

SEANKELLY

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ARTFORUM

Alec Soth



Alec Soth, *Lil' Jay J and the Spiritual Boys*. Rochester, New York, 2015, black-and-white photograph, 30 x 40".

*Alec Soth's photographs capture an intimate vision of contemporary Americana. He begins 2015 with the release of *Songbook* (2015), now available from MACK, as well as accompanying exhibitions this winter and spring, beginning with *Sean Kelly Gallery* in New York, followed by *Fraenkel Gallery* in San Francisco, *Weinstein Gallery* in Minneapolis, and *Loock Galerie* in Berlin. Here, he discusses the making of *Songbook* and its relationship to the music industry. His latest New York exhibition runs January 30 to March 14, 2015.*

MY LAST PROJECT, *Broken Manual*, was about the desire to disengage from society and run away from the world. After that, along with doing some magazine assignments and collaborations with other photographers, I started self-publishing a newspaper called *The LBM Dispatch* with the writer Brad Zellar.

Songbook collects all of this work from the last few years, but the text has been removed. I actually found this process liberating. So much of editorial work is about making decisions in service of the story. In this case, I was relieved of that. From the thousands of pictures I had made over the past few years, I could untangle myself from the specific stories and just swim in the visual. It was a treat. Meanwhile, I started

formulating what came to be *Songbook*. The book is a compilation of all of this quasi-journalistic work from the past three years.

But unlike the *Dispatches* and other publications, the stories behind the pictures have been stripped away. My goal was to produce something lyrical rather than informational.

I often reference the music industry when talking about publishing. Most music is now obtained for free via digital download. Nevertheless, there's been a boom in more expensive vinyl records, and live performance is just as vital as ever. In a similar way, as photography has also become free online, there seems to have been a surge of interest in photography books and exhibitions. People have a craving for physical objects and experiences. Just as I make an analogy between the photographic and music, *Songbook* is like a vinyl record. It's a physical object that you can hold, and the pictures, like songs, are sequenced in a certain way to achieve an effect. With most pop records, there's always been an understanding that there will be singles, removed from the album and experienced in a number of different ways. What's different in the digital age is that every song has become a kind of single. It's only those die-hard connoisseurs who buy an album and listen to its originally intended sequence.

This also holds true for photography, and *Songbook* is well suited to function in this universe. *Broken Manual* was like a concept album in that a lot of the pictures don't make any sense outside of their original context. When you show photographs in a gallery, it's often a struggle to try and translate the spirit of a book-length project onto the wall. But since so much of the emphasis of *Songbook* is on the lyrical power of decontextualized images rather than on the story, I found the curatorial process simpler. It was just a matter of doing more editing to carry the most impact in the space. The great thing about photography is that, like music, it translates into these various forms quite easily.