

**INTERVIEW 028**

ublished
pr 30th, 2015

interviewer
ou Noble

ayout
gustin Sanchez

website »
ittle Brown Mushroom

umblr »

FOREWORD

The more interviews we do, the more I find myself straying from the familiar, from the photography I grew up noticing. Alec Soth is far afield from the portraiture I've previously been drawn to, but the skill with which he crafts his photography books is undeniable.

The potency of his work lies in the emotions his books are able to bring out in the viewer, both from the single

images and the sum of those images sequenced just so. His work really turned me on to the ability of a photography book to serve as more than just a collection of photos, but as a propulsive tool through which a visual theme can be evoked.

And the guy was just great to chat with. Very open and light-hearted, you're gonna dig it.









From **Broken Manual** by Alec Soth

You tend not to give a lot of direction, you tend to find your subjects as they are, yeah? Or do you give direction?

I'm by no means a purist in this way, so I... the way I usually describe it is being like, when you take a family portrait and like "okay, let's go over here by the tree and then Johnny take off your hat," you know? It's

like...I work the scene, there are pictures that are completely as they happened, and then there are other things that are more formal, and more set up. I'm not, like, telling people to dance or whatever, but there's a kind of spectrum of approaches I take towards that and I feel like in personal work, I don't have rules. It's different if I'm working for the New York Times or something.

Do you find your personal work more liberating than your editorial work because of that?

It's just a different beast and Songbook is a collection of these things, but you know, for example: The bulk of the work was made with this thing, the LBM Dispatch. And the Dispatch was great because it was like doing editorial work but without a boss. So yeah, it was definitely more liberating, for sure.

Do you...think differently when you're using more flexible equipment, do you notice your thought process changing from 8x10 to digital?

Yeah, I mean, so much has changed. It's hard to analyze what's related to technology and what's related to me. Because I'm a different photographer than I was 10 years ago. A different person and it's different

equipment. I mean, the funny thing is that I made work that bears quite a resemblance to this (Songbook) before *Sleeping By The Mississippi*, a book that got published called *Looking for Love* and so I don't know, it's hard to analyze these things, because it's a mish-mash of different changes.

I read some other interviews you've done and one of the biggest things that jumped out at me is that you've been making work since graduating school, but it wasn't until you were thirty-five that you had the Whitney Biennial and got discovered.

Right.

How did you keep the fire burning for those years where you were making work but not a success, per se?

Like anybody...the people who work at my studio, they're all photographers, and they all have to come to work for me and then they have to figure out, in their spare time, how to do it and I think that phase is really important, because it's where most people fall away and maybe they're doing it for

other reasons or it's too much work or whatever it is, it's a long slog to find your voice and also to just endure, there's an element of endurance to the thing that kind of separates you out, after a time. And how did I do it? Just like everybody else, slogging away, trying to find time. I mean the big revelation for me was that I needed to travel, I didn't know I needed to travel, but I later learned that I thrive on that and I was a bit... my development was stymied because I was staying close to home.

What was it that opened up for you when you started to travel?

Primarily, I got a grant that enabled me to do that, and it's an important thing, and I haven't really talked about arts funding but it's a significant element. Minnesota has really great arts funding and that seed money just did so much for me and I'm forever grateful to those people, the Knight Foundation, they gave me that first big grant to go out and make work. Because it's really hard to do it. In retrospect, I could've been less conservative and just managed to do it anyway, but I wasn't thinking that way at the time.

How much time did you take for that project with the grant money?

The big trip was a three month trip. It was

cut short because of a death in the family but it was about two months, something like that, and that was the biggie. And then more work followed, and more grants followed.

Was it...easy to adjust to that kind of change, from slogging away to all of the sudden being validated artistically?

That was really surprising, I was a person who always had to have a job, I was just raised that way or whatever, so the idea of leaving my job, I found really stressful. Exciting, of course, but, like, “can I sustain this?” And I didn’t have a graduate degree, so it’s not like I could just dive into teaching, it was a bit of a gamble, at that point. And that’s actually why I started doing editorial work, it was like a back-up, and yeah, it was nerve-wracking, but really great. But it wasn’t like I suddenly walked into a candy store, that was the good thing about being a bit older, too, I had some maturity, and sort of knew that in order to sustain this I’d have to be responsible and not go off the deep end.











From **Songbook** by Alec Soth

So Songbook is different because it's a collection of work you've been doing over the years (rather than a specific project made to be published as a single project), what made you decide to put it into a book?

So about halfway through the project...first of all, Songbook came together from a lot of

different but related threads, I'd been collaborating with Magnum photographers on one project, of course I'd been working with Brad (Zellar) on Dispatch stuff, and I'd been intentionally doing editorial work that kind of fit along the same lines, so it was about mid-way through the process, I saw how this was taking shape and I knew that a book would come out of the Dispatch work with Brad, eventually. And there was some talk of timing them simultaneously, but there was no way to do it. That'll happen later, in the future. But I wanted this place for the pictures that was separated from the text and yeah, I knew it halfway through, it was emerging, it wasn't called Songbook in the beginning, but I knew the themes and the feeling that I wanted and then it just took its course.

I've heard you talk about narrative...do you feel you've gotten better at telling a narrative through your photos?

Heh...no. Always my struggle with photography is with narrative...you know what I've gotten good at...this is like bubbling up for the first time, it's like...

YES

...Hahahaha...I've gotten good at finding an outlet for narrative that's sort of outside of the work. Like...because I know that

inherently photography isn't very good at narrative but I long for narrative, so I've been able to incorporate narrative but outside of the project a little bit. With the early projects I would do it with these footnotes, with Broken Manual there were these filmmakers following me around, with Songbook it's the Dispatch. And I've been able to have the narrative but elsewhere.

As a supplemental.

As a supplemental! Exactly. Which is good, because it satisfies the need that I have for it, but without making truly narrative work. And I'm still interested in narrative, I'm doing something right now, just a little tiny project that's incredibly narrative and will be presented in front of an audience, but I like doing those things, but in the end, the most significant work that I do is fundamentally non-narrative.

Mm...then how would you describe it, if not narrative?

You know, lyrical, whatever. I make this analogy a lot, between poetry and fiction, it's more like poetry. There's elements of narrative in it, and it's suggestive of a story, but it's not...there's no plot. And I've always been envious of that, because it's so powerful to have that. But photography's just not that great at it.

Are there any photographers who you think are good at it? Or do you think inherently photography will always run up against that wall?

There are books, I think that Larry Sultan's Pictures from Home is the quintessential narrative photography book, it's just perfect to me, so I think there are great achievements along those lines, and again it's another spectrum thing, just like poetry...there's narrative-ish poetry, and then there's totally fragmentary experimental poetry and there are times when I want to be more one or the other, and I think there are photographers that are succeeding more one way than the other but total storytelling in the way that you put on a movie where there's a plot and a resolution, that thing just doesn't really happen in the same way with photography.







From **Last Days of W** by Alec Soth

Do you...when you're putting the book together...when you're putting any of your books together, are you conscious of a rhythmic flow that you're trying to achieve from photo to photo?

Yeah, exactly, and that's where the poetry analogy really works, it's about rhythm and

meter and flow and especially beginnings and endings are important. And then finding some rhythm in between and there can be a suggestion of narrative I think, but I've never been able to sequence pictures like "this happened, then that happened and that happened," you know, although, I kind of am doing it in this live slideshow format I've been working with, which is kind of something different.

That kind of reminds me of *La Jetee*, which does tell a narrative through a series of images, but there's also narration, it doesn't work on its own.

It's true.

It's an interesting phenomenon, because I can get frustrated in films when they lack that narrative pulse and that was the interesting thing working with those filmmakers is that they were jealous of me because I was free of all that. And I was jealous of them because they had the power of it.

Have you always had that pull towards narrative? Is there a reason you didn't go into a field that allowed you to tell narratives?

Interesting...I don't think I had a natural inclination to it, like; I'm not a storyteller. I'm not sitting around the table telling family stories, I don't come from storytelling people...

Hahahahaha

...Hahaha, so I don't think necessarily, I just think just in the culture at large, it is just the most powerful thing there is and so I'm just aware of its power, I choose not to become a filmmaker and go that route in part because it does seem burdensome to have to do that and to sort of get character from point A to point B just seems tedious to have to do it, and then you have to work with like 20 different people to do it and figure it out and, yeah, I like the act of being a photographer. But I'm sure poets are really jealous, "wow, 500,000 people read that novel and are moved to tears by it, and there are, like, 30 people that read my poetry book, even though I'm a famous poet, and they're all other poets." so I think it's a similar sort of frustration.

Right! How did you foresee your career, is this how you saw things going?

Hehehehe...no. I came from the art side of things, totally, so I wanted to be an artist. But I also interned in New York...it just seemed impossible to be a successful artist,

so I thought I would pursue it as seriously as I could, and maybe someday something would happen, but I didn't realistically think I would make a living at it. I fantasized about it, and the context in which I fantasized about it would be that sort of museums and shows and stuff like that, but not Magnum photos, not working as a photographer, lecturing, and all that kind of stuff.

So in the early days, was the work enough? The process of taking those pictures...

No, I'd be lying if I said that.

Feel free to lie if you really want to, we have no problem with that!

Heh, no, I mean, it would sound great and noble, but I was frustrated and I was unhappy with the work that I was doing, because it was low paid in terms of actual day to day life and frustrated that it's not getting out there and frustrated that I hadn't really found my voice, all that kind of stuff. And I was, every year I was like, "should I go to graduate school or not go to graduate school?" Those questions, like everybody else, so it was fairly typical in a lot of ways. But what happened, real life started kicking in and just, family issues or whatever, and I

could feel myself getting too old to go to graduate school, if I'm gonna have kids, the responsibilities were piling up and then I got lucky! Hahahaha!

Hahahaha! Do you still find the same kind of joy in the process as you did then?

I find real joy in the process, it's not the same kind of joy, I mean I think about that first trip, and that was complete joy, a real innocent joy, but then also I think about the work I did before that, I was really frustrated. And I find moments of great joy, but it's definitely different now, because there's an economy that surrounds it. All the people that are dependent on the work, my family, my employees and whatnot, so it's different, but I still find great joy in it.

“Do you find joy in the process more, or the result?”TM *TPJ 2015*

Oh the process, yeah, the result is pleasurable, but so fleeting, yeah, it's the process.

Yeah...so, you're subjects are varied, your range has expanded, are you conscious of what you're looking for in a subject when you

go out? Is that something you come up with ahead of time with a project, or sometimes you just go out?

Mmmmm, I usually don't just go out go out, I need some quality to go for, but I like being surprised, but that was the great thing about The Dispatch, it sort of set up a structure which enabled us to be surprised over and over again. So we were sort of looking for something but were surprised by all sorts of other things and that's really what photography's great about doing, surprising you with the reality of the world out there.

**LBM DISPATCH
#3: MICHIGAN
(SPECIAL
EDITION)**

By Alec Soth and
Brad Zellar
Publication Date,
November, 2012
Library buckram
exterior Japanese
cloth interior
12 7/8"x 15 7/8"
x 1/2"
Edition of 100



Are you gonna continue the Dispatch?

No, it ran its course, for lots of reasons, partly because of the economics of things, it started in this sort of DIY way and just got bigger and bigger and required lots of fundraising and all this kind of stuff and by the end it was too big and needy. And that's kind of a repeating pattern I have, too, with Little Brown Mushroom and other things, where if I feel like it's becoming too much of a business then I need to put a stake in it.

Why do you think that is?

There's a danger of losing the creative impulse, so that you're serving the economy of it, rather than the art of it.

So you're very conscious about trying to keep the joy in your work.

Oh yeah, definitely, I mean, that's a big part of how I've set up my life, is to preserve what's good about creative work and part of the thing about doing other work is so that I can preserve some of that creativity. So by teaching or lecturing or photo jobs, it's like, how I keep that other thing pristine.

Right...how do you feel about teaching, these days? Because I saw in an interview from several years ago where there seemed to

be kind of an uncomfortability
about the idea of teaching versus
say, mentoring.

It's something I've really been working
towards, finding my footing in that world. I
did this summer camp thing in our studio, it
had the elements of a workshop, and it was
super-fantastic and life-changing.

For you?

For me, yeah. It was all about this slideshow
idea that I've had, this live storytelling, it
was a way to explore that, it was free, which
is a really important part of it, and I just
thought, wow, there's tons of energy there,
so I took that idea, and with Brad Zeller we
taught a class at the university of Wisconsin
and it went...okay, but it was within a
university context and, suddenly,
something was lost in that process. So I
realized that was a misstep. So now I'm in
the process of...I got this grant, we have to
find this matching money, but we get to
work with teenagers and it's taking that
same idea again, but trying to keep control
of it, do it out of my studio, have it be free
for the participants, but definitely outside of
the bureaucratic structure of a university.

Are you able to put your finger
on what was lost when you were
in that university structure?

Bureaucracy just sort of sucked the life out of the creative impulse. It's like anything else, I don't really do public art, I did one sort of thing, and it's like, committees of people with all their opinions and in the case of university, I think there's tons of great stuff that happens, but I find the, "what's my grade gonna be?" that whole... all those issues, they're tedious to me, and it just gets in the way of what I want to do. And there are people that are great teachers that can navigate that stuff and they're professionals and that's what they do and I'm not a professional teacher, I don't want to make that my life's ambition, but I still want to have an effect on people's lives, so using the infrastructure I have here, I can carve out a little space to work on that kind of stuff, not make it my life's work, but do something.

And with the teenagers, is it more of a beginning class/workshop?

It would be...I'm really not interested in teaching photography, per se. And one of the great things, now, is that it's so easy, so I'm more interested in...people can use their smartphones or whatever, I'm interested in this element of live storytelling, because that has worked again & again, in fact it worked in the university setting as well, so it falls outside of that structure, I'm interested in pursuing this avenue that hasn't really been explored anywhere, for me the whole

idea is...the photo book is a semi-narrative structure, right? But I've always thought, "wow, the slideshow is itself a narrative structure," the family slide show, you go on a trip, you come back, you show what happened, and it really hasn't been explored as a creative medium, but I do it over and over again, because I'm asked to, you know, but I don't use it creatively.

Yet!

Yet. I've been trying to, I've been adding creative pieces, and I just see huge potential for it. So that's what I've been working towards and I think teenagers could bring a ton to this, also because they're so fluid with the tools, so you don't have to think so much about whether it's audio or video...

They can bring what they want to it. Along those lines, are you now more comfortable with strangers and with interacting with people than you were early on?

Oh yeah. That's one of the big changes.











From **Dog Days, Bogotá** by Alec Soth

Is it something that you still
marvel at, having evolved in that
way?

I do marvel at it. Sort of tied into this whole educational thing is that in a week and a half I'm going, I'm spending a week with my old high school teacher and his students and it's really amazing to think about where I was in high school and where I am now, and how different that is. And, you know, I couldn't raise my hand in school; I was so shy, so yeah, it's wild.

An old guy I was talking to recently was asking about what my long term plan was, and I was telling him about how I was becoming more socially conscious, and that I want to go to art school...learn to teach, and he talked about how people in their late 30s/early 40s, that they get this urge to contribute back. Is that something that's bubbled up of late?

Yeah, definitely. I think I always wanted that, this high school teacher I owe Everything to, and I thought, yeah, I want to do that for someone, and I dabbled in teaching early on, and I just wasn't ready for it, personality-wise, and also experience-wise. I think I have more experience now, more I can bring to the table, and...yeah, that's definitely where I'm at, but it's so big, that territory, like anything, you start

getting interested and you realize how vast it is and that you have to find your way through it.

What is it you think you really want to teach that's in front of you, be it your students or the interns at your studio? Is there one thing you think you excel at which you want to convey?

It's definitely not teaching, like, "here's the list of things I'm going to give to you", it's more like helping people find their own voice. It's really, it's not about "okay, here's how you become a professional photographer" it's like, rather, it would be like, "wow, there're so many ways to be creative with the way you live your life" and sort of opening up the possibilities of that. It's interesting, my daughter is 12, and she recently said she wants to go into "business", hahahahaha!

Hahahaha!

She's traveled the world, she's seen all these things, had all these creative opportunities, and she wants to go into business? And I've been talking to her about that and then she's like, "what is business anyway?" She didn't even know what she was talking about. And we ended up talking because she actually got a tour of the New York Times from the

photo editor there and I was like, “you could work in that arena,” there’re so many possibilities, kind of what I was saying, when I was younger and not understanding the need to travel. Just open up other avenues of how to be creative in your life, is what I’m most interested in.

There’re a few quotes I’ve seen of yours that I was really drawn to... one was that you had to “find your eyes”. Is that something you feel you can teach someone?

No. That’s the kind of thing you can’t... there’s an element where it’s just time, that’s just time. I think it’s true in any medium, so that if you’re a musician, you just have to practice for 10 years or whatever it is. So no, I don’t think you can teach that. But you can sort of...I just think it’s opening doors. And then “go down this avenue,” and then maybe you find your eyes. But again, I’m not so interested in photography, specifically, in that way.

The other quote I really liked was, “tell them they’re in a museum in their basement and what’s the art up in that space, and that’s what they should make.” And...I don’t even have a

question associated with that quote! I just like that quote!

It's a good one! Although, in reality it's not so functional because when you go out to do it, it doesn't look like that, and you're confronted with the reality of the situation.

You can't necessarily take the pictures that you see in your mind-basement.

Yeah, hahahaha, exactly. I mean, I like that dynamic, to me, introspection, deep introspection, and then going out in the world to face the realities of the world out there, and that kind of tension.

That kind of sounds like the struggle of a filmmaker, in their mind...

Oh yeah...

...It's perfect and glorious, but then they're faced with budgets and the crew and the realities of the production.

Yeah, I definitely imagine that's the case. And in the case of photography...at least, if you're not doing staged photography, it just

doesn't look like that! Everything's always different, the light is always different, yeah. But sometimes, better. You just have to be open for it.













From **Niagara** by Alec Soth

Have you not had the urge to do more of a Crewdson-style of...you know, renting a town...

Hahahahaha...not so much. No. But there are more stagy things, more constructed things that I'm interested in, but not to that level. Then I'd just make a movie!

Totally! And then, there was a recent Guardian article on you, I don't know if you read this...at the end they call you the "foremost visual chronicler of contemporary America's nostalgias & fears."

Hahahahahaha!

Which seems kind of...dark... what I've seen of your work, the impression I take away is not about a darkness, but more of a celebration, even of people who have been marginalized or haven't been considered at all.

It's a funny...I mean, I know how he came to that line, but what's really staggering about that article, and one other one that was published around the same time in the UK, were the headlines. And I know the writer doesn't write the headlines, generally, and they were like, "DEATH IN THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY" or something like that, wow, that is not what I was saying at all. But what's fascinating is that both of those came from the UK, and it did feel markedly different, and there is darkness, for sure, but it's not like, I don't think it's that bleak, really, but I'm fascinated by those different responses, those different readings, and

that's happened over & over again with my work. And then my own take which tends to be, yeah, really different from everyone else's.

What's your take on Songbook?

It's much more optimistic. But then, I like sad & lonely things. I thought *Sleeping by the Mississippi* was really joyous in its own way, somber also, and I had the same feeling with *Songbook*. *Niagara*, I think, was officially dark, it did go down a dark path. And *Broken Manuals* was pretty dark, as well.

But even in *Niagara*, there are love letters that seem very...love letter-ish. They're not all dark. There's a tenderness to the nude couples together, those seem very intimate.

Yeah, there's that, and there's comedy in all the work, it's just not always obvious. A lot of that's my doing, I could change the tone to be more celebratory or what have you, and it's my taste, I tend to like things that are on the darker side of the spectrum. So I understand when people don't pick up on it the same way, but it's curious.

Sometimes there's a gallows

humor to the work.

Yeah. But that's one of the treats of having work go out and have an actual audience is that you get these different reactions. And sometimes I definitely disagree with them.

Right. Well, I think that's it...oh!
You've been married since high school!

Hahahahaha, yes?

When you're looking at, Niagara is a good example, is there an exploration of different kinds of love? Stuff that you haven't experienced or that...is there a curiosity attached to that?

I mean that's...you could take it on many different fronts, with *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, I'm just fascinated by prison life, by prison culture. The show *Oz*, there's nothing more terrifying to me than prison. So...I'm not a prisoner, I'm likely not going to prison, I'm just curious about that world. And you could say in a similar way, I'm not on *Tinder*...

Hahahahaha!

...Hahahahaha, but when a colleague of mine pulls out the Tinder app, I'm really curious about what's going on, there. So photography is a great vehicle to explore your curiosity.

And do you find that you're just as curious as when you were starting out?

Yeah...because in a way, it's more nuanced, I know more interesting things to look for, it was kind of generalized curiosity...it was like, Prison was something I was curious about. Now it's more specific curiosity.

Love in prison!

Hahahahahaha, yeah!

You can take that, that's all yours! You wanna do a project on that, all I need is a Thank You in the book.

Hehehe, yeah, I sometimes wonder if I'll ever do a prison project, because that is a fascination for me, I'm just so horrified by it.

And my last question...are you conscious of the balance of the

single photo vs. a sequence of them? How do you balance that in a book? Many books that I've looked at, when I look at a lot of zines and art books, they just... none of them have a great impact because there is no...they're focused on this overall feeling of the book, to the detriment of each individual image, but when I looked at Your work, there was this rhythm that kept me engaged, drew me in...how do you balance that? Is there a conscious effort to balance the single image against the whole?

Yeah, definitely. That's the whole thing for me. I've never been obsessed with the single image, I've always been obsessed with a great book. That's fundamentally what I want to do, and I'm trying more and more to make really good shows, but that's not my primary motivation either, because they don't last, but the book kind of lasts. But it's a real balancing act, because it still requires those moments, those great pictures. But finding a rhythm throughout it...yeah, I always say, "a monkey can take a great picture," it's easy. But a book, a great book, is a real achievement.

One more!

Yeah yeah! That's the photographer thing!

I subscribe to the Columbo theory of interviewing! "Uh...just one more thing, I'm sorry, my wife, she always yells at me, just one more question..." So, do you use music when you're sequencing your books, to find that rhythm?

Huh...that's interesting, because I'm asked a lot about music when I'm out driving, which is not, curiously, it's not a big part of my life in that way, but for actual editing...maybe it does come into play...I shouldn't say this, but...I use alcohol, sometimes, in editing, to relax and, you know, it's kind of a rare moment for me, the shooting's done, and trying to get into this flow, and I think music...but I think alcohol more than music, which is a weird thing to tell you!

This is a safe place! There's no judgment in this interview.

Sometimes a little heroin!

Just a little! I mean...does it help

free up being able to associate pictures together, see the pattern?

Yeah, because the editing process, you kind of have to let go of the backstories and things like that, that's the great struggle, knowing the picture has all this other meaning, but here, okay, you're gonna let go of that, and then it's, "does it feel right in the sequence?" and getting that feeling is like dancing or something, you have to be in the moment. What you're saying about music, it's like why people drink at the night club, so you can relax and dance...(Alec Soth, via video Skype, does a classic White Man Dancing routine in his chair) yeah, that's my editing process, white man dancing!

Hahahaha, Is there a particular kind of music you listen to?

In the editing process, not necessarily, no... actually...no. It is a bit project-dependent. But, curiously, for Songbook it wasn't the music I was referencing, it's more like, I went through a big Lucinda Williams phase, it's not one to one, though.









From **Looking for Love** by Alec Soth

PREVIOUS KRISTEN WRZESNIEWSKI

NEXT BEE WALKER

TPJ

© ThePhotographicJournal.com 2015

[Homepage](#)
[Articles](#)
[About TPJ](#)
[Submissions](#)
[Contact](#)