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Alec Soth photographs an older, sadder and stranger America

Beyond the corporate and cyber worlds, the US is still a place of cheerleaders and cowboys, of cliché and of surprise. For the past three years, the photographer has captured far-flung communities across the nation



Bree, Liberty Cheer All-Stars, Corsicana, Texas
©Alec Soth

Photographers, like novelists and film-makers, have given us many different Americas. Some are easily identified, others are more constructs of the imagination, though no less real — whether it's the country Robert Frank drove across in the mid-1950s, Diane Arbus's New York or William Eggleston's South. More recently, the artist and geographer Trevor Paglen has alerted us to the ways in which America (and the rest of the world) is being photographed from a new vantage point: the reconnaissance drone.

There is nothing so overtly sinister in Alec Soth's recent American images, and yet they are unsettling. Although moments of humour and absurdity run through them, the overall feeling they transmit is one of anxiety and desperation. They reflect a society — mostly people living outside the urban money belts — under threat from loneliness, economic hardship, emotional breakdown and boredom.

Soth has been photographing different parts of the US since his first book, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, was published in 2004. A sequence of landscapes, interiors and portraits, it took the river as a spiritual guide as much as a geographic one, moving south from Wisconsin and Soth's native Minnesota, through Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. It was a journey of literary and visual allusions that seemed as much about the past as the present.

Over the next decade Soth (it rhymes with “both”, he advises) carved himself a path through photography that avoided — or maybe just ignored — the barriers being erected in artistic circles between photojournalism and art. He set up his own publishing imprint, Little Brown Mushroom, in 2008 but still worked with mainstream publishers. He took advantage of established support systems, such as an agency (he is a member of Magnum Photos) and art galleries (he was taken up first by Gagosian and is now represented by Sean Kelly in New York), but retained his independence.

Soth spent the years between 2006 and 2010 exploring the idea of retreat, seeking out monks, hermits, hippies and survivalists living off the grid. Some of them had worked-out reasons to do with ecology, economics and politics; others were just crazies and “solitaries” — a word that has none of the heroics of “loners” to it. He admits the project was partly based on a personal dream — as a child growing up in rural Minnesota, despite having an older brother, he’d spent a lot of time alone. “I had this rich fantasy world in the woods,” he says, speaking in *Somewhere to Disappear*, the 2010 documentary film that was made about his search. He makes no attempt to disguise the presence of the film-makers as he sets up his plate camera inside shacks and caves and mobile homes, taking portraits of their occupants. At one point, tapping gingerly on the door of a heavily boarded-up roadside shack, he explains to them that his last visit there was “the most scared I’ve ever been photographing”.

The presence of the film-makers, and the relative luxuries of a people-carrier and a wife and two children back home in Minnesota, don’t entirely dissuade the viewer of the dangers of Soth’s position, as he lugs his huge camera and tripod through thigh-deep snow, or meets a couple of stoned, wild-eyed characters on the desert road. As he made clear when we met in London at the end of last year, this search for escapees hadn’t been a purely aesthetic quest. “It was where I was at that point. I have a tendency to navel gaze, and I was going inward-looking. In the end I was happy with [what I’d done] but it was, like, wow, I’m going far down this path.” By the time he’d finished a book about it, he was ready for some company.

In December 2011 he asked his friend, the writer Brad Zellar, for a birthday present. He wanted to go out and “report a story”. Years before, Soth had written an introduction to a book of photographs Zellar had put together from an archive of a suburban newspaper photographer, Irwin Norling. “I had once been a suburban photographer and it was very small-scale,” he explains, “like a ribbon-cutting, a city council meeting, local news. But I’ve often thought, knowing what I know now, wouldn’t it be interesting to photograph those same things.” So he and Zellar went out, locally at first, to parts of suburban Minnesota, looking for stories to publish in their imaginary newspaper. It had a name: “It was called the Winter Garden Dispatch,” he says. “[We were] thinking of it as almost like this mythical place. It was like a dark Wobegon [the Minnesota setting of Garrison Keillor’s fictional town], a David Lynchian Lake Wobegon. And we were having fun with that. There was no publication, we were just feeling our way.”

But soon they turned it into a real newspaper: a handsome, large-format 48-page broadsheet with Soth’s black-and-white photographs and Zellar’s text, supplemented by quotations from writers such as Sherwood Anderson, Edmund Wilson, Studs Terkel, Jack Kerouac, Willa Cather and many more. They renamed it the Little Brown Mushroom Dispatch and sold it through the LBM website. Between 2012 and 2014 they published reports from seven different states: Ohio, upstate New York, Michigan, California, Colorado, Texas and Georgia.

The basic motivation came from the conversations they had that winter. Zellar wrote: “We’d been talking and thinking about community and people’s search for real-world connection in a country where loneliness seems increasingly to be an epidemic more corrosive than the popular culture that fuels it . . . We wanted to see how folks were faring outside the ersatz, isolating communities of office hives and cyber space.”

It was, obviously, a labour of love. The journeys were a mixture of planning and serendipity, funded by lectures and workshops and partnerships with a network of institutions and colleges that helped to keep the two of them afloat. They always travelled together and each night, from one hotel room to another, Soth downloaded his photos and sent them to Zellar, who wrote or chose the texts that went with them. In the early days they uploaded everything on to Tumblr but later they kept stories back for an edition of the paper.

At the outset, in Ohio, Zellar had worried they might be looking for what they expected to find. But by Michigan he'd learnt that "preconceptions are almost always misconceptions". In Michigan they began to accept that if the ordinary people they met were friendly and welcoming in the main, the rich and the powerful were not. "A disproportionate number of our encounters with the elusive demographic have been unpleasant, contentious and even hostile," Zellar wrote. "It is increasingly clear to me that the powerful people in the country — the wealthy, the comfortable, the politicians (of both parties) — now live in labyrinths, bunkers and fortresses that are utterly inaccessible to the average citizen."

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As news of the Dispatch spread, the two men became something of a news story themselves, and last September, part of what turned out to be the final edition, "Georgia", was published in The New York Times.

The logistics of production had become too much. "It was bigger than just taking pictures," Soth says. Along with trips for the Dispatch he was working on other assignments of his own: a big story on oil in North Dakota for The New York Times; a Magnum project in Orlando, another in Oklahoma. "I just didn't have the time and energy to build audiences and that's what real publishers do. That's not what I was in it for. I was just in it to experiment and play. I always wanted to maintain relationships with real publishers. So somewhere in the middle of the process of the Dispatch, Brad and I talked about how I had the need to publish these [pictures] separately, because I was making all this other work and I had the desire for the images to exist on their own.

"One of the things I love about photography," he says, "is that it can function in a way that painting can't necessarily. I can work for The New York Times, or I can be in a gallery, and I can have the same picture exist with text and without text in different contexts, seeing what happens. And I knew that some of the pictures were going to function well out of context."

So while Zellar is working on a book of stories based on the Dispatch (which will have some of Soth's pictures), Soth has just finished a new book of photographs. Some are from the Dispatch trips, others are from his independent projects. They are presented in the form of a songbook — a riff on the idea of the great American songbook — a conceit he hopes will encourage, he says with a smile, "a more lyrical experience".

"All of my work is a battle with storytelling, with how much you want to tell a story with the pictures. With this book, rather than a storytelling form, I wanted a musical form. You could say it's the difference between a poem and a short story; you're allowed to drift and float and invest your imagination. You're allowed to invent the connections between the pictures."

Stripped of their original context, accompanied occasionally, on the facing pages, by a few lines from some of America's best-loved songs, Soth's pictures suggest an older, sadder and stranger America. Despite the references to Cole Porter and Lorenz Hart, it seems more reminiscent of what Greil Marcus, in his book on American folk music, *Invisible Republic*, calls "the old weird America". Partly it's the black-and-white, which, as Soth says, look like the pictures could have been made 60 years ago; partly it's the locations — small-town dancehalls, community halls, beauty pageants and religious gatherings. Among the cheerleaders, the football jocks, the professional Optimists and cowboys are solitary figures who, whether Soth intended it or not, seem to point to an underlying desperation.

"My tendency, always," he admits, "is [towards] isolated pictures. But the thing about America is that it is strange. It's wonderfully strange. I mean, I'm a defender of America. Because there is this cliché that everything's McDonald's and all that, and there is that. But you just poke a little bit and it's really unusual, and people are quite welcoming, and there is so much material there."

Detached from their background stories, his portraits in particular are open to all kinds of ambiguous readings. If this is an abdication of responsibility, it's one he accepts. "I'm not doing great things for the world. I don't believe my photography functions in that way. If I take a portrait of someone I'm not revealing their soul, it's just a collection of surfaces and people project all sorts of things on to them. Which doesn't mean I want to be unethical, but there is a limit to it. For me the power of it is this battle

between narrative and lyricism. You know, where something is ethically uncomfortable, is where it's also alive."

What is there undeniably in his pictures are references to the work of other photographers, other Americas. "Exactly right," he says. "A long time ago I decided that photography is a language and I'm going to use the language rather than create a new one. That's where I like the literary connection, because writers aren't embarrassed to use literary history, whereas so many artists are trying to generate entirely new languages. It's OK to respond to something that's part of its historical knowledge."

But though he has stripped the texts from the pictures, he's still full of stories about them. I pick out a portrait of a young cowboy, cigarette in the corner of his mouth, arm around his blonde girlfriend, her face in his shoulder. "It's in Texas, in San Antonio," Soth says. "He is dancing, I'm not asking permission. He knows I'm there, obviously, and I'm just, like, 'Is this OK?'" But what's amazing about this picture is that it's real. He is that guy.

"I think this is how we've become jaded. Where it's all [about] our screens. The real world still exists and that's what's encouraging about being a photographer. You go out there and people still have real lives."

"Songbook" by Alec Soth is published by Mack (mackbooks.co.uk). Exhibitions of his work are at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, January 30-March 14 (skny.com); Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, February 5-April 4 (fraenkelgallery.com); Weinstein Gallery, Minneapolis, February 20-April 4 (weinstein-gallery.com). A major exhibition of Soth's work will open at the Media Space, London in October.

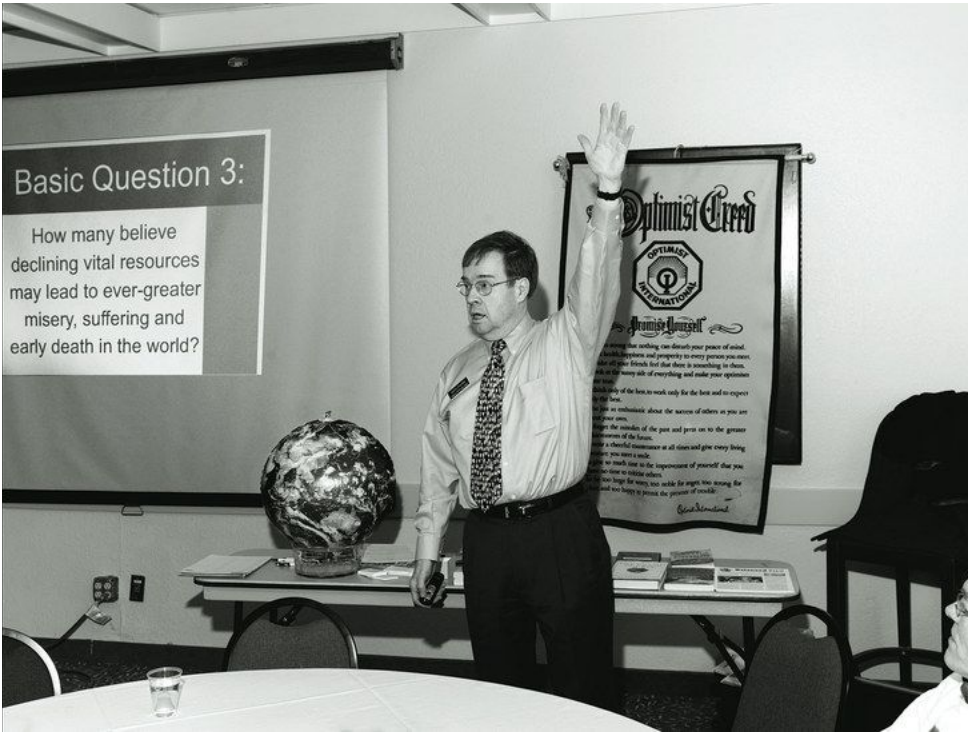
Photographs: Alec Soth



Dover, Ohio
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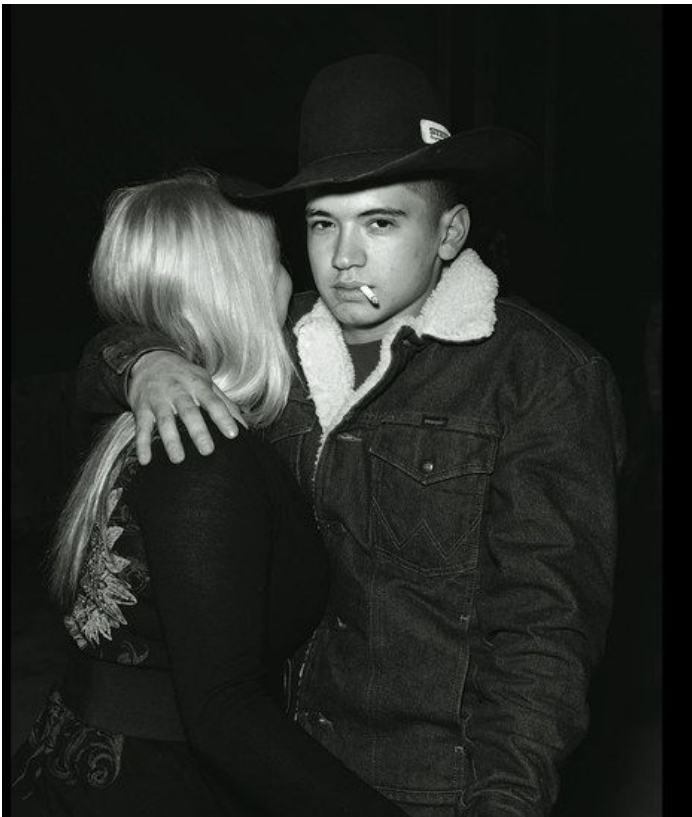
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