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Behind Alec Soth and Dave King's Audio- Visual Performance: The Palms

A revelatory documentary photographer and revered jazz drummer walk into a pandemic. A live (virtual) symphonic slideshow of found photos ensues.

by Steve Marsh

3



Photographs Courtesy of Alec Soth

Musician Dave King catches photographer Alec Soth practicing poor social distancing red-handed.

The pandemic has been hard on everybody, but especially the loners. Take the photographer Alec Soth, who made his name with his 2004 photo book, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, and who continues to create art as the consummate wanderer whose process is centered around convincing strangers all over the country to allow him to take their portraits. Even a rugged individualist like Soth has felt emotionally under equipped for *this*.

“Even talking on Zoom and stuff,” he says, when I reach him via Zoom. “Initially, talking into this emptiness was hard for me.”

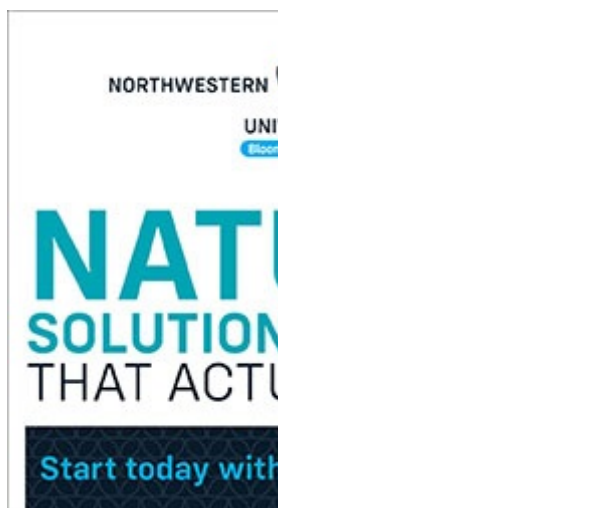
But through wonderfully humane serendipity, just before lockdown, Soth found a new collaborator: Dave King, the drummer for Minneapolis jazz groups The Bad Plus and Happy Apple. (He’s also on the Zoom.) Fast-forward through most of the pandemic, and later this month, Soth and King are dropping the fruits of their labor: *The Palms*, a novel audio-visual performance piece, at **The Great Northern** <https://thegreatnorthernfestival.com/> festival.

The name is a reference to the long-gone Persian Palms nightclub in downtown Minneapolis. A while back, Soth came across a 1950s photo from outside the Persian Palms shot by the New York crime photographer Weegee, and it captured his imagination. Soth started researching the old nightclub, and its regular acts, and eventually thought “Dave and Alec’s musical picture show” could fit on a bill.

King, for his part, has gone from playing 200 dates out on the road every year to making the instant COVID transition to stay-at-home dad and Zoom drum instructor.

“For me, it goes in waves,” he says. “I go from feeling desperately lost for a purpose to ‘I’m still a good dad.’”

He says he very much welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with an artist on Soth’s level. And Soth, in turn, says that for a couple of mid-career artists like themselves, it’s refreshing to not know exactly what they’re doing.



“We’re figuring it out,” he says. “So much of art is like children playing, and to get to that non-cynical place where we’re safe and we feel like we can do this together and we’re not going to beat each other up.”

So you guys committed to the project around March of last year, right before COVID?

Soth: It was pre-COVID for sure. I know that [festival executive director] Kate Nordstrum talked to me about The Great Northern much earlier. And I was a busy person, and everyone's busy. And then it became more real because Dave and Kate came here to my studio so that I could visually show what I was talking about. I just put on some random music and flipped through some photographs just so you could get the feel for what it is. Dave got it right away, seemingly instantaneously.

King: When you started presenting your idea for the collaboration, it was like we had these ideas circulating in our own lives. I had an idea to try something that involved working with a visual artist in a presentation, almost like a slideshow. We got to talking about found postcards, and just immediately you're like, "I have this whole found-photograph archive."

Soth: For years before this, I tried to figure out ways to work with text and image and collaborating with different writers. I did a collaboration with Billy Bragg one time in a totally different way, and that was cool, but it was nothing like this. There're so many ways to combine photographs and music that don't work and are super cheesy. And I've seen these slideshows, and the mood swells at a certain point, and it feels forced the way music in a film can feel forced.

In your last book, *I Know How Furiously Your Heart Is Beating*, you talk about "getting back to basics" and avoiding making photographs under a huge unifying theme like lonely men or people living along the Mississippi. So why impose a theme or a narrative on a pile of

photographs that aren't yours instead of deciding to make new work of your own?

Soth: At Little Brown Mushroom, my publishing side project, what all our books had in common was combining text and image. And what I found was, in order to get the balance right between text and image, the image has to be less chock-full of information. Like in my collaboration with Brad Zellar, it was black-and-white flash photography, less info. And Brad and I did a book where it was very heavy text, and thus I used a disposable camera and very few pictures.



Soth and King rehearse *The Palms* in November 2020.

House of Coates?

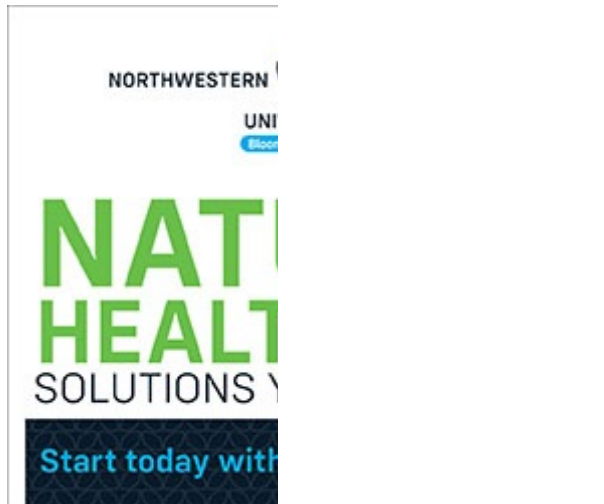
Soth: Exactly. So, to get the balancing act right, the photos have to contain less information, and almost all of my pictures are very informational. And so there's just not space for words next to them or for music next to them. And that's not to say I wouldn't make new work for this, but it would be tricky. For the previous year, I was thinking so much about these photographs that I've been acquiring and how to make meaning from them and how photographs work in the world. And this is a way to explore that.

In a *Paris Review* article revisiting your *Sleeping by the Mississippi* photographs, you said you have “always worked poetically instead of narratively.”

Soth: What’s so cool about this is that the meaning of these photographs is not analytical, and it’s not logical. It’s not an essay to be written. And even making a book of these photographs is too constricted. Going the musical path, it does something else. It’s like the energy of it is moving through them, and that’s something I’ve never experienced. I’ve just not had the opportunity to do this. I have that feeling sometimes when I’m editing, but then it’s lost. And here it’s like editing live.

Dave, you’ve worked in both rock- and pop-based structures and formats, and you’ve done a ton of improv jazz stuff. So, how do you see the narrative running through Alec’s images?

King: The way I see Alec’s work, and the way that I’m trying to relate to it, is that the way that we combine these images actually relates quite a bit to some free improvisation, where you have to allow some space for a possible epiphany. There’s an old saying, “If 20 percent of a free [jazz] music show works, it’s a victory.” And I’m like, “Wow, hopefully I’ll get to 20 percent at some point in my life.” I see what he’s doing, and we look at each other and laugh, because it does make sense on some level to us equally. I really feel like I found another collaborator of clarity meets subconscious poetic flow. And that’s truly the ingredient of a really good improviser and a really good composer.



Soth: The first time we practiced, Dave said that line about free jazz, about hitting it 20 percent of the time, and I was like, “Wow.” That really made an impression on me. I found it very comforting. So, here’s the funny thing about photography—when I’m moving through the world, taking pictures, my percentage is more like 2 percent. But when it happens, it’s extraordinary magic. There’s no one around to share it with; it’s just that moment. Moving through the world doing that stuff is very improvisational and beautiful, and I always feel like I’m doing performance art, but there’s absolutely no audience for it and there never will be. And then the photograph itself is this other thing, and it’s quite frozen, and it sits on a wall or in a book, and it functions in a totally different way. So, I do see this as an opportunity to share some of the process stuff with other people in the moment.

Because you’ll be performing for an audience instead of just for a subject?

Soth: Exactly. Yeah. And it’s less about the end result. But I’m still trained to think about the end result. And so I have moments where I’m like, “Is anyone going to get this? Is it going to be satisfying to people?” It’s

important to me that I don't feel like we're just like,
"Fuck the audience; they're bored."

King: So it must be stated that many elements of this are very, very composed. And so to make it sound like "we're jamming" would be very misleading. I'm playing piano on several pieces that are composed and written. Alec had mentioned a couple of themes, so I went and composed some themes. And then, just like a symphony, there's a couple movements in it that then take us someplace that is wild and uncharted. So, it is symphonic. I use that word a lot with this piece.

But did it start in a more primordial way? Like, "What photographs are we going to choose? What music am I going to write to this sequence of photographs?" And improv was one of the tools that you used to build the structure?

King: Yes. Correct. Because, I mean, anytime you're composing thematically, if someone's saying, "OK, well, this is the aura around this type of thing"—I have to begin with some searching through the dark and some space so that I have a visual, but I don't quite know the pacing of anything yet. We definitely improvise.

The language of jazz can be so personal and idiosyncratic that it can feel opaque at times. But onstage your banter is hilarious, Dave. Is that an intentional technique to help the audience find a way into what might be a challenging set?

King: Well, I appreciate that question, because it would be wrong of me to say I'm not aware that it hopefully adds a certain surreal element to the whole thing. I mean, at the end of the day, it's almost like avant-garde cabaret or something. You take a band like

Happy Apple, and you get 75 minutes of this introspective jazz shit—I mean, I feel a little bit like some levity has to occur on some level with everything you’re trying to put out there. I’ve been a member of an audience where you’re just like, “Dang, these guys are just shuffling through their charts. And this stuff is like quantum mechanics.” Some of it works and some of it doesn’t, and there’s something communal about having some rhetoric onstage that feels a little bit more release-oriented. I think it’s directly related to helping the music. And at the same time as our own release—of just laughing about how serious we take this stuff.

So, the banter is actually less planned than anything else?

King: Right. Maybe you’ve seen this—sometimes I don’t say anything for three or four tunes or whatever. And then all of a sudden there’s a 15-minute fantasia about something completely insane. And everyone is looking around like, *This is an interesting show*.

How serious is this show going to be?

Soth: I have to take some responsibility for this, but there’s some darkness to it. And that’s just me; I know that’s some of my stuff. I mean, it’s dark humor also. It’s like Lake Wobegon meets the Coen brothers.

You’ve long been obsessed with making portraits of people you find in the middle of the country. But so many of our rural aunts and uncles are wearing MAGA hats now—and have become less charming.

Soth: I mean, in some ways this is an escape from all of that. I still can’t process any of it—I’m still in disbelief. But recently, I got a subscription to Newspapers.com,

the vast newspaper archive. And I decided instead of reading today's local paper, I was going to read a 100-year-old paper in the morning. And it's so interesting. The world has always been so fucked up. Murder, suicide, misogyny—it's all so vast. And I actually took comfort in this. That humans are complicated and we mess things up. I don't know how much you know about Weegee the photographer, but he was this midcentury press photographer in New York. And he took this delight in the theater of New York, and it became this persona of just enjoying the theater of life. And so, there's that element in what we're doing too. Rather than giving in to the depression of our time, just having some fun, I don't know.

How big was this collaboration to you personally?

King: I think we're both responsible guys who care about people. And I think that we looked at each other with the ease that we were approaching the collaboration energetically. I think we used that ease to get over the normal anxieties that people are having right now with being around each other.

Soth: I have no friends. *[Snickers.]* So, this is good.

King: We just do this a couple of times a week, and we sit and talk about our kids and whatever, and it's really nice, actually, to have a thoughtful, intelligent new pal. It overwhelmed me one evening, like, "Man, this is one of the best things I've ever been a part of in my career." And just to get to do it and get to talk to you about it.

Soth: No, it's a special thing. And it will live on.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.
For more on The Palms livestream on January 30,*

visit thegreatnorthernfestival.com
<<https://thegreatnorthernfestival.com/>> .

Lyrical Meaning

Alec Soth and Dave King's *The Palms* will debut (virtually) at The Parkway Theater during this year's [Great Northern festival](https://thegreatnorthernfestival.com/) <<https://thegreatnorthernfestival.com/>> . The performance is a quixotic investigation into the very meaning of photography—the voyeuristic production and consumption of imagery—set to music. Here, Soth gives us an exclusive preview of the found-photo rabbit hole (you'll have to provide your own music).

“I was thinking so much about these photographs that I’ve been acquiring. how to make meaning from them and how photographs work in the world. And this is a way to explore that.”

Alec Soth

1 of 9



"In 2019 I went on a cross-country road trip—my intention for this trip was to just go with the flow, to let one thing lead to another. My first stop was at this antique store in Winona."

2 of 9



"I bought some photographs, and this was my favorite."

3 of 9



“Later that evening I thought, I’d like to see myself photographed like that. On my next stop, in Springfield, Illinois, I found a portrait photographer named Dean Williams.”

4 of 9



Dean Williams’s photo strip of Alec.

5 of 9



“I ended up spending the day with Dean and learned that he used to be the Illinois State Police photographer and had a huge archive of his police photos. From my perspective as an art photographer, they

seemed almost impossible to match. Each night I would lay them out on my hotel bed and try to make sense of them.”

6 of 9



“I tuned out of Twitter and subscribed to Newspapers.com. I started reading local papers from 75 to 100 years ago.”

7 of 9



“One of my favorite finds was learning that Weegee, the self-proclaimed ‘World’s Greatest Photographer,’ visited Minneapolis for one night. He made this photo in front of the Persian Palms nightclub, and it was published in The Minneapolis Star on October 11, 1950.”

8 of 9



“In Minnesota, there’s a tendency to Lake Wobegon-ize the past. After I spent months devouring our depravity—suicides and peeping Toms, strangulations and mail bombs—the Coen brothers seemed a lot more relevant.”

9 of 9



Steve Marsh

Steve Marsh is a senior writer at Mpls.St.Paul Magazine.

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