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Bicker, Phil. "A New Record of Small Town America," *TIME*, January 27, 2015.

TIME

A New Record of Small Town America

In his fourth monograph, photographer Alec Soth takes a different approach to his work



In accordance with Alec Soth's decision to disassociate his captions from his images in *Songbook*, the captions to the following images can be found at the end of this article.

It is little more than a decade since Alec Soth's first book *Sleeping by the Mississippi*—and his sophomore publication *Niagara*—established him as one of contemporary photography's leading lights. In the intervening years Soth has traversed the U.S., in the distinctly American photographic tradition, of Robert Frank and Walker Evans, in pursuit of his art—while consistently experimenting and pushing the boundaries of his work.

Soth's book *Broken Manual* published in 2013 focused on withdrawal from society—as Soth describes it, "the desire to runaway from the world". His latest tome, *Songbook*, stems from the photographer's desire to reengage. "[After *Broken Manual*] I wanted to be an out-in-the-world photographer and engage in social activities," Soth told *TIME*. "I took this new photographic approach, for me, that is more journalistic."

The large majority of *Songbook*, which Soth, constructed in a lyrical manner, is comprised of images originally made in conjunction with writer Brad Zellar and self published in the *LBM Dispatch* collection—a series of seven broadsheet newspapers dedicated to different regions across the country: Georgia, Texas, Colorado, California's Three Valleys, Ohio, Michigan and Upstate New York— alongside work that Soth was doing for the *New York Times* and as part of various collaborative *Postcards from America*

projects with Magnum. “All these travels around the U.S. were somewhat under the umbrella of social life and social connection,” says Soth.

“I was interested in the newspaper, in part, [because] it used to exist as this vehicle of social interaction,” he says. “It’s a place where, [especially in] small towns, you would not only have the news but you would have notification that someone had passed away or there was going to be a public dinner at the church—it connected events to each other.”

Soth and Zellar started out three years ago with their first experiments in Minnesota—initially covering news, which included a suburban murder scene. As they moved to Ohio and onward the focus of the project became less “newsy” and much broader. “Every now and again we would encounter something—an execution in Texas, [the aftermath of] a shooting on a freeway in Michigan—but it’s more like a small town newspaper [mentality], where going to the local county fair is a news story,” Soth says.

In 2012, fellow Magnum photographer Jonas Bendiksen had taken a job at *Bladet Vesterålen*, a local Norwegian newspaper, in an effort to try to find the local news. Soth’s approach was less literal—working independently, he took on the role, rather than the responsibilities of being a local newspaper photographer. “It was like how a novelist might use the protagonist as a small town journalist to write a story.”

The three-year period over which Soth made his work coincided with mass job cuts in local newsrooms across the country with staff photographers often being those most affected.

From the start, however, Soth had another non-news plan for the black-and-white photographs he had been making. While he and Zellar were equal partners on the *LBM Dispatch*, Soth always had the intention to publish a selection of the pictures without Zellar’s stories. “That’s where the title *Songbook* comes from: I wanted to be less informational and more musical or lyrical in nature and more mysterious in that way too.” Consequently, in order to leave the images more open to interpretation, “the caption information for the images is tucked away in the back of the book, still somewhat available, but not there next to the pictures.” [*Similarly, the captions to this online slideshow have been moved to the bottom of this article*]

Songbook channels the spirit of Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel’s groundbreaking 1970s postmodernist work *Evidence*—a conceptual book of decontextualized vernacular photographs, mined from government agencies, educational institutions and corporate archives.

There’s no doubt that *Evidence* was a big influence, but Soth’s own formative photographic experience also informed his concept for the book. “Years ago, I worked as a small town newspaper photographer in Minnesota [for the *Lillie Suburban Newspaper* chain] and did that work with a limited amount of motivation. Years later, I thought how those pictures out of context are interesting, and that’s the great lesson of *Evidence*: lack of context, plus time, equals mystery,” says Soth. “And this work was inspired by that and other vernacular photographic approaches, [as well as] press photography in general and this weird intermingling of time—there’s this element of nostalgia in the work, both in subject matter and photographic technique, playing off the history of photography.”

While *Songbook* is one of more than 20 books and magazines that Soth has published or self-published, he considers this latest opus his fourth “serious” book, he says. “It’s the difference between publishing a short story in a magazine and a publishing a novel—*Songbook* is a novel,” which informs his decision to turn to MACK to publish it. “I wanted it to be treated professionally. I wanted this [book inspired by small town America to have a] larger audience.”

Captions: **1.** Bil. Sandusky, Ohio. **2.** Woodville Farm Labor Camp. San Joaquin Valley, California. **3.** Hewlett-Packard. Palo Alto, California. **4.** Bill, Antlers, Oklahoma. **5.** Near Kaaterskill Falls, New York. **6.** Dover, Ohio. **7.** Magic Forest. Lake George, New York. **8.** Home Suite Home, Kissimmee, Florida. **9.** Rochester, New York. **10.** Miss Model contestants. Cleveland, Ohio. **11.** Sue. Sierra Sky Park. Fresno, California. **12.** Round Rock, Texas. **13.** Brian. Williston, North Dakota. **14.** Execution. Huntsville Prison. Huntsville, Texas. **15.** Bree. Liberty Cheer All-Stars. Corsicana, Texas.

Songbook by Alec Soth is published by MACK. Songbook will also be on show in three concurrent exhibitions—each with slight content variations—the first at Sean Kelly, NY opening Jan. 30, the second at Fraenkel Gallery, in San Francisco, on Feb. 5 and the third at Weinstein Gallery, in Minneapolis, on Feb. 20.

For the duration of the New York presentation, Soth will take over Sean Kelly's official Instagram account. Follow @SeanKellyNY and search the hashtag #SKNYtakeover to see the images.













