

SEANKELLY

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SONGBOOK

*Alec Soth on his most important work since *Sleeping by the Mississippi**

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MELODY MAKER

Songbook, published by Mack, marks a departure from Alec Soth's previous narrative-driven works. He tells Lucy Davies why he's answering to a new rhythm

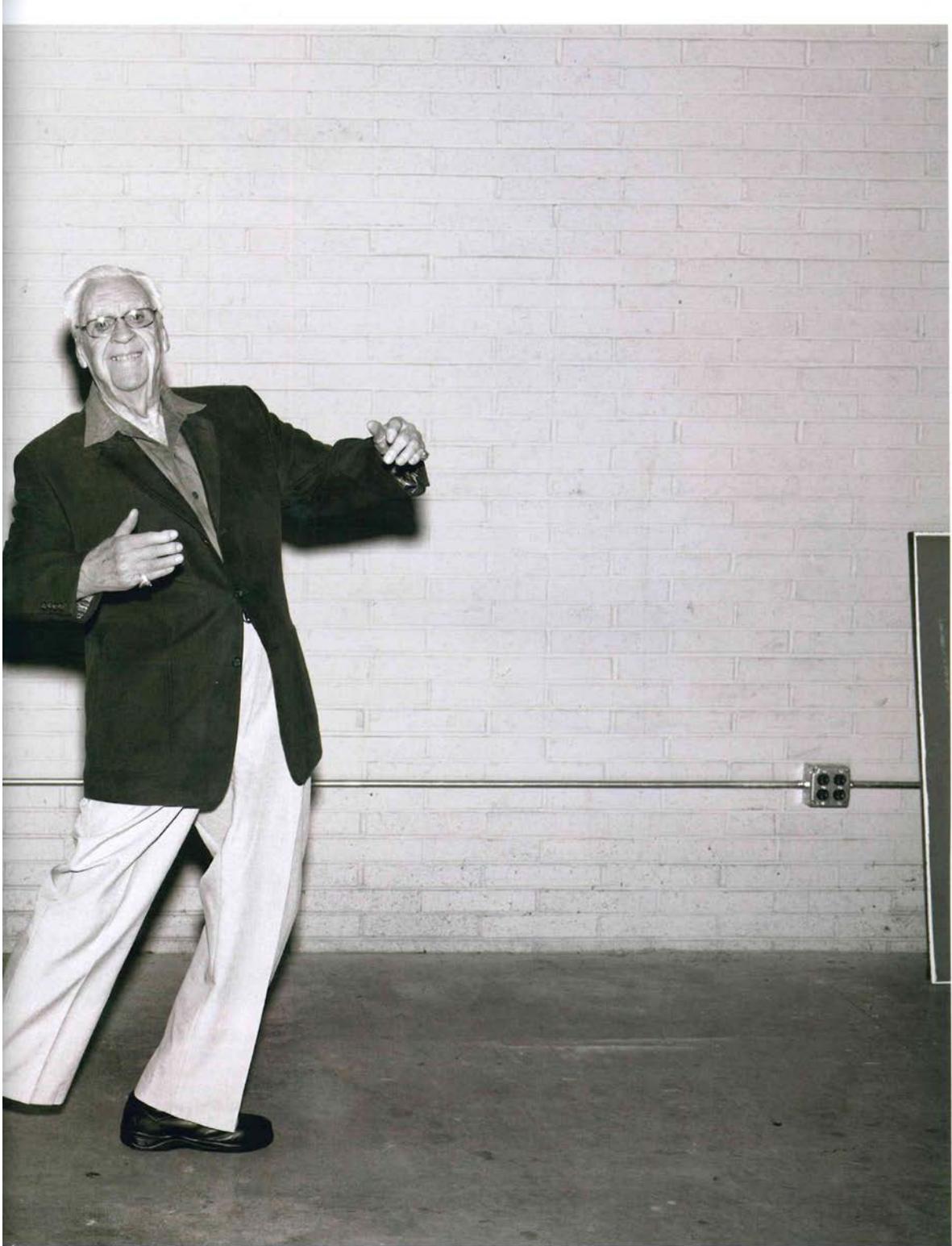
On my way out from interviewing Alec Soth, navigating the stairs from his publisher's office, into the rainy evening outside, it seems appropriate - significant even - that it happened on London's Denmark Street. This tiny diagonal lane on the flanks of Covent Garden has been a draw for musicians since Dickensian times, when the music halls and theatres nearby bought sheet music in bundles from the terraced shops on its route. Later, in the 1950s, it was host to a flourishing music publishing industry, becoming known as the British 'Tin Pan Alley', and later still The Rolling Stones and David Bowie sang into microphones in recording studios on their upper floors. These days, what's left is a clutch of guitar and specialist music shops - all under threat of redevelopment - the brassy yellow light from their windows reflecting in the sheen of a wet, gum-dotted pavement.

Soth is in London to lay the ground for a retrospective of his photography, which is opening at Media Space in the autumn. Beginning with *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, the work that would slow-burn its way into the collective consciousness of the photography community worldwide, alongside his follow-up, *Niagara*, and those that followed, *The Last Days of W* and *Broken Manual*, it will also be the first British showing of his latest endeavour, *Songbook*. Officially premiered in late January at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, it is also a book, published by Michael Mack in time to coincide with the show and two further exhibitions opening in March, at Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco and Weinstein Gallery in Soth's hometown of Minneapolis.

Soth was in Istanbul to supervise its printing the day before I met him, and swatches of the lime-green cover fabric lie on the sill next to where I'm sitting. It's a dated colour, sort of 1960s, with the dense weave and padded feel of a family album. "I liked it for its nostalgic and challenging aspects," says Soth. "The puffiness is kind of uncomfortable, but it's also very tactile. I really want to feel a book when I hold it."

Now aged 45, Soth has been waging war on the book's behalf for the better part of a decade (one of his many sidelines is, of course, Little Brown Mushroom, founded in part to facilitate limited-run titles). By 'book', I mean books in general, their form and particular talent for telling a





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story via images in a specific order. "I think in narrative terms," he has said, "the way a writer thinks of a book, or a filmmaker a film."

Songbook, however, marks a new departure. True, his approach continues to mirror the great sequential, locus-based studies like Robert Frank's *Americans*, or Walker Evans' *American Photographs*, but where he previously used narrative tools such as captions and forewords, *Songbook* does away with all that, replacing description and explanation with an impressionistic structure intended to work on you like a half-known, sentimental old melody.

Governed by lyric rather than logic, the photographs are poetic things, visually absorbing, even without explanation of exactly what it is they show. Sometimes knowing what they are changes things completely. An aerial shot of a man walking across a paved courtyard, for example, hips to the left, elbow to the right, and just one of many images in the book to feature people seemingly in mid-dance manoeuvre, was taken on the forecourt at Facebook's headquarters. That might gain the image an angle, but it also acts as a sort of stutter in the sequence.

But even though there are no captions, the

book does contain snatches of text, which are lines and verses from the loose collection of musical works known as 'The Great American Songbook'. These are the canon of popular songs by composers such as Rogers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter and Irving Berlin, whose tunes defined America before the advent of rock 'n' roll.

"I kind of want that music playing in your head as you go through it," says Soth. "It was about getting the right tone. The thing about that music, it's nostalgic, but there's an anxious, lonely quality to it as well. It was the right kind of mysterious, bittersweet longing."



Its sequencing took Soth far out of his comfort zone. "It's very different to something like *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, where there's a geographical sequence - not perfectly - but more or less north to south. I knew *Songbook* required something more musical, and so I had to feel my way through it rather than chart it out." That geographical quality is still here, "but I broke it apart: the geography is everywhere. That idea of place, of America, it functions well for me, and part of that is the American tradition in photography that I'm so aligned with; it's just in my DNA at this point."

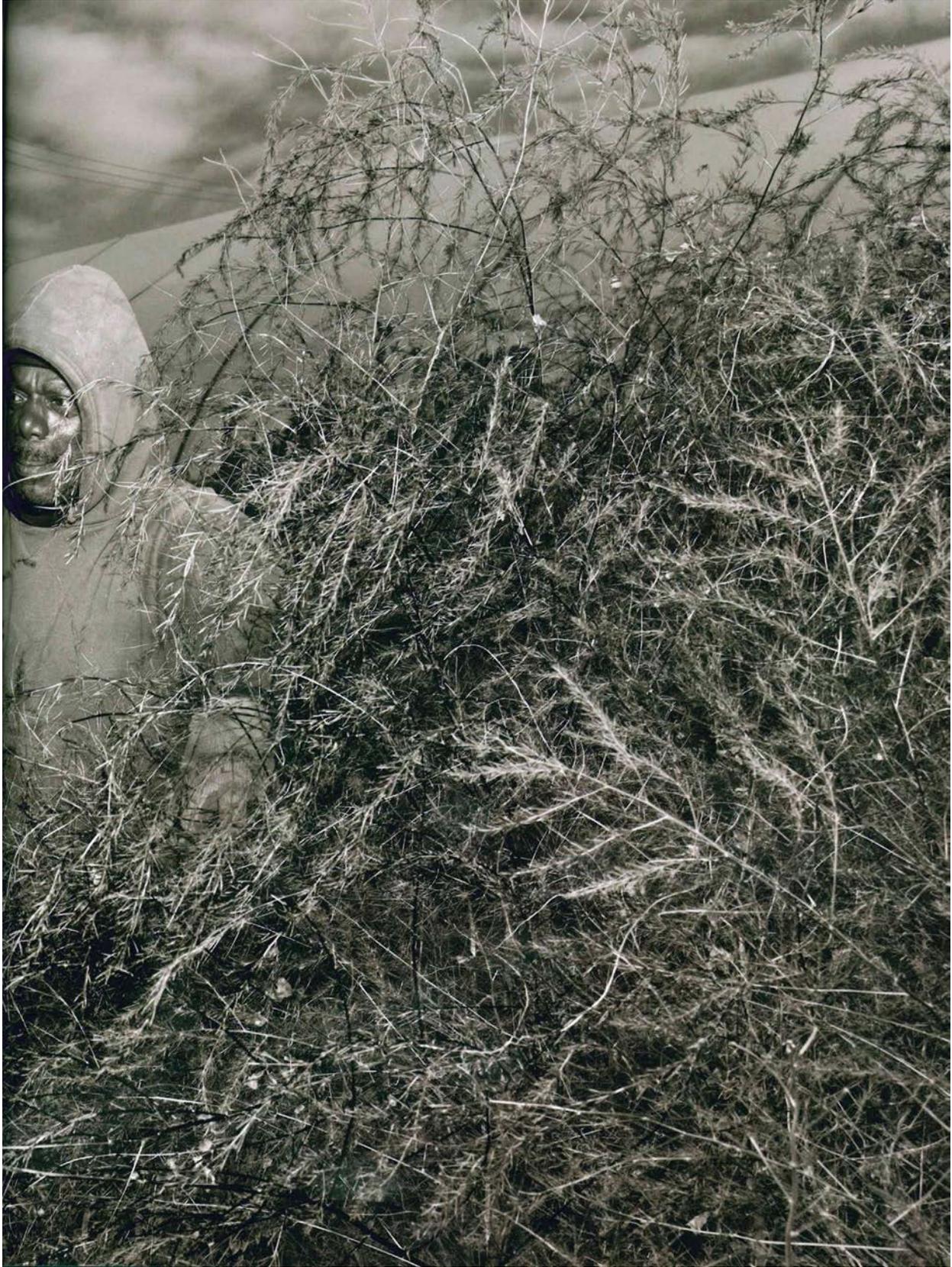
Most obviously, the images arc and fall, become darker and darker, "getting kind of chaotic", says Soth. "It ends in a surreal lightness, like the next morning, everything's gone, daylight." Repeated motifs, such as animals and mist, work as a sort of refrain in the run. There are also contained passages, so we have a woman in a tiny plane, a parachutist, both on the ground, then some skywriting. Other images work as a means of transition, changing gear from one state to another. The book has a pace, a beat all its own.

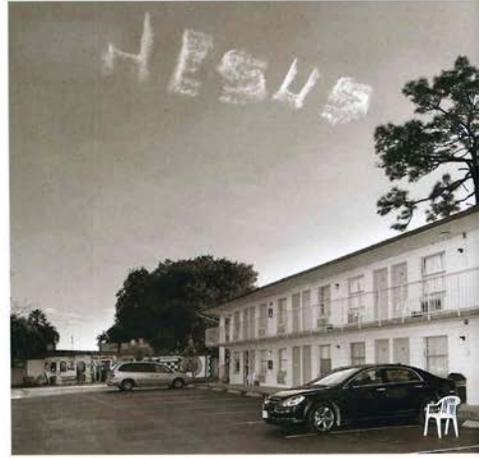
"Photography is static as a medium, the opposite of music," he says, "but that's where

the book form comes in - it allows for rhythmic patterns and passages. It's taken a lot for me to open up to that and know how to feel it. It's hard to articulate. How does a musician explain rhythm, like why they put the sounds together? It just feels right." He references Walker Evans, saying that "he talked about working lyricism into a documentary style, like [the poems of] William Carlos Williams. They're both of the real world, but lyrical. That's the closest I can come to explaining the quality I'm trying to get here."

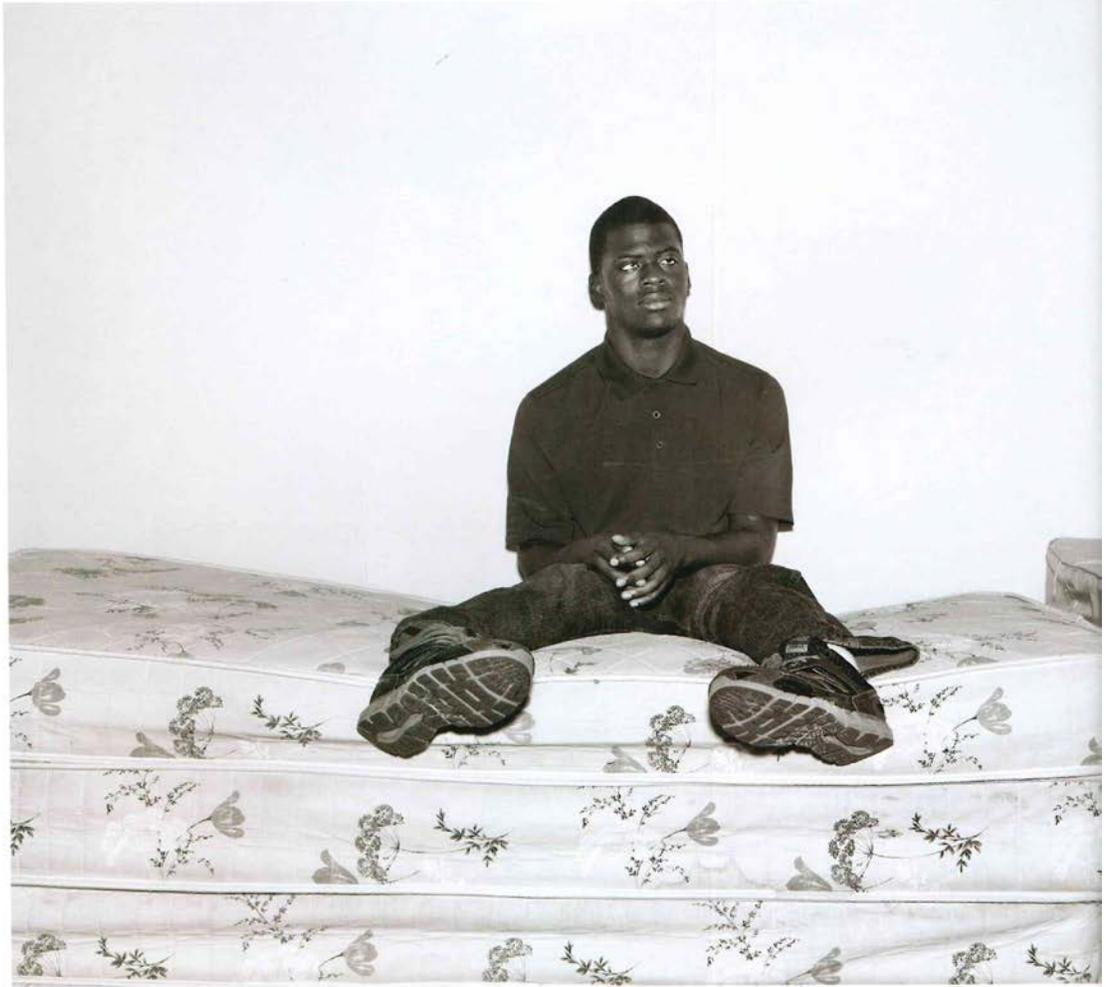
Some of *Songbook's* pictures, or variants of them, previously appeared in a self-styled,

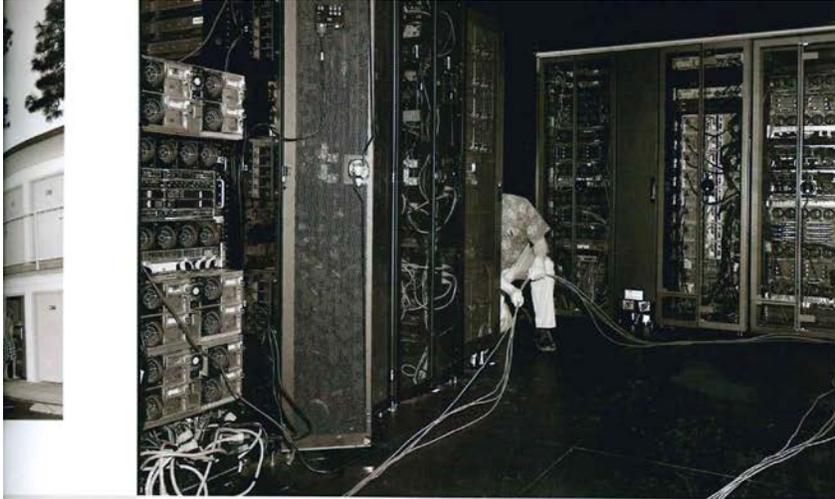






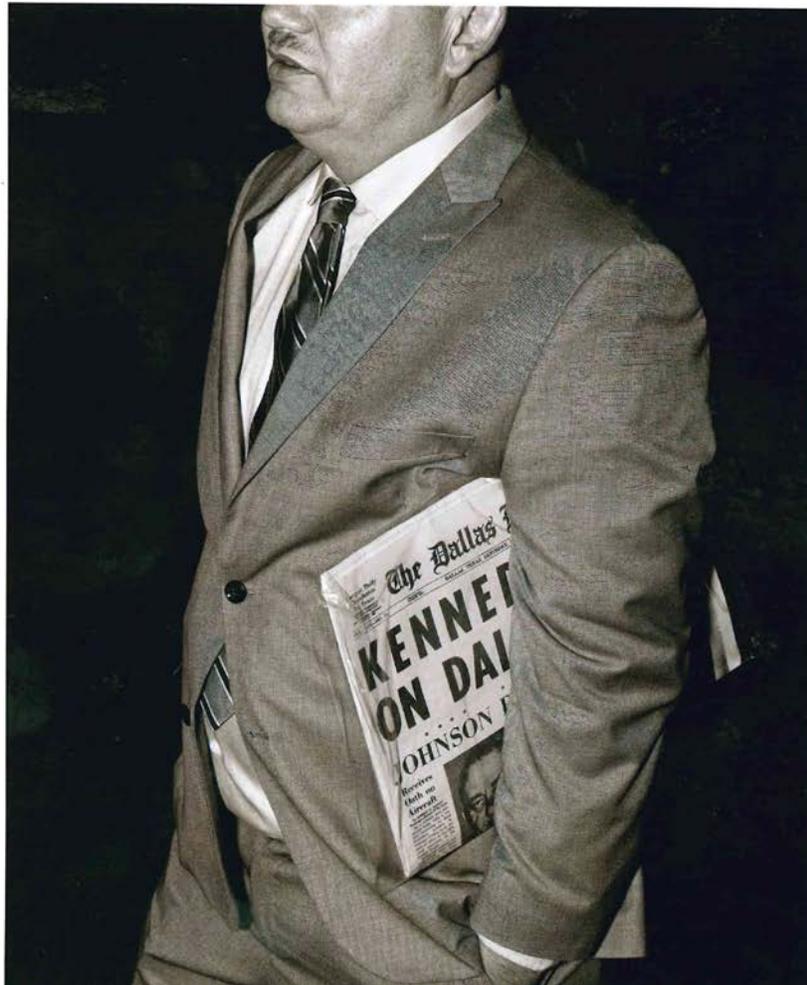
All images © Alec Soth, courtesy Mack / www.mackbooks.co.uk





On show

An exhibition of the work continues at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York until 14 March, with further shows opening at Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco (05 February to 28 March), Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis (opens on 20 February), and Look Galerie in Berlin (from 30 April). *Songbook* will also appear as part of a retrospective at Media Space in London's Science Museum in October.





small-town kind of newspaper that Soth began publishing in 2012, alongside writer Brad Zellar. It began, as Zellar told *Vice* in 2013, as “a lark and an experiment”, where he and Soth went back to their beginnings as photographer and reporter on suburban newspapers to explore first the twin cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, where both started out, then Ohio, Michigan, Colorado and the Three Valleys. Sometimes Soth would combine the trips with commissions that came through Magnum Photos, of which he became a nominee in 2004 and a full member in 2008. “I was doing editorial work for the *New York Times*,” he says. “So using a journalistic style and approach, it combined really well.”

To begin with, the pair would only pretend to be working under the patronage of a newspaper. “It might be surprising in this day and age, but a lot of these areas still have a functioning local newspaper,” says Soth. “If I said I was working for the *LBM Dispatch*, people didn’t always understand what it meant, but it didn’t really matter, they were used to the idea of it, and I guess after a time I took on the presence of that sort of photographer, so they trusted me.”

In Ohio, they began a real publication, with daily deadlines. “It was a great experience,” says Soth. “Brad and I would make intensive two-week trips, gathering stories during the day, holing up in our motel rooms at night, putting the paper together, matching pictures to stories. The inclusion of an image was first and foremost to complement the story, so sometimes I would use a weaker picture because the story needed it.”

Songbook was his chance to do the opposite. “That was my place, where I could choose pictures that worked photographically, that could live on their own, without explanation.” *Evidence*, the groundbreaking artist book self-published by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel in 1977, working with record images found in institutional archives, was a big influence. “There’s a real beauty in stripping context,” says Soth. “Photography is really malleable in that way.”

Many of the images have a retro feel – I’d wondered if some were in fact archival, but no, says Soth. “I was specifically after that nostalgia. I exploited it in certain images.” He points out the picture of a man in an ill-fitting, 1960s-style suit, attending an event to mark the anniversary of the death of JFK. His head is out of shot, but a pristine copy of the November 23, 1963 edition of the *Dallas Morning News* is under his arm, and we can just make out the bones of the famous headline, “Kennedy Slain on Dallas Street”.

There are other nostalgic, but less pseudo-historical choices that continue the same vein – a wooden barn in a cornfield that could have been taken a hundred years ago, and a 1950s-looking teenage couple slow dancing. In fact, most of the images feel timeless, dream-like.

Although it was fun to poke around the Minnesota he grew up in and still calls home, finding the quirky became infinitely easier once he crossed state lines. “Taking on the persona of an outsider, pretending to be this other photographer, that helped too.”

His first test shots were in large format and colour, “but I wasn’t able to work fast enough. And shooting in black-and-white, which was handy because I could reproduce pictures quickly and cheaply, suited the project somehow. I wanted a Weegee-like quality – stark, a lot of flash, more in-your-face. Actually, Weegee was a big inspiration for this. I heard an interview where he said, in his unique New York accent, ‘If you wanna be a photographer, you can’t be a nice nelly.’ And that’s kind of true, but at the same time, he had a real joy in social gatherings.”

Soth and Zellar started with a copy of the real local newspaper in each location, cross-checking its listings and notices with a map. After that, it was good old-fashioned persistence. “So much of photography is access. A lot of work goes into the story before you photograph it. You ask questions, you poke around, you don’t stop: What’s in that room, what’s behind there? And eventually – boom – there it is.”

Time of knowing

Soth has spoken before about the shyness he suffered when he was starting out, working a night shift in a Minneapolis darkroom by himself to avoid having to speak to strangers, let alone photograph them. It crops up again now, when we discuss how best to get that elusive access. “When I made *Mississippi*,” he says, “I approached people with great trepidation, which in a way disarms them and makes it easier to get in. Now, I’ve done this whole thing too many times, and I’m just not nervous about it, so it’s kind of the opposite, where I come in with such confidence... and people just sort of believe in you. A part of me misses that other way in, but it would be fraudulent to act nervous when you aren’t. I think you just use what you have available.”

In amongst the local happenings you would expect to be covered in a community paper (ribbon cuttings, fugitive pets, re-enactors), Soth was struck by how many of these events involved people meeting in the real world rather than a virtual one. It became his theme. “We live in this time of cell phones and screens. How are we faring? Are we lonely?”

He refers to *Bowling Alone*, a book that came about 15 years ago. “This writer’s [Robert Putnam] idea was that when you go to a bowling alley nowadays, you see people bowling alone, whereas it used to be that bowling was all about leagues, fraternal organisations that have died away. There is an incredible amount of loneliness in America. We’re a car culture; all these people in little cubes, driving together, but alone.”

Interestingly, this expands on an idea Soth worked on at the beginning of his career. His very first exhibition in Minnesota was a series of black-and-white photographs of people alone in bars. *Songbook* includes an image he took in North Dakota this time around that’s a nod to that earlier series: four men sitting at separate tables in a roadside café, seemingly oblivious, or perhaps ignoring each other, as they eat.

Songbook is much more optimistic than this sounds. “I started from this point of communal

loneliness, but what I found is that, actually, people still live real lives, in the real world, going to dance class or what have you. Community still exists, and the newspaper remains a form of real engagement. It was a complete 180 from the interior photography I had been doing with *Broken Manual*, where I was following people who wanted to run away from society. This was about re-engaging. I dedicated it to brotherhood.”

Soth talks me through the stories behind the images, some of which you couldn’t make up. There’s a hospital for Cabbage Patch Kids in Cleveland, for example, and a snow globe repairman in Northfield. Then there’s the community of pensioner aviators who have specially-built garages, so that they can bring their beloved aeroplanes right into their homes. “As crazy as the US is, I’m a big defender of it,” he says. “People were incredibly welcoming, and often without even asking why I was there. *Songbook* leaves me feeling good about how rich America is in terms of its variety. It’s kind of a cliché that everything is becoming malls and McDonald’s. You just have to drive a little bit, ask a few questions, and it’s strange, surprising and endlessly fascinating.”

One picture shows the meeting of a local ‘Optimist Club’, where the guest speaker lectured on over-population, landfill and starving children. “It wasn’t exactly optimistic,” laughs Soth. “When I saw it in the advance notices of the paper, I was really curious – I mean, what does it mean to be an optimist in this world? Well, I can tell you, it generally means being about 70 years old and pretty crusty. It was like a skit.”

Humour is actually a crucial ingredient. The book opens with a guy called Bil – he must be in his 70s – in Sandusky, Ohio, leaning into a partner-less dance, with his arms stretched out to the side and a huge grin on his face. The picture is joyous, and clever, too, as Bil’s body leans into the title page, inviting you in for a turn.

“One of my goals was to bring that humour in – some of it is dark humour, but there’s also joy,” says Soth. “I have a naturally morose tone to my work, a sombre quality that exists here too, but I don’t want to take the same picture over and over for the rest of my life. I have a pretty robust sense of humour and I wanted that to be a part of it.”

I mentioned Robert Frank earlier, and I want to mention him again, because if *Songbook* is about brotherhood – and there are several pairs of men in the run of images, as if to emphasise this point – then in many ways, Frank is Soth’s darker, more brutal twin. Both of them collect, as Frank ably described, “things that are there, here and everywhere – easily found, not easily selected and interpreted”. And Frank, too, when he made *The Americans*, spoke of wanting to create a “more sustained form of expression” that didn’t depend “on that one single image”.

In a Q&A with *Interview* magazine last year, Soth spoke of his concern with the direction in which photography is headed. In conversation with fellow photographer Austin Nelson, he outlined the difficulty in making meaningful images when everyone has a camera. “You





used to have to be a chemist to be able to be a photographer," he says, "and now it keeps getting easier and easier and easier. If an eight-year-old can take a picture, how do I add meaning to that?"

After *Broken Manual*, he decided to move away from his familiar practice and experiment a while. He played with video, digital, disposable. He also investigated the idea of the iconic photograph, making an extended response to Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*. He's gone on record saying he shies away from that kind of image, and I wonder if he still stands by that. "When I said that, I was pretty bitter about it. I kind of like individual pictures more than I used to. I want the iconic image as much as anyone. I want that to happen, but it seems fruitless to chase after it because, you know, they come on their own. They're like an added bonus. It's like a little gift from the gods when you get one."

Did *Songbook* restore his faith in photography more generally? Last year he compared photographs to pop songs - terrifyingly ubiquitous and liable to get lost in the digital flood. "Going back to a more traditional form of storytelling helped, yes," he says. "Shaking things up, doing things in a different way, seeing the world in a different way, I really did fall in love with the making of things again."

"I gave a talk to some high school students a year ago and they were so excited about photography, I thought, who am I to say there are too many pictures? It's about stopping with the navel-gazing and not living too much in the world of your craft, getting outside of all that."

He's also made a point of fine-tuning the way he works. "I've found that doing small things alongside big projects is key. To sustain myself creatively is to not give myself over entirely in one way or another. I like to try things that really knock myself out of the park. Who cares if you fail? There was a project after *Broken Manual* that didn't pan out, but this work came out of that."

It sounds as if the self-doubt that plagued his early years is no longer a problem. "Oh God, talk to my wife!" he says. They met when they were 15. "How sweet," I say. He laughs. "It's funny, women always say that. Men are like, 'Really?'"

As we're finishing up, I have to ask about the skywriting. Vast, beautiful letters that spell the word 'JESUS' in already dispersing cloud, over the most humdrum of motels in Kissimmee, Florida. Did that actually happen?

"Yes, and all I could think was, 'Oh my God, somebody's writing in the sky', frantically looking for something in the foreground, and there he was - I kind of love this - a guy just walking into the room. Who knows why he had the chair out there in the lot. The combination was incredible."

I can't remember the last time I saw skywriting. It seems God quite literally intervened. "I know," he says. "And this is why; this is the thrill of being a photographer out in the real world. Just every once in a while these things happen, just un-frickin-believable." *BJP*

Songbook is published by Mack, priced £40
www.mackbooks.co.uk