

# Photographer Vera Marmelo on keeping your day job



June 20, 2017 - One of the best known music photographers in Portugal, [Vera Marmelo](#) has organically built a career from simply being a fixture in Lisbon's thriving music scene. "Taking photos was a way of looking at the people that surrounded me and feeling their energy," explains Marmelo. "I wanted to be part of something and the camera helped me do that. It was my entry point into the world." In addition to being a sought-after photographer, Marmelo leads a double life working days as a civil engineer helping to control and regulate the water supply in Lisbon: "If people in Lisbon have good water pressure when they take a shower, they can thank me."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2312 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Beginnings](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Education](#), [Anxiety](#).

**Almost every musician I know who's played Lisbon has been photographed by you. How did you start taking photographs?**

Going to college in Lisbon was the first time I started to meet a lot of new people outside of my high school life here in Barreiro. I was making friends with all of these musicians, but I was also a little shy, so my way of communicating with them—getting in touch with them, having a reason to be around—was to start taking pictures at all the shows. My father had just bought this digital camera, a little point-and-shoot that had less than half of the quality that our phones have nowadays. I was carrying it around when I went out at night.

As a young person, taking pictures was my way of meeting new people. Back then I was more interested in hip-hop and R&B, then I went through a terrible nü-metal phase, which led me to investigate a lot of the noise/experimental stuff that was starting to come through Lisbon—bands like Black Dice, or seeing solo shows by Panda Bear at [ZDB](#), which is the venue where I was spending the most time.



Devendra Banhart

Some of my musician friends were starting to get more attention and, at the time, I was the only one taking pictures of them. So as those Portuguese bands were getting bigger, my photos were suddenly everywhere. For me it was about wanting to hang out and make new friends. I wasn't trying to be anyone's girlfriend or anything, so people often wondered what I was doing there. *Who is this girl?* It was just me trying to be more social. Taking photos was a way of looking at the people that surrounded me and feeling their energy. I wanted to be part of something and the camera helped me do that. It was my entry point into the world. Eventually my social life also turned into my work life.

I was a kid who was always in my own world and I wasn't very confident. I had to use a weapon, a tool, a device, to get close to people. Everything started to get bigger when I finished college. I had my regular job at that point and I'd often be working until really late. I wouldn't even go home after work, I'd go directly to the venue to hang out with the musicians before the show. Then I'd take photographs. When everyone else was going home to crash after the show, I was still waking up early every day to go to my day job. That's what I've been doing, more or less, until now.

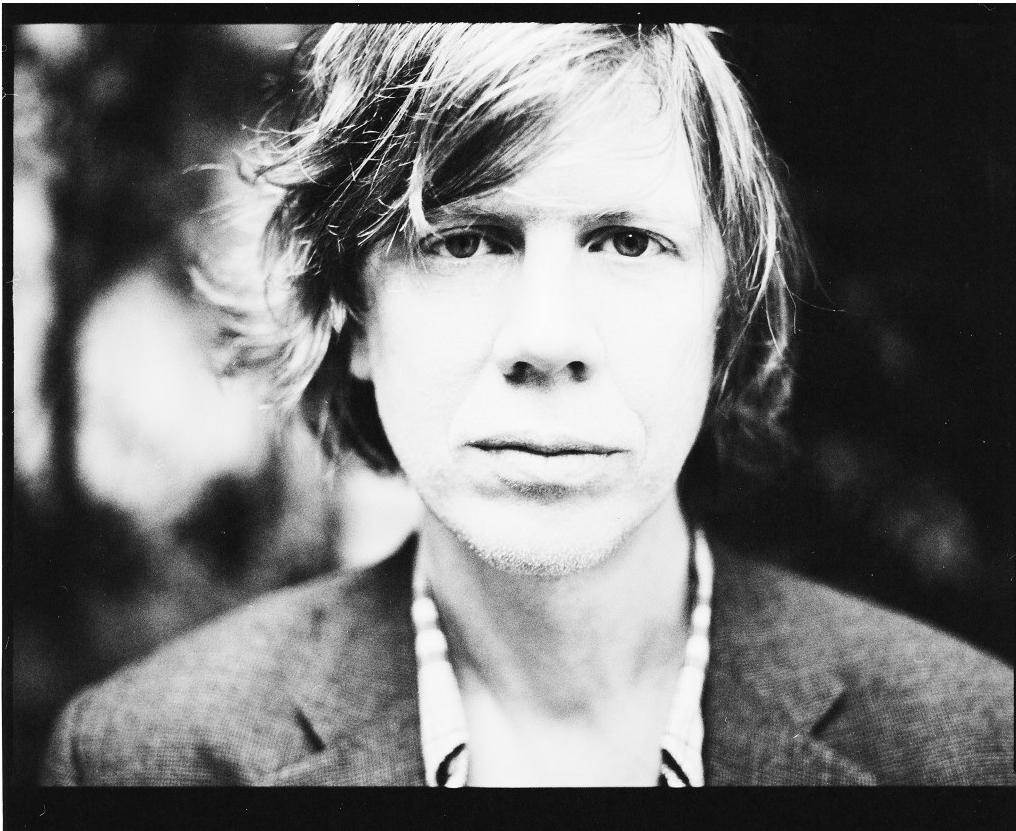
**You have an interesting kind of double life. You're a photographer by night, but during the day you work as an engineer for the city of Lisbon helping to control the water supply.**

Exactly. I don't exactly control the water, the operation guys do that, but I'm a part of that. If people in Lisbon have good water pressure when they take a shower they can thank me. In September I will have been an engineer for 10 years.

**At any point did you consider giving up your day job to just be a photographer full-time?**

It's funny. A lot of kids will come up to me at shows now saying things like, "I started taking pictures because of the way that you do it, you're a big inspiration," and things like

that. And most of those kids are actually going to photography school, which is something that I've never done. So you hear people say these things, which is great, and you sometimes look at yourself and think, "If I'm that good in everyone else's eyes, why the hell aren't I a full-time photographer?" I have to say no to a bunch of stuff, possible assignments, because I'm only available after 5:30pm on weekdays or it has to be something I can shoot on a weekend. I sometimes ask myself, "Why am I not brave enough to change the way I do things and commit to taking pictures all the time?"



Thurston Moore

Even now I say no to more things than I say yes. I say no to things that I just don't believe in because I'm afraid it will ruin the reason that I take photos, or it will ruin the photography that I'm known for. Already this year I've said no to about five weddings. Every photographer I know here in Portugal has to shoot weddings in order to make a living. And, of course, after you do wedding on a Saturday, you probably don't want to go to a show until three in the morning to shoot a band after that, either because you're too exhausted or because you are still busy editing wedding photos. I mean, I never want to be editing wedding photos.

Trying to be a full-time photographer by shooting only the types of things that I like would be impossible. There are months that I do a lot of work, but I get no money at all. I do a lot of small stuff essentially for free, but it's that small stuff that gets me the bigger jobs, like shooting the cover of Thurston Moore's record or having a photo on Angel Olsen's record or getting sent to festivals I want to attend because someone is inviting me to go there. I don't mind doing a lot of stuff for free, but no one seen as a "real" photographer would do that because they can't. I'd have to start charging everyone for the things that I do now just for fun, all in hopes of somehow making a living. A lot of the stuff I do now for free, the kids I take photos of, is just because I believe in them and because I like the energy I get from them... I don't know if I'd feel right making money from that.

Am I not brave enough to call myself a professional photographer? Or am I just trying to stick to the plan that I had when I started studying engineering back in school? Probably both. Most of the time I think it's just me convincing myself that taking photos of musicians is not really that important. Because often you're just feeding their egos, or just showing some kids what these musicians look like when they are hanging out backstage. Meanwhile, as an engineer, I actually know that I can improve people's lives a little bit.

It's a balance that you need to have, or at least that I need to have. I need to feel like I'm doing something useful in this world. I get approached a lot as a kind of influencer now, which is also a very weird thing. Brands will approach you to come to their festival or their event for free, not because they want to pay you for your photos but because they know you'll be taking photos anyway and that people look at your Instagram or whatever. In the end they are still using you to promote their stuff.



Emma Ruth Rundle

Or they'll say to me something like, "We really want your type of photography, just come and do it with us." But then they present me with these really weird conditions to take the pictures. So I say no, and they're like, "Why? Isn't it enough money?" I tell them that it will ruin my small reputation and also hurt my small heart, to work that way. Having a serious day job is good for saying no. Sorry, I have no time. I can't do it. But most of the time I say no to something because I just don't believe in what people are asking me to do. And somehow I want to keep my work feeling separate from the music industry. I don't want to work with big labels. If someone says, "We're paying you for this work, so you need to take pictures like the way that we want you to." I know I won't be able to do that. So it's kind of weird; you're not really able to get money from something that you do, the way that you do it, but everyone in your community is looking at you like this really successful photographer. Or people will say, "Oh yeah! You're the one that has no money from taking pictures, that has to work as a civil engineer."

When it comes to taking pictures, I just want to do whatever I want to do, and simplify it. It feels crazy trying to make money from something that basically saved you from being this really introverted child. I'm not able to do business around that, it's just weird.



As you get older, the security of having a day job—a reliable paycheck, health insurance, etc—becomes a more important thing. The idea of being a starving artist or giving up everything for your art is more romantic when you're in your 20s. There's something to be said for having the security of a job that's in no way attached to your creative life.

It might also be a cultural thing here in Portugal. We are used to seeing our parents working the same job for years and years and years. We are used to this idea of buying yourself a house, and buying yourself a car, and all of that. And even though I'm not really that interested in the possession of things, I'm still interested in that idea of not having to be always thinking about money. I'm surrounded with amazing, creative friends from different areas that are always struggling and worried about money. Often they spend all of their time working bad jobs just to keep themselves going and end up exhausting themselves, unable to do anything else. The struggle to make money can actually interfere with their ability to make art.



Pharmakon

I'm kind of doing the same, but in a much more normal job as an engineer. Whenever I'm doing my creative work, I do it knowing that nobody's expecting anything from me. I take pictures

the way that I want to. I don't have to think, "If I take the photo *this* way, maybe I can sell it or maybe someone will hire me to shoot something else." If those things happen, it's great... but I'm not dependent on that and it's not a thought process that really impacts the photos I take. I don't need to think about it, which is perfect.

**I'm sure young photographers probably ask you, "How do you do your work? How do you take these kind of pictures?" Is it a thing that you can really teach or explain? Most music photographers I know are really good at it because they know how to make people feel comfortable and put them at ease, which is usually the result of having spent years hanging out with musicians.**

It's true. The fact that you hopefully get a sense of intimacy from my photos is because actually I do spend a lot of time with those guys. And some of them are not my friends, but they are so familiar with my presence that they aren't self-conscious with you in the room. Sometimes, it's about really trying to just be invisible. Sometimes the people are my friends, so it's capturing the feeling of just hanging out with them. You get that sense of intimacy sometimes where there is the sense of having your eyes really viewing through the camera and the musician's eyes really looking into your camera when they are playing because they are really just looking at you.

After more than ten years of doing this, eventually you develop all of these social and psychological ways of dealing with people. It's just a people skill. Because you are around musicians all the time, you actually kind of understand how it is to be alone on tour. You understand the way the whole thing works. I've been lucky that I've been able to photograph so many of my friends and also that so many people I took pictures of eventually *became* my friends. In the end I always remind myself that my memories are not the photos. More important than the photos are the relationships that happen because of the photos. Often you throw into this weird situation with a stranger and taking the photos becomes a way of building a bridge between the two of you. Some of my dearest friends are women who I met by taking photographs. So when it comes to advice, it's hard for me to say except that there's more to it than just being able to make a nice picture. So much of it is about your ability—and your willingness—to really try and relate to other people. To me, that's the fun part.





Angel Olsen

**Recommended by Vera Marmelo:**

Listen to [Norberto Lobo](#)'s records on chronological order of release

Catch a summer concert at Galeria Zé dos Bois in Lisbon and enjoy the terrace after

If in Lisbon, walk

[Maria, Cabeça da Cabra](#) and the surroundings

Grilled fish by the ocean, if possible at the restaurant just before arriving to Aivados, Porto Côvo, Portugal

Filtered coffee

Desk Daily Diary by [Aobar](#)



Travel alone by train

Rodrigo Amarante's voice as your alarm clock

Name

Vera Marmelo

Vocation

Photographer, Engineer

Fact

One of the best known music photographers in Portugal, Vera Marmelo has organically built a career from simply being a fixture in Lisbon's thriving music scene. "Taking photos was a way of looking at the people that surrounded me and feeling their energy," explains Marmelo. "I wanted to be part of something and the camera helped me do that. It was my entry point into the world." In addition to being a sought-after photographer, Marmelo leads a double life working days as a civil engineer helping to control and regulate the water supply in Lisbon. "If people in Lisbon have good water pressure when they take a shower, they can thank me."





