
DOCUMENTARY, PHOTOBOOKS

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Alec Soth – Songbook

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Songbook, Alec Soth's most important work since the iconic *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, is a revisitation of his beginnings as a staff photographer on a suburban newspaper in Minneapolis. He goes in-depth with Lucy Davies.

On my way out from interviewing Alec Soth, navigating the stairs from his publisher's office, out into the rainy late-November 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, most of what's left of that illustrious, sing-song past is a clutch of guitar shops and specialist music retailers – all under threat of redevelopment – the brassy-yellow light from their windows reflecting in the sheen of wet, gum-dotted pavement.

Soth is here in London to lay the ground for a retrospective of his photography opening at Media Space in October. 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 also a book, published by Michael Mack in time to coincide with the show and two further exhibitions opening this month at Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco and Weinstein Gallery in Soth's home town of Minneapolis.

Soth was in Istanbul the day before I met him to supervise its printing, 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 now (one of his many side-lines is of course Little Brown Mushroom, founded in part to facilitate limited-run titles). By 'book', I mean books in general, their form and its particular talent for telling a 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 whereas before he 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 us knowing 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 of composers such as Rogers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter and Irving Berlin, whose tunes really defined America before the advent of rock and 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."