cionados of photography proves something about the extraordinary cunning with which he manipulated the way others viewed him. In *Weegee—A Tribute*, Bruce Downes describes Weegee’s accumulated work as “an impressive collection of pictures, the photographic quality of which was uniformly poor. But however bad they were technically, what was in them was true and alive.” Far from being “bad technically,” Weegee’s control of his medium—in his case exclusively a Speed Graphic 4×5 camera (the same equipment used by Sid Grossman in some of his best pictures) with Graflex-synchronized flash—can be said to have set a new standard for photojournalism. His habit was to preset to 1/200 of a second, stopped down to f16; he says he simply made it a rule of thumb to focus to a distance of ten feet. Weegee’s is a case in which technique rarely impinges on the sensation of the camera’s having captured traumatic or, more often, post-traumatic, experience in its most essential energy and meaning. The gritty immediacy for which his best images are known has never been equaled.

Technique and “style” become a single concern in Weegee’s work; all the photographers of the New School aimed at merging the two, but Weegee achieved it more purely. In the words of the critic and photographer John Coplan:

All Weegee’s passion was centered on getting close to his material, to snatch the explosive moment out of the act of something else counted. There is a frantic edge to Weegee’s eagerness. He worked at a point blank range and at a desperate pitch the better to catch people in the raw... Weegee had an absolute perfection for artificial light. He liked the way in which no object is highlighted and flattened by the freeze action of flash, and slowly dissolves into a saturated black background.

Coplan goes on to characterize Weegee’s technique after exposing his film, making an observation that applies fundamentally to the photographers of the New School, and that is indeed one of the school’s hallmarks:

[Weegee] focused in on an event, and if an image failed to compose itself, he used the enlarger to crop and bring the image closer by eliminating superfluous detail, especially in the background, which he often burnt to a deep flat black. Thus, Weegee’s images are unleavened by tonal gradations.

While it may not be true that all the photographers of the New School avoided “tonal gradations,” their nearly unanimous willingness to seize what they wanted in their pictures after capturing the image in the camera lens—their habit of using the original negative as a point of departure, rather than an end in itself—is a large part of what sets them apart from other photography of their time. In this conscious effort to reveal the unness beneath the veneer of self-presentation, Weegee goes beyond what the other photographers of the New School wished to express—indeed, beyond what most photographers of any era have sought. Coplan also makes the provocative comment that “his photographs are morally dubious... often [he is] deliberately spying... Sleep, self-absorption, and unawareness were continuing obsessions, and people shocked, in terror, convulsed with pain, or blown out of their minds were his special targets.”

Weegee’s way of covering the New York crime scene in the late 1930s and 1940s is well known: he cultivated relationships with several Manhattan police headquarters, fitted out his own automobile with a radio tuned to the police-call wave band, followed its calls to fires and vice-squad raids and riots and murder scenes, photographed when he got there, and sold the photographs to such New York newspapers as the *Herald Tribune*, the *World Telegram*, the *Daily News*, the *Post*, and the *Sun*. He was at the top of his form in the first decade of the New York School.

It wasn’t, however, only nighttime crime photography that interested Weegee as a photographer in New York during the 1930s and 1940s. From 1940 to 1945, he worked for Ralph Steiner’s *PM’s Weekly*—which he later described as “a very liberal newspaper... They never told me what to do but if a story broke I brought in the pictures.” (He would have seen Model’s “Why France Fell” photographs in the January 1941 *PM’s Weekly*.) What captured Weegee’s eye were often precisely the things that fascinated his compatriots of the New York School. He photographed Coney Island with just the same level of abandon and immersion evident in pictures by Grossman, Model, Frank, Arbus, or Davidson; in his “Lovermaking on the Beach” images from *Naked City*, he literally prefigures some of Davidson’s 1959 pictures. He haunted Harlem and the Lower East Side with an eye to the very street life Helen Levitt made her own. In one particular case—that of the appropriation of Sammy’s Bar in the Bowery—Weegee and Lisette Model may be said to vie neck and neck for ascendancy.

In the matter of verbal description, however, Weegee wins:

At 167 Bowery, sandwiched in between Missions and quarter-night flophouses, is “Sammy’s,” the poor man’s Stork Club. There is no cover charge nor cigarette girl, and a vending machine dispenses cigarettes. Neither is there a hat check girl. Patrons prefer to dance with their hats and coats on. But there is a lively floor show... the only saloon on the Bowery with a cabaret license. As the customers arrive from uptown in cabs, they are greeted by a bunch of panhandlers who don’t ask for the usual “got a nickel for a cup of coffee mister,” but instead for a dime for a glass of beer, and get it too. Inside, the place is jammed with the uptown crowd mingling with the Bowery crowd and enjoying it. But towards midnight some odd types drop in for a quick one. There is a woman who called “Pruneface,” a man called “Horseface,”