

# LIFE AND DEATH (MOSTLY DEATH) IN THE STREETS

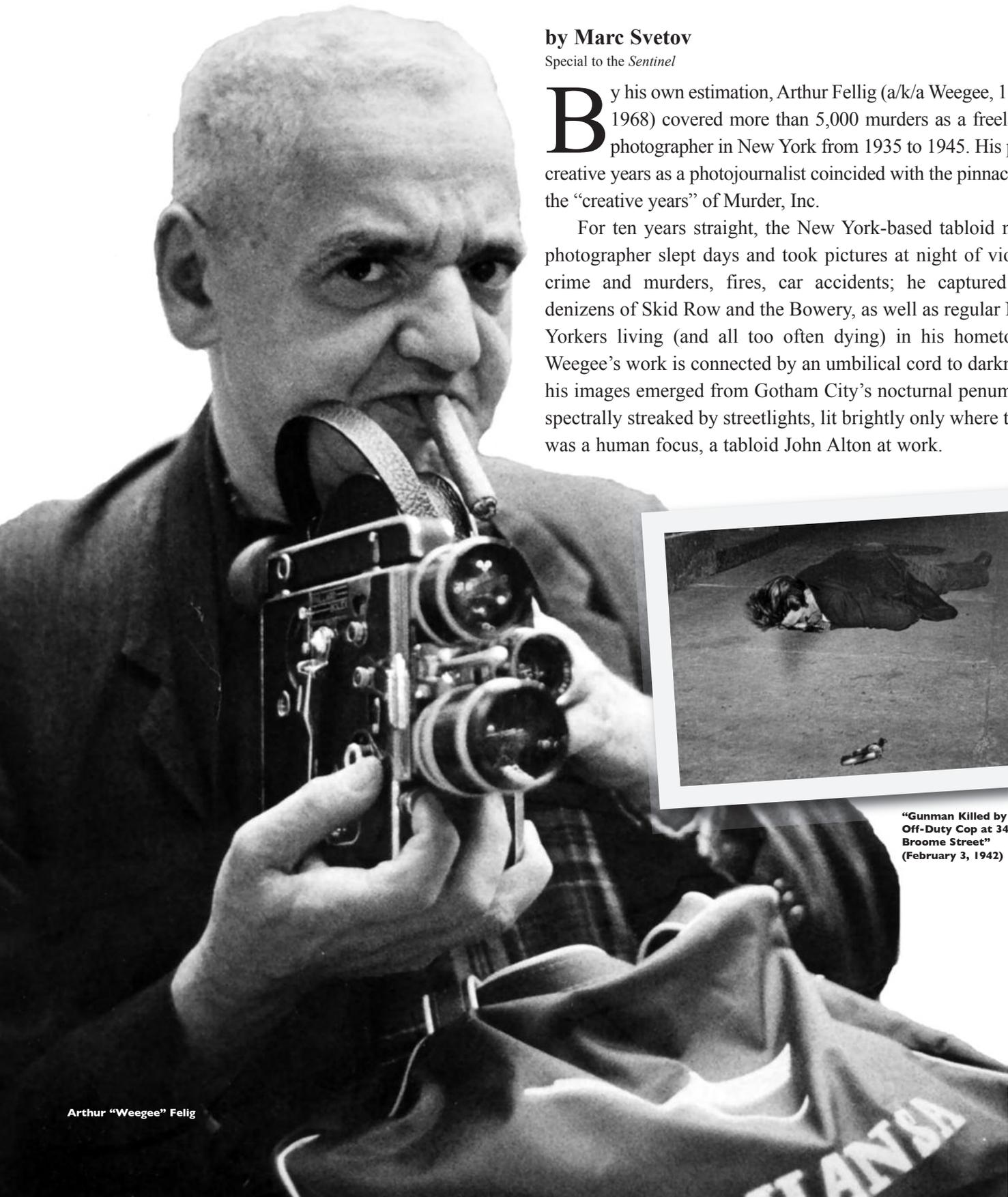
## Weegee and Film Noir

by Marc Svetov

Special to the *Sentinel*

By his own estimation, Arthur Fellig (a/k/a Weegee, 1899-1968) covered more than 5,000 murders as a freelance photographer in New York from 1935 to 1945. His peak creative years as a photojournalist coincided with the pinnacle of the “creative years” of Murder, Inc.

For ten years straight, the New York-based tabloid news photographer slept days and took pictures at night of violent crime and murders, fires, car accidents; he captured the denizens of Skid Row and the Bowery, as well as regular New Yorkers living (and all too often dying) in his hometown. Weegee’s work is connected by an umbilical cord to darkness; his images emerged from Gotham City’s nocturnal penumbra, spectrally streaked by streetlights, lit brightly only where there was a human focus, a tabloid John Alton at work.



**“Gunman Killed by  
Off-Duty Cop at 344  
Broome Street”  
(February 3, 1942)**

Arthur “Weegee” Fellig

Weegee called it his “Rembrandt light” as he caught the human protagonists in the white glare of his photo flash, the scene otherwise enveloped in darkness. Weegee’s news pictures were never haphazard snapshots, albeit they were taken by a man who had happenstance and chance as his helpmates; he and his camera, with its flash, seem to have a fateful meeting with his human subjects; pictures seem perfectly arranged, and what we focus on is their human content. Weegee is the quintessential noir photographer. Night was the terrain Weegee’s subjects inhabited; his photos were torn from the dark streets—photographs that have become virtually synonymous with noir.

One has to recall New York at that time, with mobsters running the rackets, and labor unions controlling the docks. Charles “Lucky” Luciano had been put behind bars, taken down in 1936 by New York special prosecutor Thomas Dewey. Thereafter, organized crime was run by people like Meyer Lansky, Louis “Lepke” Buchalter and his associates, and Bugsy Siegel. Lansky and Siegel were in charge of the troupe of hired killers, nicknamed “Murder Incorporated” by the press, but the troupe was actually run by Lepke. His top henchman were Mendy Weiss, Harry “Pittsburgh Phil” Strauss, Louis Capone, Lulu Rosencrantz, Charles Workman, Allie Tannenbaum, Seymour Magoon, Sholem Bernstein, Irving “Knuckles” Nitzberg, Vito Gurino, “Little Farvel” Cohen, Harry Maione, Frank Abbandando—a virtual “who’s who” of New York’s organized crime figures.

The ring of killers got a weekly retainer; in addition, they were rewarded with \$1,000 to \$5,000 per mob-ordered rub-out. Lepke received murder contracts from gang bosses across the United States. This enterprise, headquartered in a nondescript candy store in Brooklyn, called Midnight Rose’s, also had as co-bosses on its “executive board,” such figures as Albert Anastasia, Jacob “Gurrah” Shapiro, Abe “Kid Twist” Reles, Tommy “Three-Fingered Brown” Luchese, and Joe Adonis. The killers employed ice picks, strangulation, and shooting. Many were sent to the electric chair as the gang was eventually broken up, but not before Murder Inc. had eliminated a great many witnesses who could have testified against the syndicate.

### Learning the ropes

Usher (Ascher) Fellig was born in Zloczew in 1899, near the city of Lemberg (Lvov) in Galicia (what is now Ukraine), then the eastern reaches of the Austro-Hungarian empire. His father left for America in 1906. The rest of the family—there were four children including Usher at that time—followed after him by steamship in the steerage section, in 1910. Usher’s first name was Americanized to Arthur upon arrival at Ellis Island. The elder Fellig had studied to become a rabbi; in America, he made a living selling goods from a pushcart on the Lower East Side, where the family was settled. Weegee’s parents worked later as janitors, in exchange for rent, in various tenement buildings. Weegee’s father was thoroughly Old World, keeping the Sabbath and Orthodox Jewish precepts despite it impeding his earning money. The elder Fellig would finish his studies in America and be ordained as a rabbi.

These old-fashioned European ways were not for Arthur. In 1913, he left school to make money for the family. There were more siblings born in America after him. Arthur attempted to earn his way as a tin-type photographer; he was a helper to a commercial photographer after a few months, laboring in this capacity several years before he decided to strike out on his own, buying a pony and photographing Lower East Side children sitting on it. Weegee knew that proud parents, no matter how poor, would buy a picture of their kids. He soon had to give up that job,



Weegee was sufficiently self-aware of his image to pose for this noir-style photo of himself “heading out to work”

however—the pony’s big appetite ate into the profits.

At the age of 18, Arthur moved away from home. At first, he had no roof over his head and slept in flophouses and on park benches like the people he would later photograph. He did a variety of jobs, all the while hoping to work in a photographer’s studio. He caught on a general helper at a studio in Lower Manhattan, doing darkroom and studio jobs.

In 1921 he was hired at the *New York Times*, again doing darkroom work; he worked with the photo syndicate World Wide Photos, also as a helper, staying a couple years before leaving for Acme Newspictures, later taken over by United Press International. Arthur Fellig was a technician in the darkroom and a printer at Acme. He also took some turns as a substitute news photographer. Eventually, he was doing this more often.

### Getting there first

By 1934, he had rented a one-room apartment at 5 Center Market Place, behind the Manhattan Police Headquarters—where he would stay until 1947, the end of his career. Installing a radio in his apartment, from which he could pick up police emergency signals and fire alarms, he began his legendary career. In 1935, he left Acme to be a freelancer. It was not an easy task, as there was no economic safety net. To sell a picture, you had to be the first photographer on the scene.

Operating around the Manhattan Police headquarters, Weegee was soon selling pictures to the *Daily News*, *Herald-Tribune*, *Post*, *Journal-American*, *Sun*, *World-Telegram*. This was the start of Weegee’s signature photos, when he began sleeping days and working nights, following police and fire signals. Sometimes, he claimed, he would arrive before the authorities. He gained the nickname “Weegee” from the Ouija board, since he seemed to be able to predict when

events would happen. A couple of his photos seemed to prove it—like when he photographed a wino lying on the sidewalk, who then gets up, crosses the street, gets run over by a car and is given last rites by a priest; then there was the streetcorner in Chinatown that Weegee photographed moments before a gas main blew and the street caved in. Soon, Arthur Fellig was stamping his photos on the back with: “Weegee the Famous.” In 1938, he got authorization from the New York authorities to put a police radio in his car.

*PM*, a liberal New York newspaper owned by Ralph Ingersoll, hired Weegee in 1940. He was allowed to take the pictures he wanted, or take assign-



“Simply add boiling water”



**“Harold Horn, Knocked Over Milk Wagon with Stolen Car,” (June 27, 1941)**

ments from editors. His first photo exhibition opened the following year at the Photo League in New York. It was entitled “Weegee: Murder Is My Business.”

In 1945, Weegee published *Naked City*, a landmark book of photographs, with his own captions and short text accompanying the images. The following year, another book: *Weegee’s People*. Mark Hellinger bought the rights to *Naked City* so he could make a film in 1948 with that title, directed by Jules Dassin. It had nothing to do with Weegee’s material *per se*, though it was shot in police-procedural, documentary style on the streets of New York. Weegee went to Hollywood in 1947 to work as a “consultant,” and while there took bit parts in *Every Girl Should Be Married* (1948), *The Set Up* (1949), and *The Yellow Cab Man* (1950). He returned to New York in 1952, fairly disgusted with the West Coast.

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#### **Naked humanity**

Weegee’s major creative period was as a free-lance tabloid photographer, from 1935 to 1947, working both from his apartment behind the police station and from his car. His images are indelible—featuring gangsters covering their faces with handkerchiefs when being arrested; gunmen, face down on the sidewalk, faces bloodied and battered, the pistol that killed them having been thrown down nearby.

But Weegee’s photos dug deeper—he captured gaping crowds, neighborhood kids and adults gawking at the gory corpse lying on the sidewalk in a pool of blood. He showed policemen rescuing and arresting people; firemen, weary and worn, carrying children and their pets away from a raging fire. There were wrenching images of car accident victims; of cops and ambulance drivers; of cheap punks, kid killers, gun molls, murderers and murderesses—sitting in the paddy wagon, getting fingerprinted, through the wire mesh of a cell. Hoodlums and cop-killers beaten by thick-necked, burly New York detectives who turn their backs so they can’t be photographed.

## WEEGEE’S LANGUAGE OF NOIR

In the captions to his photos Weegee could have been writing noir street poetry or disjointed but oddly resonant treatments for noirs never filmed. In some cases, he anticipates the titles of actual films noir. Here are slices of noir in Weegee’s words, taken from his most famous work, *Naked City* (New York, 1945):

“I Cried When I Took This Picture: Mother and daughter cry and look up hopelessly as another daughter and her young baby are burning to death in the top floor of the tenement. Firemen couldn’t reach them in time...on account of the stairway collapsing.

Here he is...as he was left in the gutter. He’s got a D.O.A. tied to his arm...that means Dead On Arrival.

Murder in Hell’s Kitchen: One looks out of the windows...talks about the weather with a neighbor...or looks at a murder.

Balcony Seats at a Murder: This happened in Little Italy. Detectives tried to question the people in the neighborhood...but they were all dead...dumb...and blind...not having seen or heard anything.

These are dead bodies...wrapped by firemen in “bodybags.” The priest is giving the last rites to all that’s left of a mother and her two babies...besides the firemen...there are no spectators...It’s early morning...people are rushing to work...and can’t stop to look...they’d be late...and the boss will holler like hell ...

In the Line-Up Room: This guy killed a cop in a hold up. First he got a black eye...then the electric chair in Sing Sing prison...

Sixteen-year-old boy...who strangled a four-year-old child to death.

He was booked for pouring kerosene on his wife...Locking her in the bathroom, then setting her afire ...

These two guys were arrested for bribing basketball players...they gave me a lot of trouble as I tried to photograph them...Covering up their faces with handkerchiefs.

This elderly man had a date with a blonde in a hotel room...according to the police blotter, she ‘rolled’ him for \$450 so he knifed her to death...He did not try to “cover up” ...as he couldn’t see my camera because he was blind.

These are men arrested for dressing as girls...the cops, the old meanies, broke up their dance...and took them to the Pokey.

Crime and Punishment: This happened at eight o’clock on a Sunday night...People were rushing to the movies...there was a good double feature at Loew’s Delancey Street...one being a gangster picture. A few blocks away...in the Essex Diner...a bus boy was pasting a sign in the window, ‘Chef’s Special.’ A man walked in...he wasn’t looking for any specials: he had a gun. And this was a stickup. He grabbed the money from the cash register and ran out. A cop saw him and gave chase. The holdup man hid behind a parked car and started firing at the cop. The policeman fired back and killed the bandit. Here’s the cop just after the shooting...very nervous, for he might have hit some innocent passers by, giving the gun to the sergeant. The cop got a medal...the gunman got the bullets.

This is the most peaceful time of the whole week. Everything is so quiet...no traffic noises...and no crime either. People are just too exhausted for anything. The Sunday papers, all bundled up, are thrown on the sidewalk in front of the still-closed candy stores and newspaper stands. New Yorkers like their Sunday papers, especially the lonely men and women who live in furnished rooms. They leave early to get the papers...they get two. One of the standard-sized papers, either the *Times* or *Tribune*...they’re thick and heavy, plenty of reading in them, and then also the tabloid *Mirror*...to read Winchell and learn all about Café Society and the Broadway playboys and their Glamour Girl Friends. Then back to the room...to read and read...to drive away loneliness...but one tires of reading. One wants someone to talk to, to argue with, and yes, someone to make love to. How about a movie—NO!—too damn much talking on the screen! “But Darling I do love you...RAHLLY I do”...then the final clinch with the lovers in each other’s arms...and then it’s even worse, to go back alone to the furnished room...to look up at the ceiling and cry oneself to sleep.

—Marc Svetov





**“Charles Sodokoff and Arthur Webber Use Their Top Hats to Hide Their Faces,” (January 27, 1942)**

Weegee’s captions provided a visceral vernacular for the almost-sacred squalor of his imagery (see “Weegee’s Words” for a sampling). Taken together, they packed more than a mere punch; they were a brash but anguished cry in an endless nightscape. More than mere documents of a violent era, they also exuded a humanity that could only come from the photographer himself. There was nothing judgmental or distanced in Weegee’s work; he was the antithesis of the “slickers” who worked for glossy magazines. He remained a man essentially from the same New York working-class as the people he chose to photograph.

#### Noir stills

Weegee brought a unique sensibility to the photographing people and events. True, they called him the “official photographer of Murder, Inc.” His photos were dramatic, even cinematic—lit like film noir stills. Explaining his unique ability to capture the people in what were the most wrenching moments in their lives, Weegee waxed laconic: “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.”

A French critic explained it differently. “Weegee,” wrote Alain Bergala, “was a new American, in that he was born in Galicia and was eleven years old when his family emigrated to the United States, settling in New York City’s Lower East Side. Film noir, which constitutes American cinema’s most distinctive imagery, arose from the capture of American reality by an aesthetic derived from Expressionism, and made, to a significant extent, by European filmmakers who had foreseen the looming darkness before fleeing Nazism and finding refuge and work in the United States. Although Weegee identified completely with the American vernacular and presented himself as a purely unsocialized and instinctual photographer, there is a disturbing, sensational intersection between the expressionistic chiaroscuro of his images and the Central European-derived aesthetic that he shares, however reluctantly, with the émigrés of cinema who shaped the aesthetic of film noir.”

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In the latter stages of his career as New York’s “public eye” (a monicker first hung on him by a rival newspaper, and that resonated sufficiently to be appropriated for the 1992 neo-noir about a Weegee-like photographer played by Joe Pesci), Weegee began to engineer his own “noir canvases,” utilizing what he had initially created at random into a series of

photos that had been pre-arranged. These “experiments in incongruity” were given ironic titles, such as the famous image where two high society matrons are accosted by a venal-featured bag lady. Impishly, Weegee titled this image “The Critic.”

#### Beyond Naked City

The collision between Weegee’s photos and film as noirs is more than a coincidence of technique. It was a juxtaposition that was ultimately disillusioning to him; as his fame grew, he began to feel that his aesthetic largesse had been compromised and co-opted. Displaced from Manhattan’s urban squalor during his years in Hollywood, he found himself drawn to non-realistic theories of pictorial display. He became fascinated with distorted reality, and constructed a sequence for MGM’s *The Yellow Cab Man* where automobile traffic is wildly distorted. He extended these ideas into portraits; his transmogrified sequence of Marilyn Monroe head shots, assembled by multiple exposures, melted negatives, lens trickery, both anticipates and transcends the Pop movement that took the art/design world by storm in the 1960s.

Few have felt the need to explore the more “artistic” side of a man who claimed to know nothing of art. Brutal spontaneity, whether real or feigned, would always be his calling card. He knew this, and in his own idiosyncratic prose (of which more samples can be found in the sidebar) he expressed it more eloquently than any critic:

*—People are so wonderful that a photographer has only to wait for that breathless moment to capture what he wants on film...and when that split second of time is gone, it’s dead and can never be brought back.*

*—For the pictures ... I was on the scene; sometimes drawn there by some power I can’t explain, and I caught the New Yorkers with their masks off...not afraid to Laugh, Cry, or Make Love. What I felt I photographed, laughing and crying with them.*

*—The people in these photographs are real. Some from the East Side and Harlem tenements, others are from Park Avenue. In most cases, they weren’t even aware they were being photographed.*

Weegee was still roaming Manhattan’s “mean streets” until just a month before his death in December 1968. ■



**Weegee at work near his Centre Street office in Lower Manhattan**