

SEANKELLY

Dykstra, Jean. "Alec Soth: Songbook," *photograph*, March 2, 2015.

photograph

Alec Soth: Songbook

Sean Kelly Gallery, New York



Alec Soth, *Bill, Sandusky, Ohio*, 2012. ©Alec Soth, Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery

photograph social clubs, high school proms, football games, and beauty contests. Soth abandoned the tripod and view camera he had been using in order to capture scenes and moments quickly and unobtrusively, like the gay couple slow dancing at a prom in Cleveland, or the young man doing a heart-stopping back dive into a rocky watering hole in upstate New York. The black and white photographs give a nostalgic cast to some of the pictures: the genial, soft-shoe *Bill, Sandusky, Ohio*, was photographed in 2012, but he could have stepped out of the 1950s.

Soth is a thoughtful photographer whose references are not accidental, from the Weegee-like flash of some of the photographs to his itinerant exploration of the country's social fabric, recalling Walker Evans or Robert Frank. The title of the work suggests the mid-century America of the Great American Songbook, with its can-do, optimistic soundtrack by George Gershwin, Hoagy Carmichael, Irving Berlin, and Richard Rodgers.

It's an optimism that occasionally falters. One photograph shows a solitary man making his way across the sun-blasted plaza of the Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, California. It's hard not to read it as a comment on the isolation of modern day society, despite our many Facebook "friends." But Soth's photographs of cowboys and couples and nondescript hotels are open to interpretation by design. Soth and Zellar originally published the photographs, along with Zellar's text, in *LBM Dispatches* (so named for Soth's Little Brown Mushroom books) from each region they visited. For *Songbook*, Soth stripped away the narratives and let the images stand on their own. They speak of connection, alienation, poverty and community – telling a story as complex as the country itself.

In *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2004) and *Broken Manual* (2013), Alec Soth tended to gravitate toward isolated individuals – outcasts or misfits who had gone off the grid in one way or another. In many ways, the individualism and self-sufficiency – and isolation – that were the subtexts of his pictures are conventionally American traits. But so is the notion of community, something Soth explores in his latest work, *Songbook*, on view at the Sean Kelly Gallery through March 14 (and at Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco and Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis through April 4).

The work is a shift for Soth as well in his use of black and white instead of color. From 2011 to 2014, Soth and journalist Brad Zellar crisscrossed the country in the guise of small-town newspaper reporters to



Alec Soth, *Near Kaaterskill Falls, NY*, 2012. ©Alec Soth, Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery