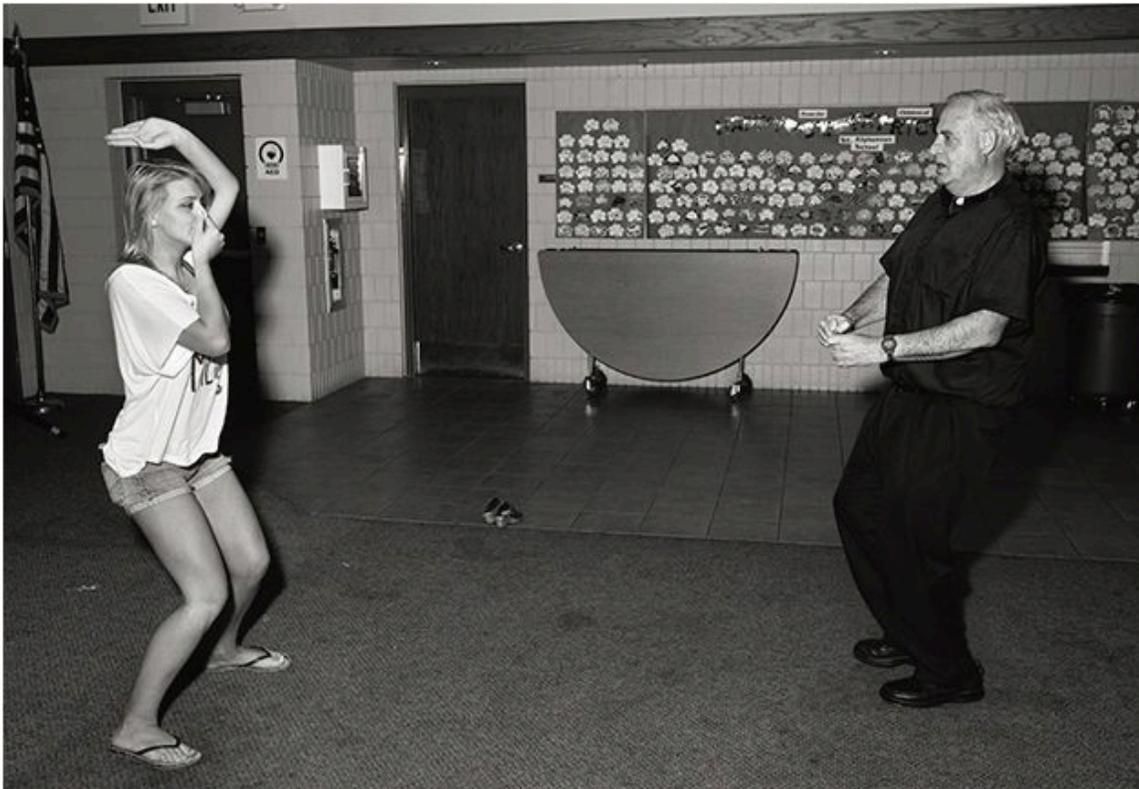


# SEANKELLY

Schnipper, Matthew. "The GQ+A: Photographer Alec Soth Talks America and Foam Parties," *GQ*, February 19, 2015.



## The GQ+A: Photographer Alec Soth Talks America and Foam Parties



Photographs by © Alec Soth 2015 courtesy MACK

Alec Soth's new book of photographs, *Songbook*, is mostly of people, all in black and white, and almost entirely without words. Soth made many of the photos while on assignment (he occasionally shoots for *GQ*), including for *Dispatch*, a small newspaper he and writer Brad Zeller helm. We spoke with Soth about the creation of the book. A selection of images from it opens tomorrow at Weinstein Gallery in his hometown of Minneapolis.

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### How did you come to the title of *Songbook*?

**Alec Soth:** Long story short, 80 percent of the pictures were made in conjunction with Brad Zeller in this self-published newspaper called *Dispatch*. That word dispatch evokes all that journalistic kind of stuff and I wanted a place for the pictures that was separate from that. Where it was stripped of language, stripped of newsy-ness and context, to a large degree. In thinking about it as something more lyrical, more open-ended, the musical analogy kept coming up. Since I often think about photographs in narrative terms, I wanted it to be non-narrative. I wanted more singular photographs, though they function together, the logic of their sequence is much more intuitive and non-narrative.

**You have a photo of a warped house in Prattsville, a small town that was devastated by Hurricane Irene a few years ago. I know that because it's local to New York, but so many people will look at this photo and not know the context. Why withhold that from them?**

All of these pictures are taken out of their context.

**But this one has so much context.**

But the truth is that a lot of them do and that issue is something I've struggled with from project to project. *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, there are footnotes with some of the pictures, *Niagara* is even more extensive with kind of visual footnotes with some of the pictures. With my next project, *Broken Manual*, actually there were these documentary filmmakers following me around so that kind of relieved me of that task. And in this case I had Brad Zeller who wrote all about Prattsville in the *Dispatch*, so that's taken care of. Some days there will be a book that involves all the text and expanded essays by Brad and my pictures will be small and supplementary. But in this case, I love how mysterious it is without that knowledge. That's what photographs do.

**There were only a few moments that seemed very "modern" in the book, like the photo of Hewlett Packard. Did you edit with a more neutral time in mind?**

The choice of the pictures was non-narrative. It was often the strongest pictures. I wanted a certain kind of powerful image again and again, but also tonal shifts, so quiet pictures and so forth. And some pictures are more tone setters and then others are more informational, but I still wanted power in all of them. The actual modernity versus something retro seeming was less of a topic. I mean, everything I photographed was made in this day and age and one of the things I'm playing off of is photographic history. There is this kind of weird awareness while making the work that was like, Wow, you photograph anything in a certain way and it looks like it's of another time. And of course when people were photographing in another time, when Weegee was photographing, the world was not black and white and didn't look like that, so that feeling of nostalgia is itself a kind of projection. And what's related to that is that that world out there still exists in a lot of ways. We think of cowboys or something like that as things of the past when in fact there are still cowboys. There are people living all sorts of different lives out in the world and I think we sit behind computers and behind screens and sort of imagine that the world doesn't really exist anymore. We're so filled with irony and distance, but in fact, it does still exist and that was one of the revelations in making the work.

**How much of your own sense of what the world is like changed through this book?**

It really has. I mean, I've traveled a fair amount in the U.S., but I'm just much less jaded than I used to be actually. Literally, an hour ago I was in rural Minnesota. I'm back in my studio right now, not far away. But in this little café there's a group of Red Hats. Do you know Red Hats? Do you know are these ladies that gather together and wear red hats? It's a weird subculture, sort of older ladies that gather...I don't know what their mission is, but they were playing cards in this café and it's just like, it still exists. Like all sorts of things still happen. Social life still goes on and there's subcultures. Not everything is strip malls and television. There's still huge variety out there. And also all the bad things that go along with that, racism blah blah blah, but it's a rich universe out there. And I actually as a photographer, I got jaded at a certain point and thought, Everything's been photographed, and why do it and blah blah blah. But I'm much more encouraged now that I've fallen in love with photography again.

**What are some times that you really enjoyed making this book?**

Maybe it doesn't look like it, but I had a blast. There's a melancholy quality to everything I do, I can't help it, but it was really joyous. With all these pictures I was accompanied by a writer or editor or somebody and we were working together and laughing. There's a lot of humor in the work, sometimes a dark humor. It's kind of endless the joyous stories. What's a good one...

**Tell me about the foam party, that looks particularly fun.**

The phenomenon of foam parties, which I think of as an early '90s Daytona Beach kind of thing, but to find that in upstate New York, What is that world like? That's the impetus for photography, and I'm sure for you for journalism. It's like, What is that like? And being a photographer is an excuse to go check something out. I made an alliance with the guy who shoots the foam so he wouldn't shoot me. Part of the backstory that's missing and sort of a shame in this case, is that a good percentage of the clients there, at this saloon, are military folks. So you had people in uniform and then you have half-naked people dancing. Never was able to capture that in a picture. I'm a voyeur in more ways than one and I like just

watching the world and people interacting in social spaces sort of contracting and expanding and what better place than the dance floor?

**So you were able to stay out of the foam, but are there moments where you actually participated in something that you didn't expect?**

There's always a little bit of distance, and that goes with the loneliness in some of the pictures. I think that photography excels at alienation because there's always this lens between you and the world. And that's part of my attraction to it, I guess, is a little bit of distance. Most of my photographs are made while traveling, and I like traveling by car. I think of it as if the car is it's own little lens, so you're behind this little bubble. You're in the world, but removed from the world. And that's usually the case. I've never been the kind of guy who shoots heroin with the subjects, that sort of thing.

**How did you meet everyone you photographed?**

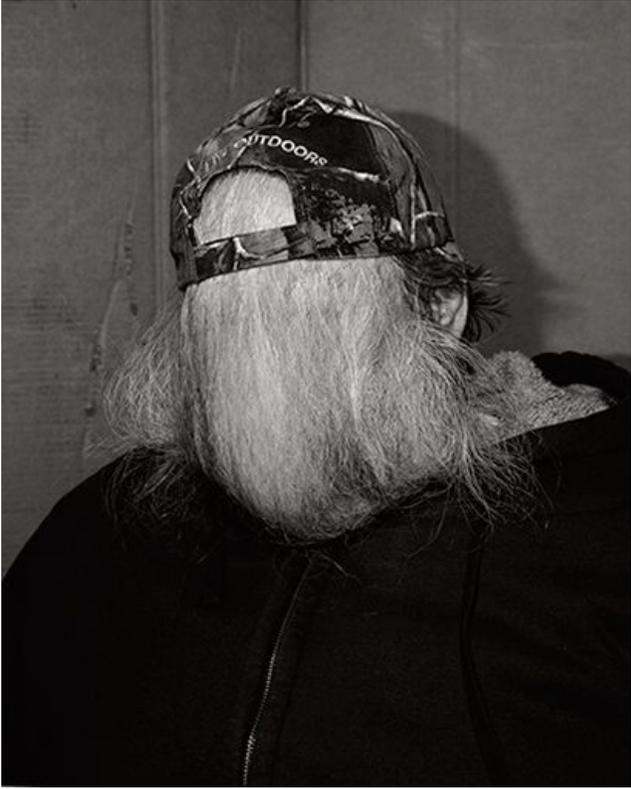
In the very beginning, Brad and I started doing assignments [for *Dispatch*] in Minneapolis. Never was there an intention to travel, we were just going to create our own little imaginary newspaper, and then it was totally serendipitous, I had a lecture in Ohio and we decided to go on the road and it was just really successful. And it was state by state that we did that and we would just map a route, generally two weeks worth of travel around the state. It was not like planned out necessarily to do this comprehensive survey of the United States. It was Ohio initially, and then we did upstate New York, and then Michigan. It's not like at the beginning I thought OK, in three years I'm going to do a book called *Songbook* and I'm going to photograph all over America, you know one thing led to another.

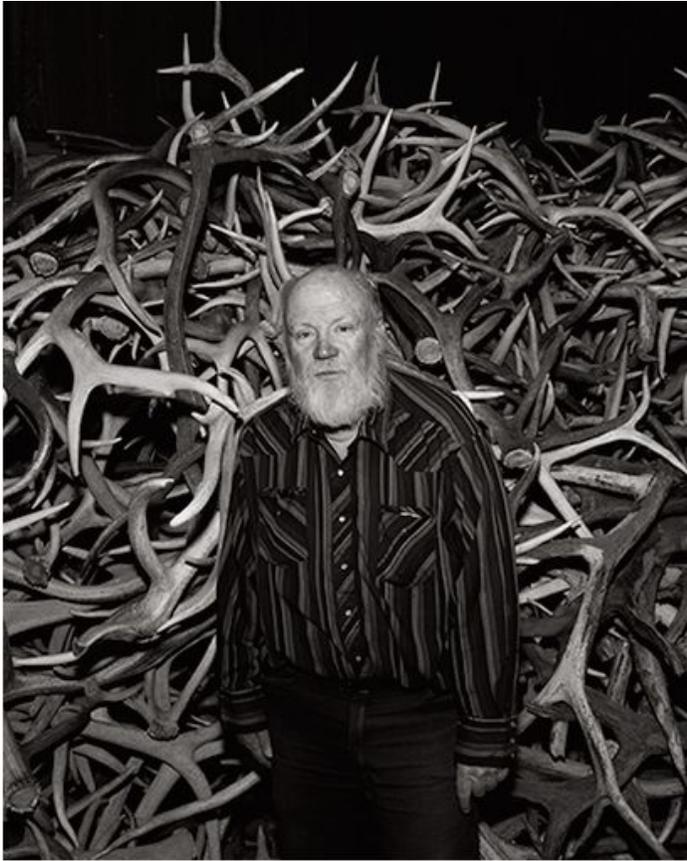
**I'm really captivated by the photo of the guy with the "lost" tattoo...**

That was actually a *New Yorker* assignment. So everything about that assignment was right up my alley. It's what I want to do, it fits in, and as an aside, I should say that I was working in black and white, but they didn't want me to work that way. I made their picture and I made my picture. People really liked the picture and so on and so forth. It's hard to split my brain and do that, but it's one of the ambitions when I'm doing assignment work. I've gotten more savvy about figuring out which assignments have that potential.

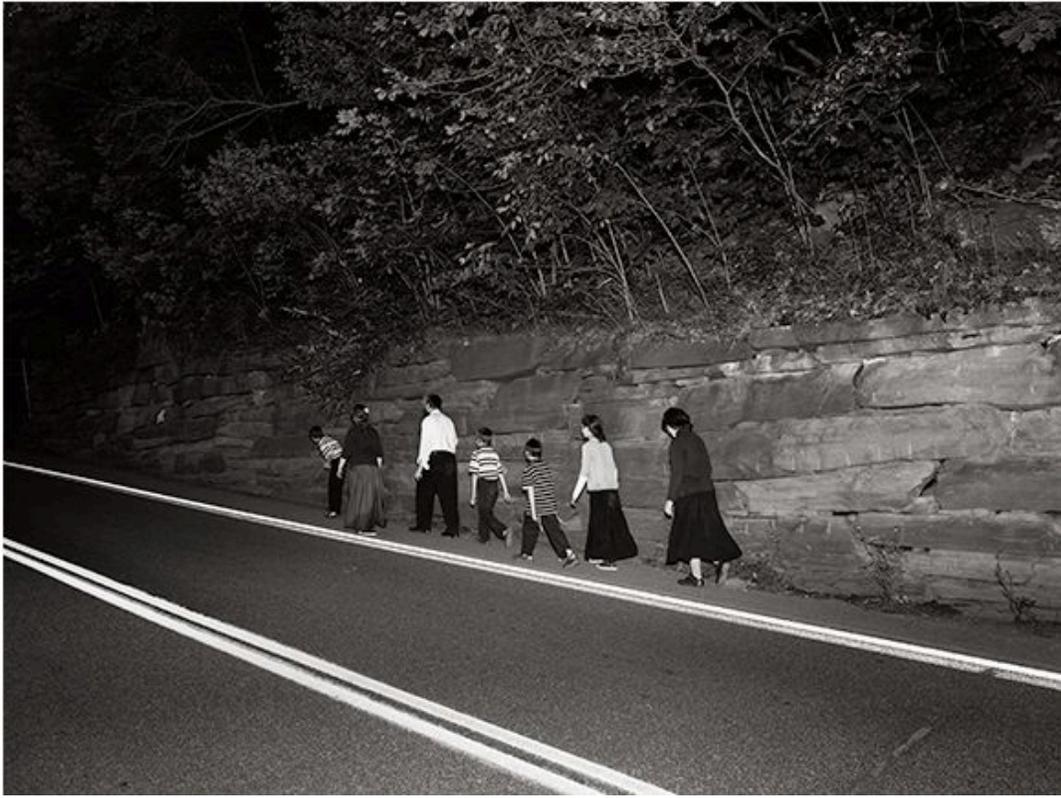
**How many of your subjects see your photos?**

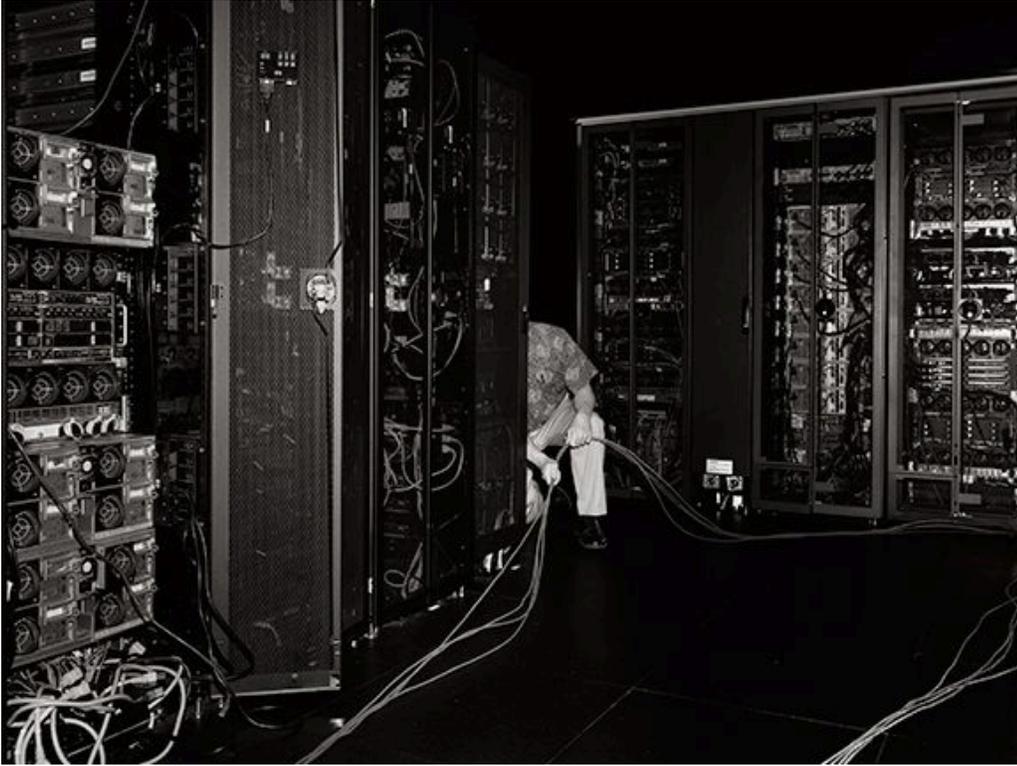
For *Mississippi* and *Niagara*, I would send copies of pictures to people I photographed. Then I had this dividing line in my process where when I worked for publications I didn't send pictures because it was like, too much responsibility. There's too many pictures, I'm just meeting too many people, and in a funny way [*Songbook*] fell into that category. So there's certain people who ask for it, and I send them copies or in this case, digital pictures. But a large chunk of subjects aren't seeing them. But one of the fascinating things I've found in traveling and meeting people is that often times they don't even ask. They're just happy to have an interaction and it doesn't really matter.











Songbook by Alec Soth published by MACK