

BY NTOSI IORDANIDOU  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

"Life is like a fast tango, so let's dance!" says photographer Vassilis Koltoukis. His parting words seem to perfectly encapsulate his entire philosophy and lifestyle. Born in Arta in northwestern Greece, Koltoukis studied French philosophy in Paris. It was there, in what many call the city of love, that he became mesmerized by the art of photography. He studied under humanist French photographer, Edouard Boubat, who "has

traveled the world 10 times." Since then, Koltoukis has followed a similar path, traveling to 40 countries to create a vast collection of stunning photographs celebrating the world's street musicians. He speaks to Ntosi Iordanidou about capturing "Music on the Road."

**Ntosi Iordanidou:**  
How do you begin to take photos?

**Vassilis Koltoukis:**  
We are all born artists. You can see it in how all children paint, sing,

Sadly, this innate behavior, due to circumstances of life, due to parents, slowly fades day after day, and in the end it disappears. You have to rediscover it through movies, books, exhibitions. I was painting from when I was young, but for some reason I stopped drawing. However, the art of painting is something instinctive; I express myself through it. When I met Boubat, one of the greatest photographers of the world, I saw his photos and there was a *click* in my mind. I saw also a documentary about his life and was shocked and moved by how great an artist he was, and I said to myself: That is what I want to do in my life, to study photography, to travel and explore the whole world.

That's the most important, not the photography itself. As I was getting older, I understood something that Boubat told me, many years ago. The most important is not to travel, but even here in Athens, which is home, to walk like you're on a journey. This, however, requires a philosophical background, which I never had. I could not understand these words at first. I wanted long trips in Africa, Latin America, but I realized that the real journey is here, in your home. To try to see things like it is your first glance, that can be quite difficult.

**N.I.:** Why did you decide to travel alone? You don't feel lonely?

**V.K.:** Believe me, here is where I feel lonely. In my journeys, I live the rhythm of life. I meet people, other travelers. I live with the locals, just like them. The first thing that holds you back is not money; it's fear. The money depends on how you will travel. I travel with very little money, as I use trains, buses, cheap hotels, simple things. Probably I would spent a lot more if I stayed in Greece.

**N.I.:** Do you always carry your camera?

**V.K.:** In recent years, I take photos with my iPhone, and I'm very satisfied with that. The most important thing is not how good your camera is; photographers fall in this trap with cameras, lenses. I was also there, and it is something that never ends, is a game that companies create. The creative photographer just needs a camera that suits him. He cares about the frame, about life, about the place where he is. Young people must be looking everywhere and be open to all forms of arts like cinema, literature, painting, dancing and to try to gain as many things as possible. In photography seminars, they teach you how to capture right, they teach about the camera, but who will teach you about the look of the other, about the contact? How will you make the contact with someone that is so poor that he cannot feed himself? How will you talk with him? Are you going to go and just take a quick photo? What do people really want? How true will you be to yourself through your photographs, through what you do?

**N.I.:** Do you have the feeling in any of your journeys that there is a country where the people are happy?

**V.K.:** It has been 15 years, but I have the feeling that in India, even though there is a lot of poverty, people have a spiritual happiness. I remember that I was complaining about the bad weather and they told me, "Don't worry, you must be happy with all weather conditions. No matter if it is hot or cold, snowy or sunny, everything is fine." That's their philosophy. I met some Hindu monks that live in one square meter without clothes. They didn't have anything material, but they have a great spiritual happiness. In the words of poet Nick Karouzos, when you don't have anything, you can have it all. It is just inside your mind. When is a traveler freer? When he has three suitcases or when he just has a pair of jeans and travels? Five cameras or just one? With one, he can make magnificent photos ... So is the life ...

**N.I.:** Why do you make a collection about street musicians?

**V.K.:** As far as I remember, from the age of 3 or 4, I was listening to music. In high school, I worked in pirate radio stations and afterwards in professional ones to be close to the music. I didn't manage to learn a musical instrument because it requires something that I didn't have — persistence and patience. Photography, on the other hand, doesn't require so much patience, but you need the nerve to push the *click* button fast. It is the feeling, the moment, the *click*, the contact with people and nothing else. So, I published this book because I want to give the musicians a gift in return to the one they give me every day. It is for the musicians all over the world that play live in the streets. I wanted to do the same, to travel around the world, with one guitar.

**N.I.:** What do you want to convey through your photos?

**V.K.:** I want them to transport people. I want the viewer to stand for more than a couple of minutes, to enter the picture and



"Music on the Road," a photography collection by Vassilis Koltoukis (far left), features street musicians from dozens of countries. This photo is from Guatemala.

to travel wherever he wants. This is what I really want.

**N.I.:** What does photography mean to you?

**V.K.:** I was shocked for what Boubat answered in a similar question. One friend in India gave me a hat, some years ago. This friend has died now, but I have still his hat in my house. Most of us have in our wallets a photo of a loved one. Some people say that photography steals your soul. Photography is a sacred thing, and I am not saying this because I am a photographer, but I really believe in its substance.

**N.I.:** What do you gain from your journeys?

**V.K.:** I gain a great satisfaction and a feeling of completeness. From what I have seen, I realized that all people want to live in peace, to love and to be loved. Every religion says this, no matter if people are Buddhists, Hindu, Christian or Muslim. They all opened their homes to me and gave me food.

Here in Greece, we were raised with the motto *God, family, country* — that Greece is the greatest country in the world. That's wrong. All countries are great. People are the same. They have their passions. They want love.

Translated by Nikolaos Vitsikounakis.  
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Ethiopia



Greece



Ukraine

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# Capturing the music of the streets

Greek photographer Vassilis Koltoukis has traveled to 40 countries to document the world's street musicians