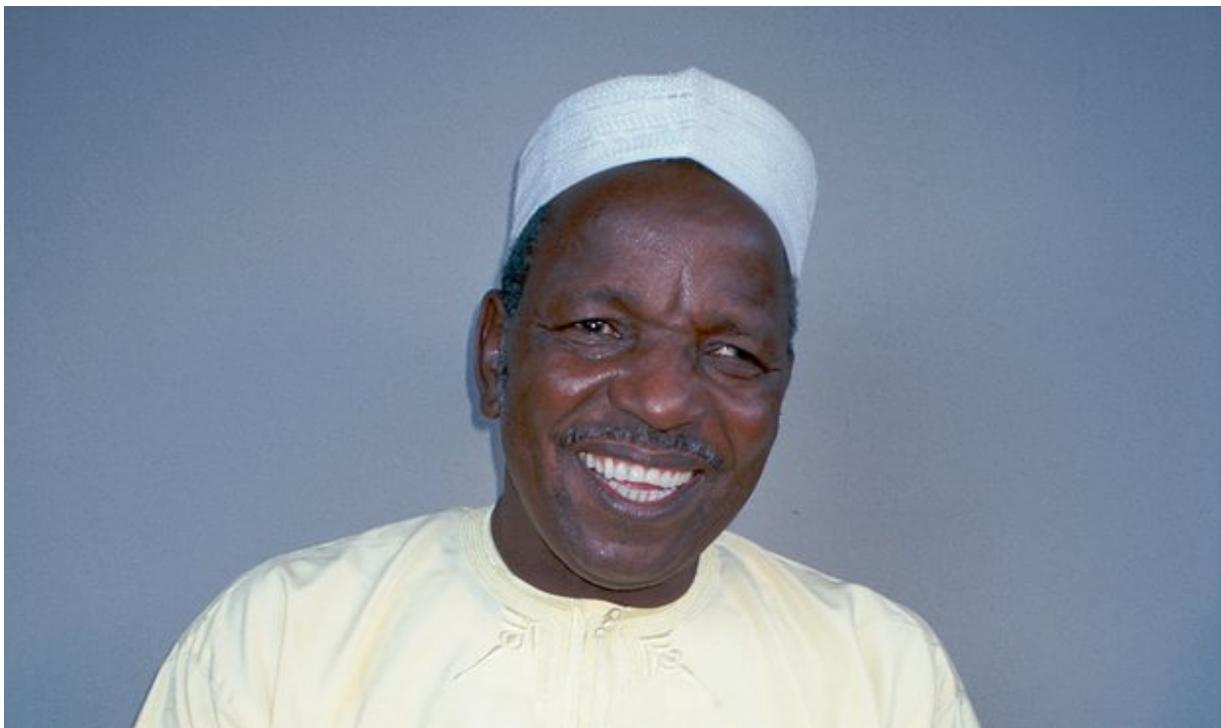


An appreciation: Malick Sidibé, 1936-2016

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The Malian photographer Malick Sidibé, who died last week, framed the essence of his country in the decades following independence



Malick Sidibé, the 'Eye of Bamako'. Photograph: © André Magnin Courtesy MAGNIN-A Paris

“When young people dance they’re spellbound by the music,” Malick Sidibé once said. “In that atmosphere, people didn’t pay any attention to me any more.” As if to attest to that, one of his most iconic images, *Nuit de Noël, Happy Club, 1963*, shows a smartly dressed young couple dancing head to head beneath the night sky. It is a study of intimacy and movement that seems so formal as to be staged and that brims with telling details, from the beer bottles on the concrete floor to the feet stepping in time.



Nuit de Noël. (Happy-club) 1963

Malick Sidibé 1963

2008

Sidibé's Nuit de Noël (Happy-Club) 1963. Photograph: Franko Khoury/National Museum of African Art

Sidibé, who trained as a jewellery maker, began taking photographs in 1955 and bought a box Brownie the following year. By 1958, he had become a professional with his own business based at Studio Malick in Bamako, Mali. Initially, unlike many traditional African studio photographers, he travelled around the city, usually at night on his bicycle, shooting the nascent youth culture in the early years of the country's independence from France. For all its vibrant intimacy, *Nuit de Noël, Happy Club, 1963* was one of several images shot during the hours when a state curfew was in force.

In the 1970s, Sidibé embraced studio photography, making formal, staged portraits that possessed an energy not usually seen in portraiture. He captured young locals in thrall to the soul singer James Brown and dressed in wide flares and flamboyant shirts, sometimes even clutching one of their idol's records. Others came to his studio to show off their new motorbikes or graduation outfits or their newborn children. Some were lucky enough to receive a print in an elaborate frame hand-painted by his neighbour, Checkna Touré. The huge cache of negatives that Sidibé kept filed away in storage for decades are an invaluable record of youth culture, family life and traditions in Bamako from the mid-1950s to the 80s.

It wasn't until the 90s, when, coincidentally, Malian musicians like Ali Farka Touré and Salif Keita became globally famous, that the work of Sidibé and of fellow Malian Seydou Keita was "discovered" by western dealers and a second career as an art photographer began. Suddenly, the negatives that had once been made into small prints for his clients were blown up and exhibited in high contrast tones in galleries and exhibitions around the globe. The joy and intimacy of his work is evident whatever the context, as well as his acute eye for composition and detail. Sometimes known as the Eye of Bamako, Sidibé made work that was not just a record of life there but a prism through which the rest of the world has viewed the country.



Toute la famille en moto, 1962. Photograph: © Malick Sidibé Courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris.

A national hero at home and an internationally acclaimed master of the medium, Sidibé remained unfazed by his late celebrity and continued working in his studio in the suburbs of Bamako until recently. "I remember the names of almost all the people who appear in my photographs," he once said. "If I can't remember their name, I remember their father, what they're doing now, if they have children..." They are all, in a very real way, Malick Sidibé's people.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/apr/16/malick-sidibe-1936-2016-an-appreciation-eye-of-bamako-obituary-nuit-noel-happy-club-1963>