

---

**The Photo Issue 2013: Collaborations**

## **The 'LBM Dispatch' Brings the Good News**

The project that morphed into the LBM Dispatch started as a lark and an experiment. On Alec's birthday, he texted me that he wanted to go on an adventure. A couple hours later, we were in his Honda trolling the exurban fringes of the Twin Cities...

---

By Alec Soth; Words by Brad Zellar

Jul 9 2013, 6:00am





Boulder, Colo. — The specter of John Denver dogged the preparations for our Colorado trip, but I was hoping like hell we would be able to avoid both his music and his legacy. This, however, turned out to be impossible. “Rocky Mountain High” is one of the two official state songs, after all, and when we saw posters advertising a performance by a John Denver impersonator in one of the first towns on our tour, I knew a trip to the official John Denver Sanctuary in Aspen was inevitable. By the time we encountered Don (pictured)

*at the Days Hotel in Boulder, we were beginning to feel Denver's presence everywhere we went, which was sort of unfortunate.*

The project that eventually morphed into the *LBM Dispatch* started as a lark and an experiment. On Alec's birthday in December 2011, he texted me that he wanted to go on an adventure. A couple hours later, we were in his Honda Odyssey trolling the exurban fringes of the Twin Cities, pretending to be representatives of a small-town newspaper. The first "lead" we chased involved a cat that had been eluding rescuers for months, living on an island in the middle of one of the busiest freeway interchanges in the metropolitan area. This cat had assumed almost mythical status, and was purported to have survived only due to fate or a couple of remarkable strokes of luck: the island on which it had been marooned contained a freshwater pond, as well as the carcass of a deer that had apparently lacked either the cat's good fortune or its survival skills.

As our luck would have it, on Christmas day, just before Alec's birthday, there had been a break in the story. A suburban police officer had finally corralled the fugitive cat and transported the animal to a local shelter, where it had been christened Adam (after the rescuing officer, it turned out, but the name seemed fortuitous for our own purposes). We visited the island Adam had been stranded on, where we investigated and photographed the pond, the deer carcass, and a culvert under the freeway that—based on fresh paw prints—we surmised had been Adam's shelter. We also paid a visit to the cat at his new, temporary home. His rather surly and uncooperative demeanor suggested that the cat had perhaps been captured rather than rescued, exiled rather than liberated.

But this was all we needed to stoke our inspiration, and from there we were up and running. We had no real plan for the project; we were both just feeling regressive, I guess. Alec cut his teeth at a suburban newspaper, and my first job was with a small-town daily paper. It was fun to explore the place where we have both spent most of our lives, and even more fun discovering so many utterly foreign little pockets of weirdness in the process.

We attended a church musical based on the Book of Genesis, poked around in the ruins of a Minnesota ghost town founded by a member of the Donner Party, and spent some time with a World War II reenactor who'd been sleeping in a foxhole he dug out in the yard of his suburban home. At an interstate hotel, during an early-morning meeting of an Optimist Club, we

listened as an expert in population control did everything in his power to grind down the optimists with tales of a planet in dire peril, complete with photographs of starving children, teeming landfills, and animals wallowing in oil-slicked seas. Finally, in a fit of foolhardy (and perhaps ironic) optimism of our own, we printed business cards that identified me as the bureau chief of a fictional newspaper.

After a few months of this (we still had no idea what we might do with any of the material we were generating), we seized an opportunity to take our fake newspaper on the road. Alec had a scheduled speaking engagement in Ohio, and we decided to pack up the van, spend a week rambling in the Buckeye State, and see if we couldn't put together and publish something on the fly.

During the time we were driving around together in Minnesota some basic ideas and themes had started to coalesce. We were talking a lot about real-world community in the age of the internet and wondering how older forms of social networking—civic groups, fraternal organizations, social clubs, and even basic friendships—were faring in the 21st century. Our own personalities and relative failures as social beings, it turned out, led us to some conclusions that, if not fraudulent, were not truly borne out in Ohio, or in any of the other states we have visited on subsequent *Dispatch* trips.

In a sense, our largely mistaken assumptions have also been tested in our own working relationship and the nature of our collaboration. Commencing with Ohio in May 2012, Alec and I have now visited five states, covered thousands of miles, spent more than three months together in a van, and published five state-themed issues of the *LBM Dispatch*. We produce the work as we're moving, with daily deadlines, updates on our Tumblr site, and a goal of editing and publishing the print edition within one week of our return. So far (knock on wood), we're five for five on meeting that goal, and have amassed—on top of roughly 250 pages of printed photos and text—thousands of images and stories. The days are long, and can involve dozens

of hit-and-run encounters, planned events, and a dizzying chorus of voices and gallery of faces and landscapes. When we check into a motel at night, Alec uploads his photos, we email back and forth, and I sit up late mixing and matching texts and captions.

I'll be honest and admit that I never expected this concept to work. I think it's fair to say that neither Alec nor I is constitutionally disposed to the interpersonal friction required for such intense collaboration. Neither of us, I'm pretty sure, would be an ideal candidate for a rock band, let alone a rock band that spends a lot of time on the road.

I am a loner with extreme OCD and like nothing better than to be at home with my dog, my books, and my music, muddling through the same stabilizing routines day after day. A day that does not require me to actually get dressed is generally a good day. The idea of creative collaboration has always had appeal, but based on my past experiences, the reality has left a good deal to be desired—and it's always my own fault. I long ago concluded that I'm just not good at it. I also have a checkered history with deadlines. I can't produce anything without a gun to my head, yet I resent having a gun to my head. Much of Alec's career has been spent working alone as well, and he has a fierce work ethic.

As a result of these concerns, the whole *Dispatch* idea was thrilling, but seriously daunting. And since we always travel with a third person who does much of the driving and helps with logistics and other nuts-and-bolts stuff, our particular chemistry seemed fraught with explosive peril right from the get-go.

It was Norman Mailer who said, "In motion a man has a chance," and now, a year into this adventure, the challenge has become how to adjust to being off the road and sitting still once again. There's an endless adrenaline rush to *Dispatch* trips, and it's become remarkably easy to lose oneself in the planning, itinerary, working routines, and open-ended possibilities of traveling every day to a new place. The notebooks fill up, the photos keep coming, and we've started to take for granted the magic that we seem to

routinely stumble into everywhere we go. Just a couple for instances: when we really wanted a Boy Scout in Ohio, there was a Boy Scout standing in a parking lot alongside the road; and just when we were wishing out loud for Mormons in Colorado, voilà—two Mormons rounded the corner on their mountain bikes.

Usually, at about the midpoint of every trip, themes and sequences begin to take shape and we start fine-tuning and filling in holes. A bad day will be followed by a flurry of unexpected encounters, and the flagging energy in the van will be replaced by what often feels like a vibrational, purely synergistic rush. A huge part of the charge comes from the self-imposed structure and deadlines, seeing the thing come together even as it's happening, and the pleasure of knowing that we'll have something we can hold in our hands two weeks after we wrap up our travels.

None of the trips ever go quite according to plan, but there always is a plan. We're not simply driving around looking for pictures and people. Before we ever leave town, we've mapped out a route, researched the history of the places on our itinerary, scoured local events, and dug around for potentially interesting destinations along the way. We read thousands of pages of each state's literature, research its history, folklore, and political climate, try to get a handle on current events that might be in play during our visit, and discuss possible themes or focal points for our investigation. Just for the hell of it, or in an attempt at mood setting, I try to assemble a mixtape of music produced in or inspired by the state. And then we drive.

Having a predetermined destination every day is useful for purposes of discipline, but serendipity often dictates random detours or extended stays in one place or another. Alec and I are together all day long; while he's shooting, I'm talking to people. Sometimes it's the other way around, but in five trips there are only a total of three pictures that were taken when I was not present. A good story occasionally trumps a good picture, and vice versa, but by this point we both have a pretty good idea what we're each

looking for from each situation, and there's a surprisingly minimal amount of conversation and compromising involved in the choices we inevitably make. There are always, though, painful sacrifices; once we've zeroed in on a theme, feel, or direction, we end up scrapping all sorts of good stuff to keep ourselves on the right track.

From a purely personal standpoint, it's almost miraculous that this project has been so much exhausting fun and has worked as well as it has. The *Dispatch* trips have been the most gratifying professional experiences of my life—precisely, I think, because from the beginning, neither Alec nor I have approached this long, rambling project as a strictly professional experience, but rather as a series of road trips, random adventures, and long conversations between two friends in a van. Those conversations and our shared experience—the things we've seen, the people we've met, and the stories we've heard—are what it's all about.

To see *past issues of the LBM Dispatch* or *buy your own copies of the “irregularly published newspaper of North American ramblings,”* visit [littlebrownmushroom.com](http://littlebrownmushroom.com). Click through to the next page for more images by Alec Soth, courtesy of Magnum Photos.



Cambridge, Minn. — This was one of the first news stories that Alec and I followed up on when we started making day trips from our homes in Minneapolis. By the time we met Scott Schmitt, he had already filled in the foxhole he had dug out in his suburban Cambridge yard. Schmitt had dug the hole, and spent a week sleeping in it, to commemorate the heroics of 101st Airborne paratroopers at the Siege of Bastogne. Demonstrating the hospitality and general agreeableness that we've come to expect on our Dispatch treks, Schmitt rounded up his authentic 101st Airborne uniform and gear and led us into the backyard for a portrait in what was left of his foxhole.

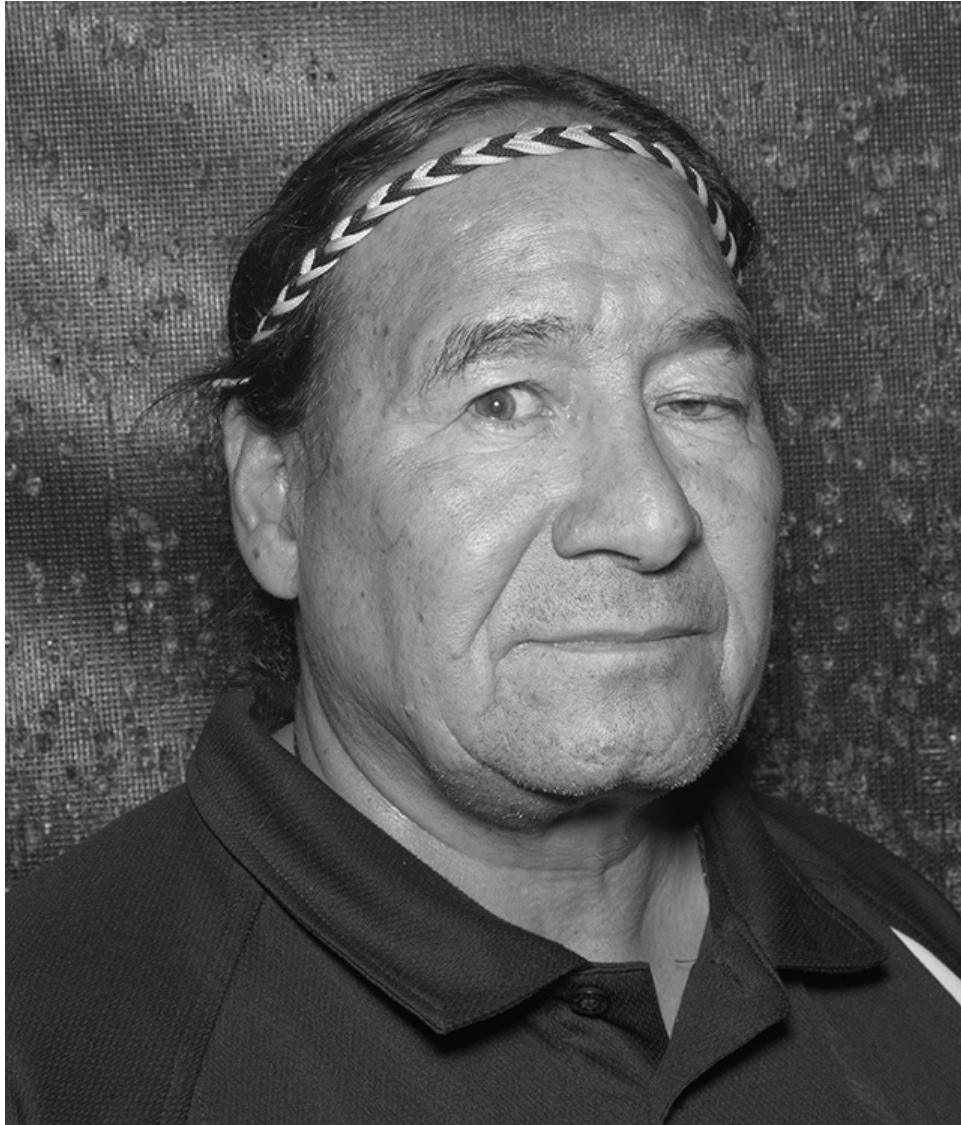




Westminster, Colo. — We were just driving around somewhat aimlessly when we encountered a group of US Marines recruits going through a grueling “delayed-entry” fitness program in a strip-mall parking lot. It turns out that these days most aspiring Marines can’t pass the fitness tests required for basic training and must be enrolled in a regimen of drills and exercises designed to whip them into shape. We saw a lot of people throw up, as well as a couple of the young recruits, having apparently come to the conclusion that they weren’t Marines material, simply walk away midworkout.



Redwood City, Calif. — At a meet and greet for Ukrainian start-ups in a forlorn office park in Silicon Valley, we met a guy who said that he was neither Ukrainian nor a potential investor. He then smiled, shrugged, and said, “But I am single, and I’m here for the hot Ukrainian women and free wine. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”



Clifton, Colo. — Gabe is a Mescalero Apache. He and his wife, Sis, own Red Rock Archery, a combination retail operation and range. On the night of our visit he hosted a group of regulars for an impromptu tournament. Our entourage was welcomed as if we'd been attending for weeks, and everyone stopped what they were doing to show us around and pose for photographs.

More photo stuff from VICE: