

Antoine Giacomoni

The Man and his Mirror

by Kevin Casha



It was fate which enabled me to meet Antoine Giacomoni. I had at one time been photographically involved in Corsica, visiting that magical place twice with a dear friend, colleague and brilliant Corsican photographer, Marcel Fortini. Marcel and I are both similarly passionate about photography and 'clicked' immediately when we had first met each other through the Alliance Française, in Malta.

At that time, we had successfully worked on projects such as the international exhibition between three photographers from different backgrounds and locations, who took photographs in each other's country and then exhibited together in Malta, Corsica and Italy. Fortini works in the same way I tend to work in Malta, in trying to promote Corsican photography as much as he can. He even runs an association called *Centre Méditerranée de la Photographie*, of which, at one time, I was also Vice President!

Our main goals were, and still are, to try to get Mediterranean photographers to network, cooperate and learn from each other. This was quite some time before email, facebook and Skype, so it was always an uphill task!

Today, things have changed so much and when Marcel contacted me to say that a good photographer friend of his was coming to Malta on a project, little did I guess the kind of personality and spirit I was lucky enough to meet and become friends with. I was asked by Marcel to help Antoine with any logistics he might require whilst on our island.

Such is my thirst to meet new people from the art world that I naturally agreed to help.

The rest is history now, and I am sure that Antoine's visit to Malta, as well as his little photography workshop I organised for the MIPP (Malta Institute of Professional Photography), will remain forever in the hearts and minds of those lucky enough to have been present.

Antoine Giacomoni was born in Borgo, Corsica, on 16 April, in 1955. His first years were spent on the small Borgo farm owned by his parents, Ange, a shepherd, and Annunciata. When work at the farm was not sufficient to make ends meet, his father left for Bastia to find better-paid

work. It was a forced exile due to a bitter slump in the island's farming industry. Young Antoine remained on the farm for another six years, 'till the age of seven, with his grandmother, Mama Rosa.

Ange Giacomoni was very liberal and although he used to guide Antoine, he always left the final decisions to his son. When Antoine eventually joined his parents in Bastia, (Corsica's capital), he only spoke Corso (the native language of Corsica) and he recalls that it took him time and pain to learn French – literal pain as in those days the teachers would beat the students if they spoke Corso!

In Corsica, Antoine became friends with a very talented and creative boy called Philippe 'Kilikini' Quilichini. Amongst other talents, he was an incredibly talented base player and actually produced an album called *Drama of Exile*, with him as bassist and the famous Nico as singer. Philippe and Antoine used to also model together as youths, acting a lot of times as twins as they resembled each other even physically.

Alas Philippe died in a car accident in 1983, at the young age of 27, but his encouragement and influence on Antoine lives on to this day. Around that time, Antoine had just won the prestigious 'Prix de Rome' but due to his friend's tragedy, he never took up his art scholarship in Rome. When I asked Antoine who was the person who influenced him most in his life, he had no hesitation in mentioning 'Kilikini'.

It was Philippe who first noticed that, although Antoine was not fond of photographic technique, the latter had a very good eye for seeing pictures. In fact it takes little to recognise that Antoine has a knack for design and calligraphy – another of his passions, together with music, another of his great loves.

Giacomoni's first camera was a Nikkormat and, for him, it was THE dream machine! He remembers sleeping always with his camera and film next to his bedside and trying to shoot at least two or three frames a day.

Eventually, at the age of 21, Antoine went to study at the Sorbonne, in Paris. His subject was *Art and Archaeology*, together with *History of Art*. He recalls that during those days at university, his faculty had a lot of problems with lecturers and so he and his class lost a lot of tuition hours.

This might have actually been a blessing in disguise, as with more time on his hands, Antoine started involving himself ever further in photography. He started supplementing his income with modelling in Paris but it was definitely something he was not very fond of. Antoine soon made the natural step of going on the other side of the camera and began doing portfolios for would-be models as well as some work for magazines and publications. It was a highly competitive arena, but Antoine did well in the fashion world.

At one time, *Elle Paris* magazine saw his portfolio and he was chosen from over 500 others to work for them. In fact the publication's director thought it was the work of someone much more mature than the young Corsican's 21 years.

In 1977 his passion and love for music made him cross the channel to London, the world's capital of music. It was the age of punk and underground and Antoine revelled in its embrace. His artistic and creative photography became very much in demand in London and in 1983, after years of work in the music scene, his prolonged exhibition at the Galerie de Lombards, in France definitely crowned the prodigal Antoine as the 'wonder boy of rock photography'.

<http://mandrakimage.blogspot.com/search/label/ANTOINE%20GIACOMONI.%20Galerie%20des%20Lombards.%20Le%20catalogue.1983>.

Still, fate again played its hand in Antoine's life and at the same time, a job opportunity arose in Jamaica – a land then ruled by Bob Marley's reggae music. Music runs in Antoine's veins, so the decision for him was both obvious and easy, and he accepted *Photo Reporter's* offer to cover, photographically, the capital of reggae music in Jamaica.

His work and subsequent book made Antoine well known. He stayed in Jamaica for three years.

I asked him about the culture of light drugs in Jamaica, particularly in those days, and he believes it was mainly a byproduct of poverty and lack of work. Still 'ganga' consumption was not really decadent and all quite controlled. Funnily enough, according to Antoine, the bible was always near at hand within the Rasta community!

His insatiable thirst for experiencing life first hand, made him eventually travel to places such as Jamaica, Colombia, Morocco, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, New Orleans, Sicily and recently Malta, naturally, between trips to his beloved Corsica.

The purpose of this long pilgrimage was to capture the essence of the human soul, and possibly to unravel some of the hidden thoughts and masks that persons tend to hide throughout their lives. He now travels accompanied by his inseparable Pentax Spotmatic classic 35mm film camera and his faithful mirror. Antoine still works with 35mm mostly monochrome film to this day. He loves the texture and feel of traditional silver-based paper.

Antoine also worked as a freelance for magazines such as *Rock and Folk*, *Rock and Stock* as well as Gamma agency (who were so interested in his archives and stock photos that they syndicated his work). Antoine at one time was also asked to teach in Corsica, but, this, in his own words, "did not suit him."

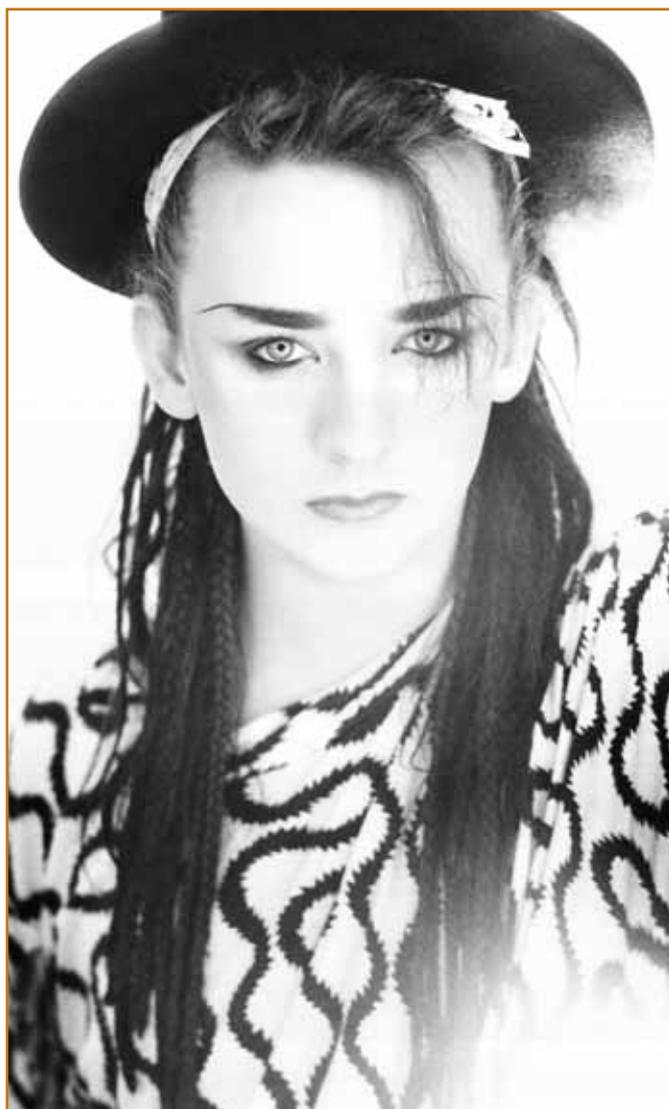
For the last 20 years, Mandrake Images archive his negatives and market his work. Antoine's mirror series images are all cared for here.

<http://mandrakimage.blogspot.com/2010/10/antoine-giacomoni-portraits-travers-le.html>

Denis Stass is Antoine's monochrome printer.

Antoine's recent years have been naturally dominated by his 'Portraits attravers les Mirroirs' or Mirror Images. This intense project started after Giacconi's meeting with German iconic and enigmatic singer, Nico.

<http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608004031/Nico.html>



Boy George – Antoine Giacconi

Due to Antoine's involvement in the music scene, he had already been particularly fascinated by her singular voice and publicity images. One critic memorably stated that "when Nico spoke it was like coffin-lids creaking. When she sang it was like listening to ravens taking off 13 at a time. Nico was like nothing rock music had ever seen or heard before or since!"

Born in Cologne, in 1938, Nico's eerie, haunting voice appeared to have come from out of nowhere. And it might just as well have done, for all that she was willing to reveal of her true past. Nico enjoyed surrounding herself in mystery, taking delight in building her own legend. The first of the supermodels, she had pioneered a career path that took her from the pages of the glossy style magazines into film and then into the recording studio. At the time of her death, she was reputed to be working on her autobiography. She wanted it to be, in her own words: "Half true and half not true, a mixture that cannot be untangled."

<http://smironne.free.fr/NICO/drama.php?page=c>

In fact, a lot of controversy still shrouds her life until this day, perhaps increasing the myth surrounding her.

At that time, when Antoine was introduced to Nico by some friends, she was about 40 and she had become quite withdrawn from public life as well as averse to beauty. She came to Antoine's house with a group of musicians and he was taken aback with the way she looked. Alas, during the 70s, she had fallen into a downward spiral, becoming addicted to heroin.

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Nico—Antoine Giacomoni

So Antoine's image of her was definitely different from previous photographs he had seen, especially in her heyday as a model and film star. He was silently shocked but on talking to her he was immediately attracted to her way of thinking and her mystical personality. Antoine was fascinated by her soul.

As is understandable, he wanted to photograph her but, initially, Nico did not want to see either a photographer or a camera. Nevertheless, they became soul mates and after a period of time, Antoine eventually convinced her to get her portrait taken through her reflection in a purpose-built mirror surrounded by lights. That way she would not be conscious of the camera or the photographer!

This was the birth of Antoine's *Mirror Images*. On seeing the session images, Nico's reaction was appreciative and the resurfacing of her portraits in the music world caused a ripple that lives on to this day. This encouraged Antoine to pursue his quest for this type of 'likeness' that endeavours to capture the raw soul and essence of the person. The concept caused such a stir that even the *British Journal of Photography* has written on the Mirror images. The Mirror portraits are characterised by the unusual multiple catchlights created in the eyes of the subject.

For the chronicle, Nico finished school at 13 and was mainly self taught. Nivea had discovered her as model in post-war Berlin. Nico's life tracks a fascinating but sad story. Still perhaps, for one to get an idea of the aura that surrounded Nico, one recalls the fact that when Federico Fellini cast her in his famous film, *La Dolce Vita*, he kept her original voice as well as her name. This was not usual for Fellini, as he would many times change the actors' voices and names when he contracted them.

Nico also starred in a famous Andy Warhol film called '*Chelsea Girls*', (or should it be infamous, as the film got a very mixed critique?).

Nico unfortunately died of what was termed as sunstroke while riding a bicycle in Ibiza.

Antoine recalls that during that fateful ride, it was extremely hot in Ibiza, and sun stroke could have affected her heart. It took time to get medical assistance and Giacomoni believes that if she had been flown to a better equipped Madrid hospital, she could have been saved. Although it was thought that Nico had recovered from her heroin addiction at that

time, her health was somewhat weak and this could have been another contribution to her sad demise.

She had initially discovered Ibiza in the 50s, when doing fashion modelling during her heyday as a top model for Elle. Antoine recalls Nico as saying that she always had an uncanny premonition that she would die in Ibiza. In fact, at 49, she had written a haunting song titled 'I should be seven when I would be in heaven', which she also performed at her last concert in Berlin at the Planetarium:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLvX8xUo240>

The song's lyrics and mood sound sinister, psychic as well as slightly morbid and makes one think of what was passing through Nico's last days. Nico's son, Ari, is said to be the fruit of a relationship with famous French actor, Alain Delon, although Delon has never acknowledged this. Still, Delon's own mother dotes on Ari.

Antoine was quite close to Nico. A quote attributed to her says:

"I'm a nihilist, so I like destruction. Nihilism seemed to be the most suitable religion since I started to think."

I feel that this quote sums up her tragedy and makes one feel as if she actually willed on this early end to her life. Who knows – maybe to avoid living through her decline? The myth still lives on.

Antoine's eventual first book *Portraits Attravers les Mirroirs* had the famous Serge Gainsborough on the cover. Today, Giacomoni affectionately calls his spartan set-up of easel and mirror as the 'smallest studio possible'. He also likens his mirror studio concept to a beloved musical instrument.

Antoine's health has not been at its best after his fortieth birthday. He was born with congenital cataracts, and had been warned by doctors that he would need to undergo an operation. If this operation was not carried out, he was likely to lose his sight. This first operation was not a success and he has since had three other major operations on his eyes.

He is convinced that he was given the wrong medical advice, especially after his initial operation. He was then wrongly told that he could go about his life as usual, but instead it is known today that he actually needed a period of recovery of at least two years. This caused irreparable damage to his eyesight.

It seems that years ago, when he underwent his first operation, the medical knowledge was still somewhat experimental and unfortunately, to this day Antoine, suffers a lot from this problem. He actually cannot drive and has to pace himself carefully when either working, seeing TV, etc. In fact he told me he tries to work in sessions of around 15 minutes to avoid straining his eyes.

Although Antoine is a minimalist by nature, and shuns computers and modern gadgetry this is also forced because of the state of his eyes.

I ended up what, to me, was a fascinating unravelling journey into a world which I had only previously just glimpsed, by rounding up with a few generic questions that I was burning to ask Antoine:

Do you think the digital medium has benefited photography or not?

"No, to my mind, it is good for only one thing, and that is that one does not need to do scans before going to printing. I think that digital has actually taken away the aura of magic from photography as now anyone can produce an image. Post production is good and saves time as well as improves quality, but I still feel that film is magical and that the film camera is like a little magic box".

I know you have a preference for monochrome and film. Why?

"In the old days, I used only colour negative and slide material. For me that is the proof that a photographer knows his job, but when I was in the United Kingdom, there was a strong monochrome culture, and I was actually influenced by it.

At that time, there was a great demand for monochrome, and publications such as *Melody Maker Weekly*, *New Musical Express* and others were all printed in monochrome.

Also the type of light found in Britain was quite suitable for traditional black and white".

If you were to give a word of advice to photography students, what would that be?

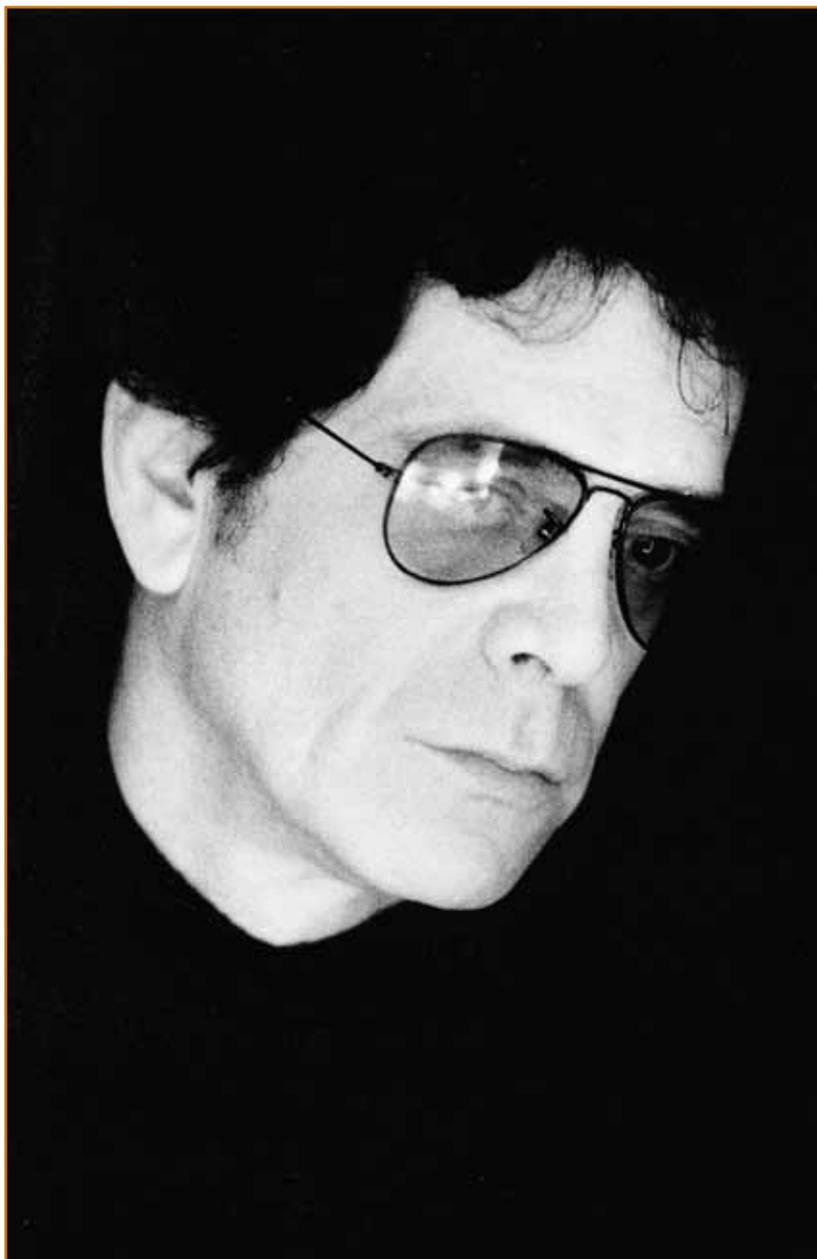
"Be yourself, explore, and should you disobey, do it with respect. One needs to cultivate a deep interest in the medium, as photography is a silent art depicting things in two dimensions."

How would you like to spend your future years? Still doing photography?

"Continue as I am. I believe in chance meetings and thrive on emotions. If anything interests me, I will try to uncover and go deeper and deeper. It is usually personal and I have to really like what I do. I try to maintain the same intensity with every photograph I take."

From your many experiences, what have you learned about life?

"Life is so fragile and short!"



Lou Reed – Antoine Giacconi

Are you scared of death?

"Not any more. My 56 years make me look at things in a different way now. Still, I have a strong will to live and love life. I consider myself a bit of a mystic and have no religion. I live and act by my conscience and respect for others."