

## A POINT OF VIEW

All images are from  
*Songbook* © Alec Soth

In his first retrospective exhibition in the UK, **Alec Soth** is showing four of his signature series including his latest project, *Songbook*, a journey through America in search of the extraordinary in the everyday. Elizabeth Roberts talks to the Magnum photographer about art, humour and hard work.



Home Suite Home, Kissimmee, Florida

Opposite Near San Antonio, Texas

My first in-depth encounter with Alec Soth was through his latest publication, *Songbook*, which I reviewed when it came out last spring. As I delved into the background of the work, I became increasingly fascinated. What had started as a playful venture with a friend had become an important body of work, but more than that, it was the way in which it emerged that was intriguing.

*Songbook* began when Soth and writer Brad Zellar set out under the guise of working on a local newspaper reporting

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on small town communities. As the work progressed they went from a fictional newspaper to a real life one, published through Soth's Little Brown Mushroom publishing house. Finally, in yet another

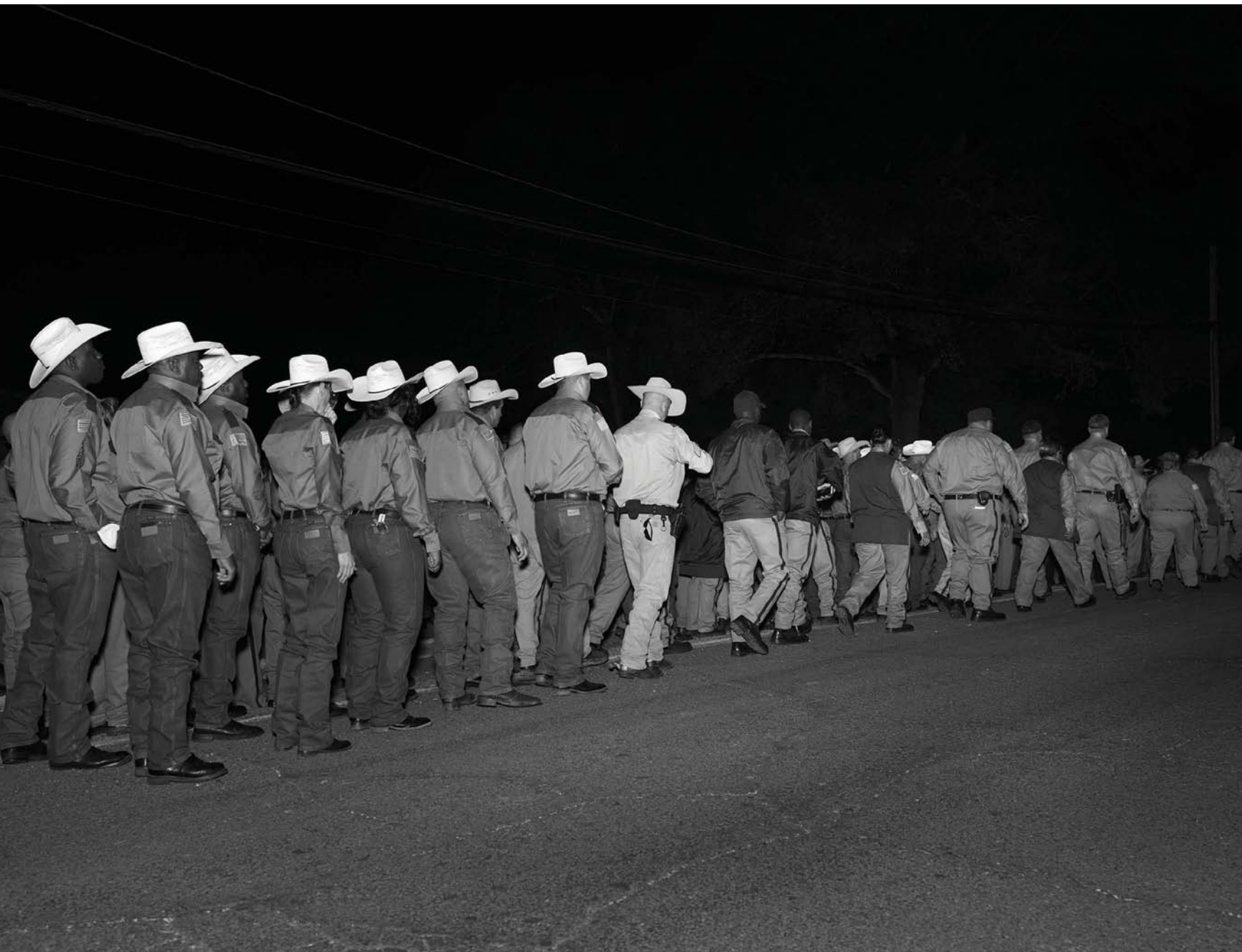
form, the work became a book.

I met Alec Soth in late September as he was hanging his exhibition, *Gathered Leaves*, at Media Space in London. Bringing together a decade of work through four series, *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2004), *Niagara* (2006), *Broken Manual* (2010) and *Songbook* (2015), the exhibition is an impressive account of the progression of an artist.

As we sat over coffee, while he took a break from the practicalities of exhibition hanging, we talked about his approach to photography and I asked him if he could tell me more >







Execution, Huntsville Prison, Huntsville, Texas Opposite top Bill, Sandusky, Ohio, 2014 Opposite bottom Bree, Liberty Cheer All-Stars, Corsicana, Texas, 2013

◀ about the sense of unreality – a sort of dream-like quality – that permeates much of his work. ‘I’m not a hardcore documentary photographer,’ he explains. ‘I come from the arts side of things – I start out with surrealism and then push it towards journalism.’ He goes on to describe his way of seeing the world that is ‘just a little askew’. It’s this ability to recreate his way of seeing – his vision – that is the key to *Songbook*.

As we talk, I begin to see that Soth is a man who takes himself seriously but at the same time dismisses that seriousness. It’s a position that few can fully achieve, but it’s also a place from which creativity

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is allowed to develop freely. ‘When Brad and I started out it was just a case of “let’s goof around”,’ he explains. ‘I’m a great believer in play. *Songbook* was born out of playfulness, for sure. But, of course, it built up over time. It’s like, say, some musicians

starting out by playing in their basement and then going out to do shows and then bigger shows until it turns into something else. And then you have to deal with the consequences of that too.’

Alec Soth’s work has often been described as melancholic and nostalgic and while these descriptions are fitting, I found as I absorbed myself in *Songbook*, I discovered a deeply humorous side to the work. I ventured to tell him this, wondering what his reaction would be. Fortunately, he was delighted. ‘I think there has always been >







Lil'Jay J & the Spiritual Boys, Rochester, New York

Opposite Dave and Trish, Denver, Colorado, 2014

◀ humour in my pictures but they've often been described as sad and I've felt a little disappointed by that. But with *Songbook* I pushed that button much harder.'

He goes on to talk about the nature of humour itself and how and why we are touched by it. 'The best stand-up comics make you feel uncomfortable but you laugh at the same time. That's what I like about humour, that it's very close to tragedy or mayhem and I like walking that line between the two.'

Nothing could describe Soth's work better than that statement. The photographs in *Songbook* reveal people lost and estranged from mainstream society, struggling to re-engage, often through

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moments of bizarre action or eccentricity. The longing for connection is obvious, precarious and momentary. I ask Soth if he feels that society – particularly American society – suffers from disconnectedness in these modern times. 'I have to be careful about making big declarations about society because I'm

aware that I have my own way of seeing the world and connecting with society, and there's part of me that projects my own view on to other things,' he explains. 'I think art is all about trying to connect. The thing I'll say about *Songbook*, and the other work in the exhibition, is that it's all American work and I do think that the US has its own relationship to social disconnection – in part because of the way it treasures individualism.'

Alec Soth is difficult to pin down. Warm, humorous and delightfully engaging as he is, he slips through your fingers if you try to define him. But maybe that's a ▶







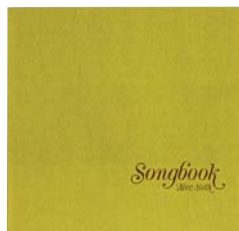
Near Kaaterskill Falls, New York

*'Taking a picture is not difficult. But taking 50 good pictures that work well together is incredibly hard. Almost impossible.'*

◀ mark of a truly original photographer who has spent years developing the ability to speak in his own voice. 'It's a long process, working with the language of photography, meeting people and being influenced by them and slowly bringing out that shred of distinctive personality that you have,' he says. 'The incredible thing for me is how simple photography is and how hard it is. Taking a picture is not difficult. But taking 50 good pictures that work well together is incredibly hard. Almost impossible.'

With that sense of the impossible always in sight and always challenging, Alec Soth's work seems to change and grow relentlessly. 'I don't like to have a consistent tone in my pictures,' he says. It remains to be seen where that inventiveness will take him next.

GATHERED LEAVES: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEC SOTH  
...is at Media Space, Science Museum, London, until 28 March. Admission £8, Seniors £7, Concessions £6 (prices include donation). The exhibition will then go on to the National Media Museum, Bradford, from 22 April to 26 June.  
[sciencemuseum.ac.uk](http://sciencemuseum.ac.uk) / [nationalmediamuseum.org.uk](http://nationalmediamuseum.org.uk)



#### BOOKS

A catalogue from the *Gathered Leaves* exhibition is available along with the hardback copy of *Songbook* from Mack books, [mackbooks.co.uk](http://mackbooks.co.uk)



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