

Malick Sidibé

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By Chris Waywell



Malick Sidibé, Les Retrouvailles au bord du fleuve Niger, 1974 (c) Malick Sidibé. Courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris

Mali got its independence from France in 1960, and immediately became in thrall to a different kind of colonialism: a cultural one of rock 'n' roll, motorbikes and jeans. At a time when the West was fretting about whether photography was even an art form, Malick Sidibé was taking pictures of young people in Bamako which contain all the issues in that debate: authenticity, imitation, control of the image. Not because he was a theorist, but because all of those issues were also central to the newly emerging country. We see teenagers doing the twist, showing off their record collections, rocking drainpipes, then flares, then pimp suits. Friends relax by a river: everyone is young and carefree. But there are questions in these images too. The chronology is sometimes faulty: in a photo dated 1964, a girl holds a James Brown album released in 1968; an androgynous teenager poses in giant bellbottoms and oversized sunnies: it's dated 1963, but must be a decade later. It's like Sidibé's memory played him false, or maybe that these people simply exist in their own parallel universe where there's always a party and pretty boys and girls to dance with. With a brilliant soundtrack curated by Rita Ray, this show envelopes the watcher and makes you wonder what hardships lie outside the frame, what kind of future these kids found in the '80s, the '90s, the 2000s. They must be old, or dead. For now, though, and for ever, they are all intensely, radiantly alive.

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