



Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *New Orleans, Jail Wall* (1950s)

On a Jail Wall By Nicoló Giudice

While browsing the lots of a recent photography auction, I encountered a photograph by Weegee that I had never seen before -*Jail Wall, New Orleans* (1950s)-. It struck a chord and felt both familiar and quite different from Weegee's iconography of American life on the streets, with its scenes full of people, drama, tragedies and crimes. This one was a rather understated and un-spectacular photograph of a jail wall covered with graffiti.

Leo, Sonny, Benny Apocaca, Mosca, Orlicz Chavev, Valverde, Heads, Camela, Luisito, Rudy Hoods, Rocky, Art... are some of the names and characters that appear on the surface of the wall. Through their sizes and calligraphies, a few of them stand out, looking and sounding loud and prepotent, elevating their persona within the hierarchy of the inmates and imposing an almost mythical status and power. Others are quiet, almost modest or barely visible and readable amongst the cacophonous presence of numerous other inscriptions. The seemingly metallic surface of the wall is framed on each side by two series of vertical lines and dots that are formed by the junctures of the walls' different sections. These details not only signify the penitentiary environment and evoke the bars of a cell, they also seem to suggest something more elusive. It is as if they form a frame within the frame, which opens up a certain space and time, like an image of the jail's cell it-self over time. Within it, the names appear like distant echoes of the people, of their voices, of their persona and seem to haunt the space like ghosts.

Fascinated by the photograph, I looked for other images that Weegee had made in jails until I found two photographs that were shot in the same cell, presumably on the same day. The discovery was striking. I suddenly made a few steps backwards in space and time and witnessed the wider scene.

The two photographs are very similar and were likely shot within seconds of each other. We are inside the cell, facing the bars, the walls with the inscriptions are on the right, a number of men have collapsed and fallen asleep, one is on the floor next to the cell's toilet, the others on benches and a table. A man is standing, shouting and gesticulating above the unconscious bodies. Another man, who is only partially visible in a corner behind the bench, looks straight back at the camera. He is awake, sober, apparently well-dressed. I imagine him to be a prison officer of some sort who was guiding the photographer inside the prison. Nevertheless, his presence and gaze addressed to the viewer remain enigmatic.

One of the photograph is entitled *Men in Jail* (1950s) and is in the J. Paul Getty Museum Collection, while the other is called *On Deaf Ears* (1946) and is in the International Centre for Photography Collection and is distributed by Getty Images. The discrepancy between the dates is clearly problematic. I speculate that the 1946 print is dated on the back while the other is not, as it is the case in *New Orleans, Jail Wall* (1950s). The version entitled *On Deaf Ears* (1946) holds a caption, which was perhaps written on the back of the print: "A prison preacher addressing a cell full of drunks in a jail in New Orleans, Louisiana".

I imagine that Weegee wanted to -or was commissioned to- photograph inside this jail and was guided by the preacher and the officer. I imagine him shooting this partially staged scene in the drunk tank -a subject he also photographed in other jails -. While doing so, the wall catches his eye. Moving closer, he recognises its significance and makes one (or more) photograph(s). I wonder if the graffiti were made while the men were drunk, or later on, to fill a few moments of their incarcerations, or if these are layers upon layers of inscriptions dating back several decades. In any case, this polyphonic palimpsest was made by fallen men, men dumped and trapped into a cage, and within that dark hole, they grabbed whatever tool they could find to leave a mark and to try to make their names, persona and aura survive somehow.



Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *On Deaf Ears* (1946)