

VARIETY

Sound meets vision as Dave King and Alec Soth square off in an artistic pingpong match

REVIEW: Alec Soth and Dave King trade sound and vision in the spirited "The Palms."

By **Rob Hubbard** Special to the Star Tribune | FEBRUARY 1, 2021 — 2:45PM

What happens when an [internationally renowned photographer](https://www.startribune.com/for-famed-minneapolis-artist-alec-soth-the-mail-delivered-an-unlikely-friendship/573065062/) (<https://www.startribune.com/for-famed-minneapolis-artist-alec-soth-the-mail-delivered-an-unlikely-friendship/573065062/>) and a [virtuosic jazz drummer](https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-jazz-band-the-bad-plus-prepares-for-final-shows-with-original-lineup/464249433/) (<https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-jazz-band-the-bad-plus-prepares-for-final-shows-with-original-lineup/464249433/>) create a performance piece together? You get moments in which old photos are splashed with acid while the drumming grows increasingly explosive and the images blur and dissolve into a stream of multicolored particles, as if a memory is fading before your eyes.

That was but one of several rewarding moments in "[The Palms](https://thegreatnorthernfestival.com/allevents/alec-soth-dave-king-the-palms)," (<https://thegreatnorthernfestival.com/allevents/alec-soth-dave-king-the-palms>) an improvisation-fueled work created and performed by photographer Alec Soth and percussionist/pianist Dave King that premiered Saturday as a webcast under the auspices of the Great Northern Festival.

The idea of one performer playing while the other presents photos may not sound captivating, but Soth and King exuded a spirit of following their mutual muse wherever it led. The result was a breath of refreshing spontaneity in a time when most artistic creations come to us polished and packaged.

If you're familiar with the work of Soth — a photographer of the Magnum collective who's had exhibits in many a museum — you may imagine it's his own images that filled the screen at the Parkway Theater, where the duo's performance was recorded. But they're actually gleaned from boxes of old photos he's purchased (often by the pound) from antique stores and collectors of castoff merchandise.

Over the course of an hour and seven musical movements of distinctly different moods, viewers are thrown into moments in the lives of random strangers, ricocheting between eras and settings. Sometimes, themes emerge — pingpong, subjects sleeping or snorkeling — but, more often, there's a collagelike feel to "The Palms," inviting you to allow the abstract combination of images and music to wash over you.

Soth and King found common inspiration in the work of [composer John Cage](https://johncage.org/autobiographical_statement.html) (https://johncage.org/autobiographical_statement.html), and having the rules for an improvisation driven by tumbling dice is the kind of thing that Cage would do with the dance company of his partner, Merce Cunningham. But King's contributions were equally influenced by the music of [experimental jazz giant Sun Ra](https://youtu.be/ZoNBMibMDD0) (<https://youtu.be/ZoNBMibMDD0>), evoked not only musically but in a mid-show story the drummer delivers.

Beyond Cage and Ra, another catalyst for "The Palms" was a chronicler of mid-20th-century late-night street life, Weegee, who once suggested pairing his images with jazz. A variation on that theme came through when Soth presented [old photos gleaned from the Star Tribune archives](http://historyapolis.com/blog/2016/07/21/the-persian-palms/) (<http://historyapolis.com/blog/2016/07/21/the-persian-palms/>), reading their captions while King's pedal-heavy piano grew more insistent and intense.

In a more meditative section, a gentle passage of stride piano lent a sepia tint to the two stacks of photos Soth gradually assembled like playing cards in a game of War, men on the left, women on the right, smiling couples eventually trumping the binary presentation.



JAYME HALBRITTER

Drummer Dave King and photographer Alec Soth during rehearsals for "The Palms" at the Parkway Theater in Minneapolis.

What was probably a rather static performance for the small socially distanced crowd at the Parkway was shaped gracefully for streaming by director Mike Jones. The photos were often fused and overlaid with King beating, bowing and shaking various pieces of percussion with musicality and an expressive spirit.

"The Palms" feels not only like a potentially liberating meeting of creative visions, but the welcome return of one of the Twin Cities' most imaginative impresarios, Kate Nordstrum, who now directs the boundary-breaking Great Northern Festival (<https://www.startribune.com/with-the-great-northern-fest-minnesota-winters-just-got-a-little-cooler/600013703/>). Her "Liquid Music" presentations — which fell under the umbrella of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra for most of the past decade — have always shown her to be a skilled artistic alchemist, and "The Palms" is a prime example of her adventurous spirit.

The Palms

Where: Viewable through Feb. 6 at thegreatnorthernfestival.com (<https://thegreatnorthernfestival.veeps.com/stream/events/17a86e5761d6>); \$15.



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David King and Alec Soth performed "The Palms."