Schultz, Charlie. “Alec Soth with Charlie Schultz,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 5, 2015.

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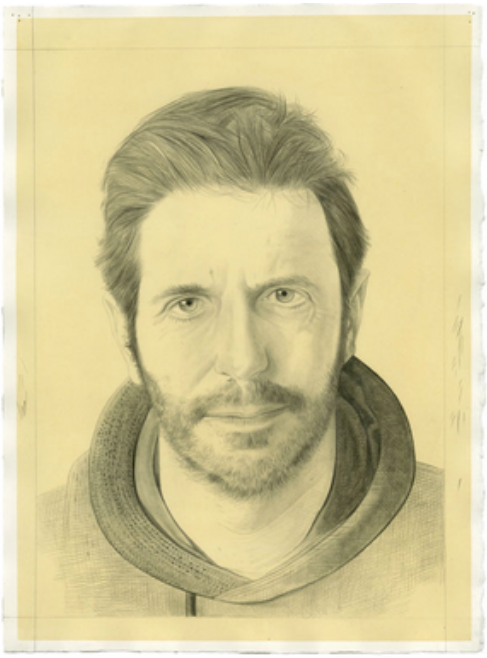
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ALEC SOTH with Charlie Schultz

Alec Soth is an American photographer whose first major body of work, *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2004), established his reputation as a deeply feeling documentarian. Soth has just completed *Songbook*, a project three years in the making for which he and his collaborator, Brad Zellar, traveled around America as a journalistic team producing content for their self-published newspaper, the *LBM Dispatch*. Shortly after the opening of his exhibition, Soth met Rail managing art editor Charlie Schultz to discuss the evolution of *Songbook* and Soth’s shifting approaches to photography.



Portrait of Alec Soth. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photograph by Zack Garlitos.

Charlie Schultz (Rail): During the press preview you said that it felt like a huge moment to have this exhibition up, even more so than other exhibitions. Can you talk about why that is?

Alec Soth: There are multiple reasons. For starters, I made a real shift in my art-making practice and I was wondering how that was going to be accepted. I’ve been waiting for that moment to come, to see what’s going to happen and see if the work is going to be received and all that kind of stuff.

There was also the fact that *Songbook* was made over three years. And I wasn’t selling the work during that period of time. I also went through the full process with a new publisher, MACK books, and a new gallery, Sean Kelly. So it was like a fresh start with these new people, and it was done the way I wanted to do it. I’ve been waiting to put it out all at once and here is that moment and it’s been really good.

Rail: Before going ahead, let’s go back to an early point in your career. It’s 1992. You just graduated from Sarah Lawrence. Who were the influential teachers that stand out to you?

Soth: Joel Sternfeld was a very influential teacher. But before Joel, I had a high school teacher who changed my life. His name was Bill Hardy. That was in Minnesota, but now Bill teaches in upstate New York and he’s actually doing a class surrounding my work. Every year they do something surrounding an artist and this year it is around me, which is pretty cool. But yeah, Joel Sternfeld was a big influence for sure, although I didn’t major in photography at Sarah Lawrence.

Rail: Because there are no majors.

Soth: Right. It’s general liberal arts. I went in to be a painter and kind of came out a photographer, but I was interested in everything.

Rail: And what did you do in the years between graduating from Sarah Lawrence and producing your first major body of work, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*?

Soth: I went back to Minnesota and ended up working in photo labs and stuff like that. Then eventually I got a job at a suburban newspaper—and that's connected very much to *Songbook*—and then I got a job at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts as in-house photography staff.

Rail: Do you remember the name of the newspaper?

Soth: It was called Lillie Suburban Newspapers; it was part of a chain of suburban newspapers.

Rail: And you shot for them?

Soth: Oh yeah! That was my job, and it's hard to believe how antiquated the process seems now. I mean, I would shoot for them, go into the darkroom, process the film, make prints, the whole thing. It is incredible how much change has taken place since then. The best part of that job was getting out of the darkroom, which was really depressing for me. As a newspaper photographer I was out in the world and going to different events—often stupid events, ribbon cuttings and parades, city council meetings—but it was a means of being in the world, which connects to the social fabric in a way. And not to jump ahead in the interview, but I will—

Rail: [*Laughs*.] Okay.

Soth: Brad Zellar, my collaborator, ended up doing a book, years later, where he uncovered these photographs from a suburban newspaper photographer in Minnesota. They were from the '50s, '60s, '70s—and they're amazing. I ended up writing the introduction to that book and talked about how I'd been a suburban newspaper photographer and, knowing what I know now, it would be really interesting to do that job in a new way. That's essentially what *Songbook* is.

Rail: You and Brad initially published the pictures that would become *Songbook* in the format of a regional newspaper that was put out by your company Little Brown Mushroom. But before we get into that, can you tell me about how LBM got started? What was the impetus or inspiration?

Soth: Well, like most things, it wasn't planned. I wasn't looking out three years in the future or anything. It was 2008, the end of the Bush era, and I wanted to assemble this work that I had made over the previous eight years. It was like a collection of work that somehow spoke to this moment for me, so I ended up calling it *The Last Days of W* (2008) and I self-published this thing on newsprint.

There was an exhibition to go along with it and I ended up publishing like 10,000 copies of the newspaper, so, a lot. The idea was that it was going to be free. It wasn't exactly free in the end, but a lot of copies were distributed for free and they weren't signed and it was somehow an escape from the economics of the art world. That was a really thrilling thing to do, to just put this inexpensive thing out in the world.

Rail: You've put a lot out throughLBM, and over the years many of the titles you've published share the L-B-M acronym. I'm thinking of *Lost Boy Mountain*, *Lonely Boy Magazine*, Lester B. Morrisonhas been a contributor—

Soth: [*Laughs*.] It's kid game playing, that's all. You know when you're a kid and you want to create a code language or something like that? The spirit of it is really childlike. I like the idea that Little Brown Mushroom is kind of a sandbox or a clubhouse or a plaything—not a business.

Rail: How's that going, keeping that idea alive?

Soth: What's interesting is the way I can feel it getting sucked out. I've felt it turning into a business. So I essentially stopped publishing, and I canceled whatever projects I've had because it was just starting to be taken too seriously by too many book world professionals. So now it's shooting off in a totally different direction.

Rail: Let's transition a bit and talk about *Songbook*. It seems to me very much connected to your previous body of work, *Broken Manual* (2010), insofar as the two projects have a kind of yin-yang relationship. Manual was about a desire to escape, and you were traveling mostly solo, whereas *Songbook* is more about a longing for community and you worked with a collaborator.

Alec Soth, "Near Kaaterskill Falls, New York" (2012). Archival pigment print mounted to Dibond. © Alec Soth. Co

Soth: Well it's not quite so tidy. The first part of *Broken Manual* was solo, but then these filmmakers approached me, asking to do a project on me and I said to them, "It's totally contrary to the spirit of the project, which is to be alone." But at that point I had a real awareness that *Broken Manual* was about the failure of wanting to be alone and the fact that whenever I would find someone who aspires to be alone, they were hungry for attention, you know?

Rail: How interesting.

Soth: At the same time, I was tired of being alone. I wanted the company of these two people in the car with me. So that was in fact the beginning of working as a group, even though we weren't a group because it wasn't a collaboration. I didn't tell them what to film. They didn't tell me what to photograph. And it's important to the future of *Songbook* in many ways—it liberated me in the sense that I knew that they were getting the back story on film and I didn't have to do that part.

Rail: How much time do you spend getting to know someone before making their picture? And how do you introduce yourself and your intentions to someone that you are just meeting?

Soth: It changes from project to project and it changes in the evolution of my life as a photographer based on who I am at any given time. In terms of my approach, I feel like it's best to be as honest about what you are doing as you can be. [*Laughs*.] When you're young and don't know, you are just doing it, you are just trying to figure out your way, you sort of communicate that in your approach to someone and you can get access by virtue of your lack of experience.

Rail: Vulnerability becomes a strength.

Soth: Exactly, so I used that for a long time. But I don't have that anymore because I'm older. I just look more professional. I look like I know what I'm doing. It would be fraudulent to pretend I don't know what I'm doing. So with something like *Songbook*, it was pretty interesting because Brad is a professional journalist and I do work for the *New York Times*, so it's like I'm coming in as an actual journalist in some way. And it was always this kind of stumbling block, the whole self-published newspaper thing can be too complicated for people to understand.

Rail: I could see it being a tricky conceit.

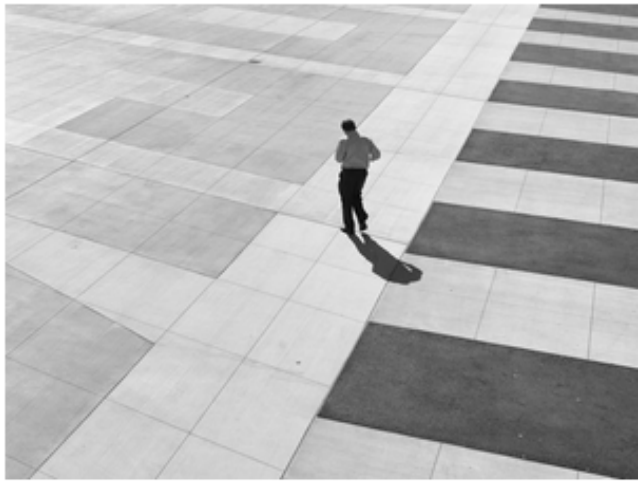
Rail: I could see it being a tricky conceit.

Soth: So we would just say it's called *LBM Dispatch* and kind of leave it at that. But the point is, with this work I would come in as a knowing professional. It was Wham Bam journalism.

Rail: For some reason I was expecting that there'd be more of a media presence in the work. I think it's quite common to imagine the American landscape as utterly media saturated, but in the exhibition there

are no signs of consumerism, flashy billboards, big advertisements, political posters. Was this an intentional omission?

Alec Soth, "Dave and Trish. Denver, Colorado" (2013). Archival pigment print mounted to Dibond. © Alec Soth. Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.



Alec Soth, "Facebook. Menlo Park, California" (2013). Archival pigment print mounted to Dibond. © Alec Soth. Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.

Soth: Oh boy, I don't think it was, because I didn't realize it until now. Maybe it was just natural for me because I kind of hate reading things in pictures. I don't like reading signs or pictures of people holding up something that has words on it. For whatever reason that's something I've come to avoid. Of course there are other modern things in the pictures, and there are many more pictures in the book than in the exhibition and even more that were in the *Dispatches*. The way *Songbook* was edited was to make it more open-ended. It is really having this dance with nostalgia, which wasn't exactly the same case with the *Dispatches*.

Rail: In *Songbook* you pair this notion of nostalgia with its cousin, anxiety. To my mind, one pitches backwards and the other forwards, but I think they both have something to do with a sense of longing.

Soth: Yeah, absolutely. If there is one word I use to describe all my work, it's longing. My work is about longing. And it's why I think my work is sort of anti-Zen. [*Laughs*.] As much as I want to be like a Buddhist, who just sort of accepts the world as it is, this is the opposite. This is about longing for something else. *Sleeping by the Mississippi* is about a kind of longing to be on the road, for wanderlust, for a certain type of freedom. *Niagara* (2006) is longing for love and romance and that intensity. *Broken Manual* is kind of a longing to escape and *Songbook* captures this sense of longing for a time that's passed, for a community, for this connection to the social web. I mean that's being too explicit, but longing is just wrapped up in everything.

Rail: You won a Guggenheim grant in 2013, which I imagine you used to help fund these *Dispatches*. It makes me think of Robert Frank, who used his Guggenheim money in 1955 to travel around America making pictures. When you were working did you have a sense of following in the footsteps of photographers like Frank?

Soth: [*Laughs*.] I felt more of a sense of that when I got a grant to work on *Sleeping by the Mississippi* from the McKnight Fellowship. I sort of felt like I was given this moment with that money. The process of the *Dispatches* was quite different in that it required a lot of money to make it happen, not at first, but it built in scale because we were publishing newspapers. That costs a lot of money, you have to have people to ship them out, to manage, and I was paying Brad as a journalist because he wasn't going to have print sales at the end of it. So it became a big structure, which is very different than the Robert Frank model. It was more like making a movie or something.

Rail: Perhaps a more relevant model would be Walker Evans and James Agee. I think a lot of people forget that they didn't go south to produce *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). They went out on an assignment for Fortune magazine.

Soth: Yeah, you're exactly right. I've been in dialogue with that book and with other pairs working in a similar time frame, like Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White. It wasn't atypical to do this and so we thought a lot about that. But I've actually been thinking a lot about not just Let Us Now Praise Famous Men but specifically Walker Evans. And the fact that, yes, those pictures are in that book, but they also have this other life that's on the wall or in other books, you know?

Rail: The way that the photographs move and evolve through culture, appearing first in a news format, then later in an exhibition, then later still in an art book format—it's how all the major Farm Security Administration (F.S.A.) images matured.

Soth: Oh, totally.

Rail: Roy Stryker would give his F.S.A. photographers shooting scripts when they would go out to make pictures. Did you and Brad do anything like that?

Soth: Yeah, something like that. Before each trip I would always make the map—because I'm the practical guy. I would be the one to raise the money, to know that it's going to take this many days and we have to stop here and pick up this assistant, etc. So I would make a map and a list of every city on the map and send that to Brad who would send back a kind of brainstorm—music, literature, anything that came to mind. We would both then research whatever was on our minds for every specific place, and we would also research events in every location and this became a massive Google doc. So when we'd drive into a town we'd have stuff swirling around, like an idea board in the background to work off of.

Cover of Texas Triangle. By Alec Soth and Brad Zellar. Design by Matt Thompson. Published by Little Brown Mushroom, 2013. Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York. Cover photo: Alec Soth, "Bree. Liberty Cheer All-Stars. Corsicana, Texas" (2013). Archival pigment print mounted to Dibond. © Alec Soth. Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York .

Rail: And were there incidents where things either completely exceeded your expectations or just went totally wrong?

Soth: Over and over. The whole thing exceeded expectations every time and we would call it the *Dispatch* luck. There were things we would walk into that you just can't make up. You go out and things start to happen, which is just incredible. And there is a sense that you are making your luck by doing this research and having stuff to go to.

Rail: Can you give me a story?

Soth: Oh my god, what would be a good one? [Opens book to page showing "*Dave and Trish*" (2013).]In this case we are in Denver and we had an Ethiopian Easter on our events list. It's not Easter time, but the Ethiopian church celebrates Easter at a different time or something like that—so there is Ethiopian Easter.

I thought this would be quite interesting and we were waiting outside the church, doing our *Dispatch* dance to get access. Brad is connecting with someone to get in and then I see this couple walking down the street. And because of the way they dress and because we are just killing time, I start talking to them. At this point I lose Brad—there were a few times in the *Dispatches* where we just lost each other—because he stayed there and I went off with these two people to their house.

I started talking to this guy about what I'm doing and I mention the Beats and that Kerouac had been in Denver and he really responded to that. That really excited him. He had this book of photographs of the Beats that he wanted to give me. So we go back to his house. He gives me this book. I say: "Really, I can't take it." But he's absolutely insisting. And we make this picture, which is funny because I've made this connection to Kerouac and I think there's something even about this window that looks like it's of that time or something.

Rail: Close-cut hair and a cigarette behind the ear.

Soth: Yeah, yeah. I feel like I'm in that time period. And in terms of the dumb luck, I mean this picture comes out of trying to get access to the Ethiopian church [*laughs*] and then this happens.

The story is even richer for me, because he ended up dying. He's quite a young guy and his girlfriend contacted the studio and she wanted pictures of him. Somehow I felt like this exchange—his book and my photograph—was so relevant, and for a long time this picture was going to be the cover of the book. It's a picture that really makes me think about how photography is so wrapped up in time, and inevitably in death too. Because people die and a picture automatically takes on this memorial quality. Something about their hidden faces enhances that—it's like they are ghosts.

Alec Soth, "Miss Model Contestants. Cleveland, Ohio" (2012). Archival pigment print mounted to Dibond paper: 43 × 56 ˝. © Alec Soth. Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.

Rail: That brings up another process question. How do you decide if the subject is going to be directly addressing the camera or looking away, feigning a more candid-type pose?

Soth: It's a tough call. One of the things about large-format photography I became really frustrated with is the dead-on portrait. It can be sort of one-dimensional, and I want to make other things happen. It's definitely not like I'm a fly on the wall; I'm there with a giant flash. I've just wandered into their apartment. They know that I'm there. [*Laughter*.]

You look at those F.S.A. pictures and they knew the photographer was there too. I'm not that interested in the whole conversation of what's true. I'm involved in making pictures, and sometimes that means energizing the scene in certain ways and making things happen.

Rail: I noticed that when faces are hidden, the next most expressive body part is often the hands. Even when you can see a person's face, sometimes what that person is doing with their hands really amplifies what you read in their facial expression. I'm thinking of the beauty queen shot—

Soth: You mean "Miss Model Contestants" (2012)?

Rail: Yeah, the smallest beauty queen really stands out to me because of the way she's pinching her sash. It conveys this sense of anxiety, as if she's actually unsure about what's happening and what she's being asked to be a part of, whereas the other girls are just mugging for the camera.

Soth: That's interesting and I think it can be true. Faces are fantastic, of course: they are so incredibly powerful. Something I think about a lot in photography is how powerful faces are, and the fact that we can read so much into any nuance of expression. If I take a picture of you and I have you tilt your eyes down, very easily people will project you as sad.

Rail: Right.

Soth: And if I have you look up people will understand you as optimistic. It's incredible that if you simply draw a line and two dots, in the right arrangement, humans will see a face, and they will project emotion on to it. But then, someone the other day was talking to me about how they loved the shoes everyone was wearing in my pictures—and I love that. That's what's so great about this open-ended photography. It gives people a place to look at those things and to try to figure out meaning through them. As much as I love the text and love using it, if you are looking at this picture and you have a page of text describing it, you tend to not look at the soles of people's shoes to figure out who they are.

Rail: That's very true. You mentioned before that you felt like Weegee and Robert Adams kind of epitomized the devil and the angel on your shoulders. How do they interact when you're making a picture?

Soth: Ah! [*Pauses*.] First of all, when I'm actually photographing, everything falls aside. I'm not talking to myself that much. I'm not hearing voices. And the one sort of Zen element of photography is that actually when you are doing it, you tend to be really in the moment, which is fantastic. Sometimes in the editing process, or before going out to shoot something, I may worry about the ethics of what I'm doing. But it's about being a responsible human being and trying to make work that's alive and real and also authentic to me, because I'm neither one of those people so I shouldn't be dressing up in funny hats and smoking cigars [*laughs*], nor should I proclaim to be doing service for the environment or anything like that. You know, I am what I am.