



Magdalena Soté

An interview with the photographer of *New Delta Rising*

Born in Spain, raised in Switzerland, and now living in New York City, Magdalena Solé is an award-winning social documentary photographer whose project work has taken her to Cuba, Japan, and through the Mississippi Delta. Her first book, *New Delta Rising*, published earlier this year, is an important look at a place largely forgotten, or perhaps ignored. Through the eye of Magdalena, though, we are drawn into a place and into the lives of its people in way that resonates with emotion and one that will not leave your heart unchanged.

Rear Curtain recently asked Magdalena about her work and the impact it carries.

What is your thinking about long-term projects in general? How do you decide on the length of time you will spend on a project like *New Delta Rising*?

I like photographing unique communities, and like any community, you need to spend time to learn its ways, make friends, gain some trust, and generally become less of an outsider. The Delta has an additional challenge, which is its sheer size. I drove about 10-12,000 miles over the entire project. If you have unlimited funds, you go back until you are done, and it is pretty clear when that moment occurs. If you are short of money, you make do.

What specifically drew you to tell the story of the Delta and its residents? What were the determining factors that allowed you to begin this story and continue it for three years?

I started by going to a rally where I met people who I really liked. The Dreyfus Health Foundation also really liked the people, and our mutual likes led to an idea for a book.

Most books on the area have a social, political or musical perspective, but the book we wanted was about the people and their heart. So the start was introducing myself, meeting people, taking some photographs but mostly making friends. After that it was exploring as much of the Delta as I could, talking to as many people as possible and trying to gather a collection of images, which reflected the profound warmth and generosity I experienced. I think it is that embracing spirit that makes the pictures so compelling.

In other interviews you've done, you mentioned that the people you met and photographed were welcoming and open. Is there something you can share with others starting out in this kind of work that would help them to be received with the same sort of cooperation and openness?

A part is abandoning judgementalness (if this is a word) and having an open heart to a unique experience. A part is a willingness to join in. If you are offered food eat it, or a beverage, drink it. Another part is simple kindness. If someone does

a favor, bring a gift as you would with any special friend. Then there is background. I was born in Spain and starting at age seven, was raised in Switzerland. On our arrival in Switzerland my family instantly became second-class citizens. I guess I feel kinship to marginal and shunned communities since I grew up in one.

Was the end presentation as a book an influential factor in the images you sought to make?

Yes, the project from the inception was intended to produce a book. It really wasn't an influential factor in the images. I wanted images that expressed a character of spirit that happened to be in the Delta. The images could have been for almost any use.

What were the biggest hurdles in bringing the project to completion?

There were the usual technical and financial challenges that all such projects face.

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How did you know when you had enough content for the book? Was the process for building the book ongoing or was the process finished when you felt you had enough images to complete your vision?

It sounds like a cliché to say it was an organic process, but truly it was. My first few visits I felt were failures. I had images but they just missed

what I was seeking. The next few visits the images were much better and coincided with an odd feeling that when I arrived in the Delta I had come home. I should say that I always brought pictures from the previous visits to give to those I had photographed. Photography has never been more of a joy than when I would share my work in the Delta. If the image made the recipient smile, I knew it was OK.

“I wanted a book filled with people you would want to sit down with, have an iced tea, and while away the afternoon in conversation.”

Your images seem to live in that place where there is both happiness and heartache, and your work shows a great deal of empathy with the people of this area. How important do you find that in being able to achieve the impact that this series has had?

Like I said, I grew up in a country where I was a second-class citizen, where my father and mother worked hard and earned about half of what a Swiss citizen would at the same job. But we had joy at home. I guess by upbringing I can easily see both heartache and happiness. I think the other advantage I have is technical. I use a Leica rangefinder. The camera is small and fairly unobtrusive which makes people forget about it. After a while I was thought of more as the family member with the camera.

What impact or changes are you hoping for from this project in the lives of the people in the Delta area? Was that a consideration as you made the images?

My hope was that when the book was done, it would reflect back the deep sense of gratitude that I felt for having been welcomed and invited into people's homes to hear stories of lives filled with harsh realities and profound understandings. I wanted a book filled with people you would want to sit down with, have an iced tea, and while

away the afternoon in conversation. I wanted memorable pictures of people who are mostly forgotten.

Why is it important to do and share this kind of work?

I think an artist's work is to illuminate and perhaps clarify this world. Unique and marginal communities happen to be what attracts my curiosity. There is just so much we can gain from the experiences of others.

Find out more about New Delta Rising and Magdalena's other work on her web site, www.solepictures.com.

