

Malick Sidibe: ‘For me, photography is about capturing a world full of joy’

By Mark Hudson, Art Critic

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Detail from Sidibe's *Nuit de Noel (Happy-club)*, 1963 Credit: Malick Sidibe

In an era when foreign images of Africa made it the object of global pity, the Malian photographer Malick Sidibé helped his countrymen tell a different story, says Mark Hudson

For me photography is all about youth,” Malick Sidibé told me with a smile, when I visited him at his studio in Bamako, Mali, in 2003. “It’s about [capturing] a happy world full of joy, not some kid crying on a street corner or a sick person.” If that sounds callous coming from a photographer who lived and worked – until his death in April last year – in a city with endemic poverty and minimal healthcare, it provides a refreshing counterbalance to the notion of Africa as a repository for the rest of the world’s pity. “Malick had a real love and admiration for people,” says the French fashion designer Agnès B, a long-standing collector of Sidibé’s work. “He was looking for elegance and beauty – but always through people.”

Sidibé’s photographs started appearing in the West in the early Nineties: discovered by the French photographer Françoise Huguier, then picked up by the influential curator and impresario André Magnin, who has produced a string of books and exhibitions on Sidibé, including *Mali Twist*, the current blockbuster exhibition at Fondation Cartier in Paris. The images had a retro-kitsch appeal: Seventies African teenagers in preposterous flares; twin girls in identically patterned frocks; chilled-out dudes posing with their new motorcycle. But it would have been impossible, then, to predict that in 2007 Sidibé would become the first

photographer (let alone the first African) to win the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale, or that his death would make national news in Britain.



Pique-nique à la chaussée, 1972 Credit: Malick Sidibé

Indeed, where 20 years ago the notion of an “African photographer” barely existed in the international consciousness, some of Sidibé’s images are now considered among the most romantic and evocative ever taken; icons of his continent’s cultural emancipation. His *Nuit de Noël* – hailed by *Time* magazine as among the 50 most influential images of all time – is a prime example. “People love that photograph,” says Agnès B, who has reproduced the image of a young couple dancing, their foreheads touching, on a range of T-shirts. “It has a graciousness and an elegance. You can look at those two young people forever.”

Sidibé’s studio stood, for more than five decades, in a poor area of the Malian capital where sheep and goats roamed among the tin-roofed buildings. A charming, modest, amiable man, Sidibé took to sitting in a wooden armchair placed outside his door, and would strike up conversation with whoever happened to pass by.

Inside the cramped studio were shelves crowded with dust-encrusted Rolleiflex cameras and neatly labelled negative boxes, some dating back to the Fifties. Prints that might now be worth thousands on the western art market were roughly pinned to the outside wall, exposed to the elements. Having lived in West Africa myself, I had, until I met Sidibé, regarded the vogue for his images with a degree of scepticism: weren’t his Western admirers merely laughing – perhaps without realising it – at the quaintness of the society he portrayed?

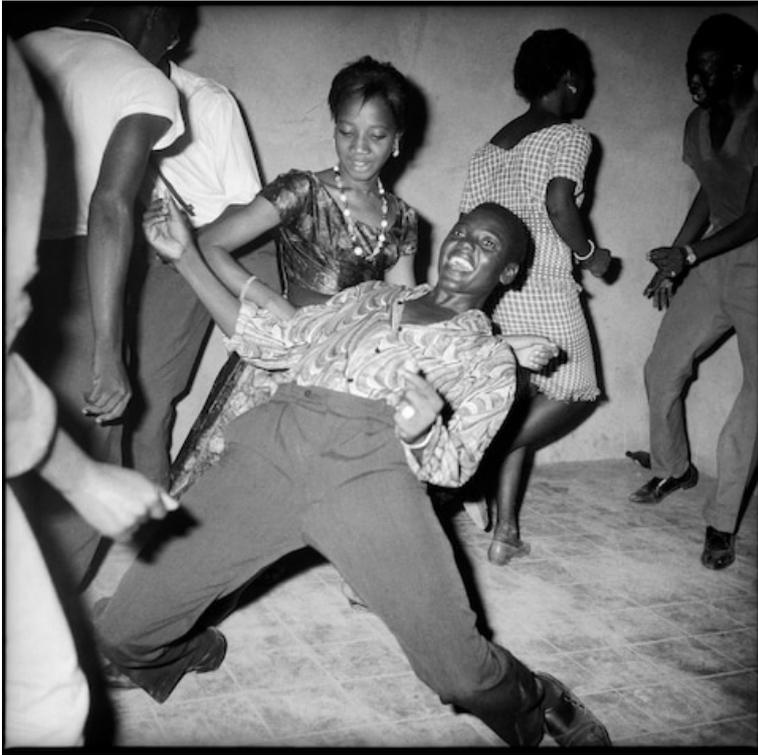


Un gentleman en position, 1980 Credit: Malick Sidibe

Yet as we sat outside his studio, the kind of people seen in his photographs were continually passing: the girl with the straightened, crimson-dyed hair; the small mustachioed man with the tweed jacket and side-parting. Having come to Bamako from all parts of this vast, landlocked country, they wanted to show that they'd established themselves and achieved the fruits of modernity. To do so, they had themselves shot by Sidibé, their neighbour, sporting the fashions or holding the objects that told that story.

Sidibé's greatest gift was arguably as an observer of urbanisation – a process that saw the population of cities such as Bamako expand more than tenfold after the Second World War – perhaps because he was himself a product of that same experience. Born in 1936, in Soloba, a remote village in southern Mali (then the French Sudan) and a talented artist from early childhood, he moved to Bamako to study at the Institut National des Arts. "I couldn't believe the city," he recalled to me. "Everywhere I looked there was so much going on and it was so noisy. I asked myself, how will I survive?"

Having begun his studies as a painter and jeweller he was asked to decorate the studio of a French photographer known locally as Gégé la Pellicule (from the French word for a roll of film). Sidibé became the Frenchman's apprentice, taking over when Gégé returned to France in 1960.



Regardez-moi!, 1962 Credit: Malick Sidibe

That year, Mali's independence from [France](#) heralded the golden age of African studio photography and Sidibé wasn't the only photographer providing portraits for the newly confident continent. Every major African city had a few such snappers; indeed, in Bamako itself there was another photographer, the slightly older Seydou Keita, whose gift for the classic studio portrait rivalled Sidibé's.

What made the younger photographer unique, though, was his personal mission to record youth culture. Every weekend, he'd head off on his bicycle and photograph youth groups with quirky names such as the Black Socks, the Sputniks and les Djentlemans who vied with each other to wear the coolest outfits and listen to the hippest music.

"After independence in 1960, there was a carefree spirit among the youth," Sidibé maintained. "People turned towards Western music and that allowed boys and girls to get much closer than they had been in our traditional way of life. Young people organised their own "dance parties" with records. I would go to up to four in a single night, because I felt I had to capture these images."



Sidibe in 2006 Credit: Andre Durand

If Sidibé was modest about his technical abilities – “It’s just about getting the right distance and a flash and that’s it!” – his images of these young bloods twisting and jiving with their mini-skirted girlfriends or cavorting on the banks of the Niger capture the rush of post-independence optimism, and serve as ocular proof that the Sixties spirit extended well beyond the West.

“I loved the music and the atmosphere, but above all I loved the dancers,” Sidibé told me. “The moments when young people dance and play as though the stars belong to them — that’s what I loved the most.”

Malick Sidibe: Mali Twist is at Fondation Cartier, Paris until Feb 25 2018

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/photography/what-to-see/malick-sidibe-photography-capturing-world-full-joy/>