

# Cultural Daily

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## Photographing in Israel 1971

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, June 14th, 2017

In the fall of 1971, while living in Rome, I received an offer that I couldn't refuse. An American friend, Stuart Birnbaum, invited me to join him in Israel, where he was working as assistant director on a movie called *Big Truck and Sister Clare*, promising that I could also get work on this production.



Elisa Leonelli. Ferry boat to Corfu, Greece. July 1971

We shared a common ambition to become filmmakers, so this was a good opportunity to gain some practical experience. I had spent the summer traveling on the hippie trail, to Corfu and Athens in Greece, to Istanbul and to Amsterdam, with a backpack, a sleeping bag, and my new camera, a Nikkormat with two lenses, a 105mm and a 35mm Nikkor; so I was ready for another adventure in a foreign land.



Stuart Birnbaum. Israel, November 1971 (c) Elisa Leonelli

We drove in a company car from Tel Aviv through the desert to the set in Eilat, on the Red Sea. I was given a job as stand-in for Francesca Annis, the British actress who played the nun, and I had to stand in the hot sun while the crew adjusted the lighting, wearing one of those large white hats with wings made famous by Sally Fields in the TV show *The Flying Nun*. Peter Ustinov played a truck driver and Perry King was his nephew. When the script supervisor became ill, I was asked to take her place. Therefore, still wearing the big hat, I would sit down on a stool on the beach set to take notes during the shooting of the scene. Too bad I don't have a photo of how I looked in that outfit.



Bedouin woman. Israel 1971 (c) Elisa Leonelli

I did take some Black and White photographs on the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, after we finished our work on the film and enjoyed some sightseeing before boarding an Italian boat back to Naples via Athens. See a few examples here. For the complete series check out [this link](#) in the [Elisa Leonelli Photojournalist](#) Collection on the website of Claremont Colleges Digital Library. There you will also find my B&W photos of Greece, Istanbul, Yugoslavia and Amsterdam that were published in the Italian music magazine *Ciao 2001*.



Jerusalem 1971 (c) Elisa Leonelli



Jerusalem 1971 (c) Elisa Leonelli

I was already on my way to becoming a photo-journalist in 1971, but I was sidetracked when Stuart asked me to join him in New York in December, and I agreed. We embarked together in another adventure, producing the weekly *Chicken Little Comedy Show* at Kemo-TV in San Francisco and the special *Beneath the War of the Worlds* at KCET in Los Angeles. You may [read that story](#) on the website I created in 2014. I continued to take [B&W photographs](#) on the set of our show, handing the camera to whoever was around when I was acting in the comedy sketches, and I did the [color still photography](#) that was used over the end credits of *Beneath the War of the Worlds*; but it was not until the fall of 1974 that I decided that photography, not film making, was going to be my profession.



Tel Aviv 1971 (c) Elisa Leonelli

I was reminded of those early stages of my career a couple of years ago when I was invited to give a talk about my [B&W Street Photography](#) from the 70s at the Los Angeles Public Library. I showed photos I had taken in New Orleans, New York and Italy in 1976, but I had not yet scanned the B&W negatives of my 1971 photographs, which I did this year. You can read about that presentation on [this page](#) of my website. It was only after an article that I wrote to accompany my photo essay on the people of Montepagano was published in the travel magazine *Westways* in 1977 that I started calling myself a photo-journalist.

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