

SEANKELLY

"Photographer Alec Soth looks for where Americans find community," *PBS Newshour*, May 12, 2015.



Photographer Alec Soth looks for where Americans find community



<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/photographer-alec-soth-looks-americans-find-community/>

What does community look like in America today? Photographer Alec Soth spent two years crisscrossing the country, capturing images of Americans finding connection. Jeffrey Brown talks to the Minnesota photographer about his new book, titled "Songbook," plus going back to his local newspaper roots and how community life has evolved.

TRANSCRIPT

GWEN IFILL: And finally tonight: An art photographer returns to his roots to capture how Americans live today.

Jeff is back with the latest selection from our NewsHour Bookshelf.

JEFFREY BROWN: Can a sense of community still be found in America today?

Photographer Alec Soth went looking for it.

ALEC SOTH, Photographer, "Songbook": I was in Cleveland. And so I was at this old supper club. And I walked in there and it was like walking into the past.

Look at the faces of all three of these people. I mean, those faces could be from 60 years ago. So, I needed to make a picture of this couple having this date.

JEFFREY BROWN: Camera always ready, Soth spent two years crisscrossing the country, from a bar in Upstate New York, to a high school prom in Ohio, to a motel parking lot in Florida; 73 photos from that road trip are now featured in a collection call “Songbook” and have been shown in exhibitions in San Francisco, New York and Soth’s hometown of Minneapolis.

Soth is known for both large-scale landscapes and intimate portraits. In 2004, in a project called “Sleeping by the Mississippi,” he documented the life and land along the river.

Six years later, in “Broken Manual,” he focused on people who retreat from civilization. Now he wanted to see if and where Americans still come together, inspired in part by the book “Bowling Alone.”

ALEC SOTH: The sense of the death of community culture, that sort of civic organizations and community life is fading.

JEFFREY BROWN: Soth, it turns out, isn’t much on bowling, but he’s a ping-pong fanatic, as I discovered in his Saint Paul studio. He had started out near here as a photographer for a small local newspaper and says that with “Songbook” he wanted to return to those roots.

ALEC SOTH: I had this idea, and I called up — it was actually on my birthday. I called up this friend of mine who had worked as a reporter for years and said, as a present, will you go out with me and we will do a news story, a sort of pretend news story?

JEFFREY BROWN: What were you after?

ALEC SOTH: A more sort of lyrical approach to the news. And we were after this sense of community life.

And what we found was that, you know, community life, of course, still exists in many different ways. And I was actually reinvigorated about how diverse and crazy America is, because there’s this stereotype that everything has become strip malls and Wal-Mart. And, of course, that’s true, you know, to a large extent.

But you just drive off the freeway a couple miles, and there’s, you know, just so much richness there and so many stories.

JEFFREY BROWN: For the book, Soth removed the reporter’s notes, letting viewers devise their own stories.

ALEC SOTH: Here’s a picture of a finger pointing at a key.

JEFFREY BROWN: It’s a wall of keys.

ALEC SOTH: I’m using the flash to illuminate this one key that almost — to me, it almost looks like a crucifix at this point.

JEFFREY BROWN: Exactly. Yes.

ALEC SOTH: Well, it has this kind of like E.T. quality, sort of like touching the light. And that kind of business, you can’t do that in straight news, so I think that that lends a mystery to it. And so a viewer, not having all the information, just creates a story.

JEFFREY BROWN: There is also though in the book a sense of nostalgia, right?

ALEC SOTH: Yes.

JEFFREY BROWN: And some sense of loneliness.

ALEC SOTH: The book is called “Songbook,” which kind of refers to the “Great American Songbook.”

And I was also thinking, like, the greatest generation. You know, it's like all this — all the great stuff happened in the past.

JEFFREY BROWN: It all happened. It's all done.

ALEC SOTH: Yes. And of course that's romanticized, to a large extent, but there is definitely some truth to it as well, that we're — and particularly with digital culture, we're all on our little devices in our rooms.

JEFFREY BROWN: In some of Soth's photographs, the subject is turning away from the camera, like this one taking in a magician's shop in Colon, Michigan.

ALEC SOTH: The owner took me into the backroom with these little cabinets where he keeps his tricks. And there was this moment where he turned away. And his palm was exposed. And that makes me think of, like, hiding a trick up your sleeve. But it is — you know, it's a completely mysterious picture.

JEFFREY BROWN: But this one of course does evoke a sense of loneliness.

ALEC SOTH: Absolutely, yes.

JEFFREY BROWN: He's standing in a corner.

ALEC SOTH: Absolutely. That's the lyrical nature of it, is that I'm creating my own world. I'm creating my — the emotional tone to these pictures.

JEFFREY BROWN: His own world and a portrait of the one we share.

From Saint Paul, Minnesota, I'm Jeffrey Brown for the PBS NewsHour.