



Young Man, 1975

One nation under a groove

Malick Sidibé's photographs capture Mali shaking free of its colonial past - and embracing rock'n'roll and the latest Paris fashions. By Jon Henley



Cousins, 1975



Child, 1966

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Portrait de Mlle Kante Sira, 1965



Nuit de Noël, 1963

It's a Christmas party; quite late, you'd imagine. The picture shows a young black couple. She's barefoot in her best sixties frock, he's in loafers and a snappy white suit. They're jiving together – not quite touching, yet, but with their heads dipped in close, both faces lit up with shy, almost disbelieving smiles. It's an astonishing photograph, full of intimacy and energy, joy and anticipation, taken in 1963 by the Malian photographer, Malick Sidibé, known as The Eye Of Bamako.

Like all Sidibé's work, it captures the pride and exuberance of a generation of young Africans during two decades of momentous – and euphoric – social and cultural change. The arrival of the twist, the cha cha cha

and rock'n'roll in Mali in the late 1950s, and independence from France in 1960, proved a heady cocktail. Bamako's nights got hot. The boys formed clubs to impress the girls: the Sputniks, the Wild Cats, the Black Socks. "We were entering a new era, and people wanted to dance," Sidibé says. "Music freed us. Suddenly, young men could get close to young women, hold them in their hands. Before, it was not allowed. And everyone wanted to be photographed dancing up close. They had to see it!"

When we speak, the telephone line from Bamako is not good and the room is clearly crowded, but there's no mistaking Sidibé's giggle of glee. Even from 2,500 miles away, the man's joie de vivre is palpable. It >>



My New Dress, 1975

Disc Jockey, 1975



Friends, 1975



played an important part in his success, too.

Born in what was then French Sudan in 1935 (or 1936; he's not too sure which), Sidibé was busy herding his family's sheep at the age of five and could not be spared for "the white school" until he was 10. Once there, he drew animals and trees, and won prizes that included a book of Delacroix paintings. Soon he was being commissioned - for France's July 14 Bastille Day celebrations, for example. Girls got him to draw on hankies they would embroider for their boyfriends. In 1952, on the orders of the colonial governor, he went to the prestigious École des Artisans Soudanais, now the Institut National des Arts, in the capital. Four years later, he had his first Brownie camera and was working with Bamako's leading society photographer, Gérard Guillat, aka Gégé la pellicule (Gégé The Film).

"I was behind the till, delivering prints, that kind of thing," Sidibé says. "He didn't teach me how to take photographs, but I watched and I understood. Soon he was doing the big colonial events, the »



Young Man With Bellbottoms, Bag And Watch, 1977

balls and official dinners, and I was doing the Africans. I did weddings and christenings and then, because I was young and I had a small camera - not a heavy plate one - I got invited to the dances."

On weekends Sidibé would cycle round to three, four, five parties a night, heading back to the studio to develop and enlarge perhaps as many as 400 photos, working until 6am. He was popular and constantly in demand, and eventually people started asking if he did portraits. In 1962 he left Gégé and opened Studio Malick.

"The studio was like no other," he says. "It was... relaxed. I did formal family shots, too, but often it was like a party. People would drop by, stay, eat. I slept in the developing room.

They'd pose on their Vespas, show off their new hats and trousers and jewels and sunglasses. Looking beautiful was everything. Everyone had to have the latest Paris style. We had never really worn socks, and suddenly people were so proud of theirs, straight from Saint Germain des Près!" It was, Sidibé says, "a fantastic period. Unique."

These days Sidibé presides over a collection of tens of thousands of negatives, taken 30, 40, even 50 years ago; images that immortalise the grace, pride and exuberance of a generation of newly independent Africans. He still takes pictures, if he feels like it; last year he did a fashion shoot in his studio for the New York Times. There's less demand for portraits, of course; families have »



Posing In The Studio, 1975

View From Behind, 2001



Flowers And A Motorcycle, 1975



their own cameras. And he's never been tempted by colour (it fades in the heat) or digital.

"I stick with black and white, and film," he says. "It's what I know. And I can do my own developing and printing. A good photographer should always do that."

To be a good photographer, Sidibé says, you need to have "a talent to observe, and to know what you want. You have to choose the shapes and the movements that please you, that look beautiful." Equally, you need "to be friendly, *sympathique*. It's very important to be able to put people at their ease. It's a world, someone's face. When I capture it, I see the future of the world. I believe with my heart and soul in the power of the image, but you also have to be sociable. I'm lucky. It's in my nature." ●

A selection of Malick Sidibé's previously unseen work opens at the Lichfield Studios, London W10, from 11 March-16 April; info@tristanhoare.com for further details.