily Republican *New York Herald Tribune*) to sensationalist tabloids (the *Daily News*, *Daily Mirror*, and the antic *Evening Graphic*). In between were four other broadsheets of varying sobriety (the conservative *Sun*, middle-of-the-road *New York World-Telegram*, Hearst’s rambunctious *New York Journal-American*, and the liberal *New York Post*).

The standards of these publications could charitably be described as flexible. Jimmy Breslin called the *Journal-American*, where he once worked, “a paper, where, believe me, ya couldn’t even believe the weather report.” On the tabloids and the *Journal-American*, legmen and desk editors routinely dismissed stories out of Harlem or the Brooklyn ghettos as “social notes,” code for black crime. Rewrite men—there were hardly any women—were known to “pipe” (make up) juicy quotes. *The Daily News* introduced phrases like “trigger man” and “gun moll” into the vernacular and the dialogue of film noir. The tabs would lead with sensational “confessions” from murderers and rapists confected from the just-the-facts account of the arresting cops. The *Graphic* pioneered the trick of creating a nonexistent picture of two people in the news by simply pasting together two individual shots into an “exclusive” photo. *Time*, founded by Luce and Brit Hadden in 1923, called the *Graphic* a “daily freak.”

The *News* proclaimed itself “New York’s Picture Newspaper” and had a little line drawing of a Speed Graphic like Weegee’s in its logo. At its peak a decade later, it sold 2.4 million copies a day and 4.7 million on Sundays. Its competition was the *Mirror*, which boasted Walter Winchell, the mouthy king of gossip. The *Journal-American* led the afternoon pack for pictures, but the other broadsheets used their share.

Weegee set himself up in a building across the street from police headquarters, in a stairwell nook equipped with an unmade bed, an alarm clock, and a police radio; his cameras, film holders, flashbulbs, and cigar butts were strewn about. He began to plaster the wall behind the bed with tear sheets of his pictures from the papers. He often slept in his clothes. Another photographer labeled Weegee’s haunt “the cockroach café.” Soon enough, the wall blossomed with startling images, many of dead bodies.

By 1939, Weegee owned the night. He got to know dozens of cops and firemen, who let him into their squad rooms and across fire lines. He captured countless shots of arrested perps, many with black eyes or bandaged faces after questioning. Some had been hung by their heels over airshafts in the back of station houses or whacked with a phone book until they confessed. On freezing nights, he shot pictures of ice-encrusted fire trucks and firefighters. When there was no action, he focused on people sleeping off binges in doorways or on park benches or in flophouses for a quarter a cot. He chattered on nonstop. Some found his running commentary obnoxious—he liked to proclaim: “I’m a *gen-u-is!*” But he charmed most people with his infectious empathy and comic repartee, and they would tip him to good shots.

Petty gangsters ran wild in the city in those days, and they routinely killed one another. Weegee hustled to every promising police call and was rewarded with fresh corpses and gaggles of pop-eyed onlookers. Conveniently, some of the bodies came to rest within view of signs providing ironic commentary on their fate. In one classic image, the victim is laid out beneath the sign for the Spot Bar & Grill—“on the spot” being shorthand at the time for having been rubbed out. Another body lies next to a post office box with the reminder “Mail Early for Delivery Before Christmas.” A car-accident DOA is covered with newspapers under a movie marquee featuring Irene Dunne in *Joy of Living*.

These juxtapositions bred suspicion that Weegee moved bodies or otherwise hoked up his murder pictures. He denied all such accusations, but at least two of his most famous images were more stage-managed than spontaneous. Weegee likely posed the children sleeping on the fire escape amid a heat wave—he had made the shot earlier in the summer and didn’t send it out for publication till the hottest night. And Weegee’s most famous picture—the one he called “The Critic,” of the bejeweled opera patrons being heckled by the disheveled woman—was a set-up. He admitted later that a coconspirator had got the woman so liquored up that she could barely stand, then shoved her in the path of the rich matrons. Still, the picture outshines the backstory. “His best pictures are

intensely truthful,” Bonanos observes, even if “sometimes he would give the truth some extra help.”



Weegee at the typewriter he kept in the trunk of his Chevrolet, 1942

Five years after going out on his own, Weegee finally found a reliable home for his work. He'd been wrangling incessantly with editors about picture choice and especially photo credit. His shots were mostly credited to Acme or to "Fellig" and sometimes "Felig." Then, in June 1940, Ralph Ingersoll, a Luce executive, founded *PM*, an innovative tabloid designed to lure upscale readers from the *News* and *Mirror*. *PM* had modern typography, carried no advertising, was mildly leftist in its politics, and used dramatic photography to punch up its appeal. It was a natural fit for Weegee, and he soon signed on as a regular contributor.

PM not only featured his photography, it recognized and promoted his talent as a writer with a distinctive streetwise voice. For years, Weegee had been doing his own picture captions, often on a typewriter anchored in the trunk of the battered Chevrolet he used as a rolling office. His pictures frequently accompanied features with Weegee's own slant on the story. Starting in 1941, he began labeling every picture "Credit Photo by Weegee the Famous." Soon enough, the rubber stamp became a reality.

PM bizarrely rejected his opera picture, but he had been selling to *Life*, and even Alexander Liberman, the fastidious Russian émigré art director of *Vogue*, found room for Weegee the Famous in its slick pages. In 1943 two of his now classic pictures were hung in a show at the Museum of Modern Art called "Action Photography." One was the shot of the woman in the kerchief crying as a tenement fire consumed her daughter and grandchild, which Weegee titled "I Cried When I Took This Picture." The other captured the crowd—anguished, gleeful—at the scene of a mob killing. He called it "Their First Murder." Weegee now had a substantial body of work, and in 1945 he published *Naked City*, a sensational collection of more than two hundred of his pictures with his own text.

A shot of female mannequins being carried out of a burned-out dress store is captioned: "The flower of 'America's pure white womanhood, is saved from a fate worse than...Death.'" A sequence of pictures shows Sammy's Bowery Follies, a nightclub Weegee adored. "Norma's ambition," reads the caption for a shot of Sammy's three-hundred-pound star chanteuse, "is to understudy Mae West...but that will be a sorry day on the Bowery...because who will understudy Norma?" At the end of the book, he generously offers tips to amateur photographers who'd like to be the next Weegee. His secret: "Don't forget...be human...think...feel. When you find yourself beginning to feel a bond between yourself and the people you photograph, when you laugh and cry with their laughter and tears, you will know you are on the right track."

The publication of *Naked City* was probably the apogee of his career. Two years later, the producer Mark Hellinger bought the book so he could use the title for a film noir about New York he was making in the style of a documentary. Weegee talked his way into the movie—he appears for an instant in a crowd grabbing a quick shot of its star getting out of a car—but he was smitten. "O boy, me for California," he told a reporter. He stayed in

Hollywood for four years, contributing short trick-photography sequences to a couple of movies and making now-you-see-him, now-you-don't appearances in a handful more.

In 1947, after long years alone, he married a widow with money named Margaret Atwood who'd come to New York from Boston and pursued him at a book signing. But his Hollywood adventure ended that marriage, and he was soon back on the road promoting a movie called *The Sleeping City*. The gimmick had Weegee traveling to more than a dozen cities and photographing sleeping people. He then gave the pictures to the local papers, which plugged the movie in their coverage. It was a huge success and a big payoff for him. "That tour may have marked the moment," writes Bonanos, "when Weegee the night-crawling newspaperman who had to beat everyone else to the scene finally disappeared for good."

Back in New York, he hit the lecture circuit, making as much as \$5,000 a night in today's money. He published *Naked Hollywood*, which had little of the verve of *Naked City*. He took nude pictures of the actress Judith Malina and tried (fruitlessly) to romance her. He started making distorted caricatures of celebrities and political leaders using his "elastic" lenses, and pursued all sorts of projects, promising and preposterous, including filming joke television commercials and trying to peddle a distortion gadget called the Weegeescope. Hugh Hefner used some of his pictures in an early issue of *Playboy*, and Liberman ran his caricatures of Charles de Gaulle and others in *Vogue*. "Increasingly, Weegee had become an oldies act," Bonanos writes. He took up again with a onetime flame, Wilma Wilcox, who seems to have been as much caregiving manager as lover.

Weegee's major work over the last decade of his life was shooting for a now lost genre of men's magazines with titles like *Stag*, *Night and Day*, *Eye*, and the unforgettable *Hi and Ho!* He recycled some of his old work and stalked Greenwich Village for new talent. "I'm looking for a girl with a healthy body and a sick mind," he liked to say. Another patron was Bob Harrison, the creator of *Confidential*, the hysterical scandal magazine, as well as *Titter*, *Eyeful*, and *Wink*. Harrison wanted Weegee to concoct lewd distortion shots of women with four breasts, two behinds, or two vaginas, and he obliged. Toward the end, he was in Europe, making low-rent nudie movies with titles like *My Bare Lady* and *The Imp-Probable Mr. Weegee*.

He did have one last brilliant moment. In 1963, Stanley Kubrick, who had begun as a *Look* photographer at seventeen and admired Weegee's artistry, invited him to bring his Speed Graphic and flash to the set of *Dr. Strangelove*. Weegee documented the production and made memorable shots, among others, of the final scene—an antic pie fight in the war room—that was cut in the finished film. Later, Peter Sellers credited Weegee's gargly voice as the inspiration for the accent he used to play the title character. Fame indeed.

Weegee died of a brain tumor at sixty-nine on the day after Christmas in 1968. He left thousands of images in his squalid Times Square flat, which Wilma Wilcox dutifully

sorted through. Nineteen thousand prints wound up in five hundred archival boxes at the International Center of Photography in New York; his ashes were later found in the trove and scattered at sea. There have been many postmortem exhibitions, including a 1973 MoMA show of press photography curated by Diane Arbus. Caches of Weegee pictures continue to be uncovered, including a stash from the Acme agency, mostly alternate frames or work peddled to the New York papers and later syndicated around the country. These pictures are newly reprinted in *Extra! Weegee*, a sumptuous album with hard-to-read original captions, which does nothing to diminish his reputation.

The coda to Weegee's story can be written to taste or inclination. He was a talented primitive who couldn't help but make art while working his trade. He did what many others did, but self-promoted to stardom. Debased aesthetics have elevated common work to the sublime. The power of photography is so profound that the image, no matter its provenance, trounces everything. "I created this monster, Weegee, and I can't get rid of it," he told an interviewer toward the end. Or, as Bonanos concludes, he was "eaten alive by his own image."