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Party Photos of Teens Being Teens in 1960s Mali

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By Hattie Crisell

In 1960, the country of Mali became independent after over 60 years of French rule, and for young Malians, everything changed. “For the first time, Malians could listen to Western music, and they wanted to be dressed just like the stars they saw in the magazines,” says Philippe Boutté, co-curator of the new exhibit Malick Sidibé: The Eye of Modern Mali, on view at London’s Somerset House. From 1962 and on, the late photographer Malick Sidibé captured the aftermath (and the changing fashions) in the capital city of Bamako.

Sidibé owned a popular portrait studio where personal style was highly prized. His customers posed, often solemn and regal, in cowboy hats, loud check suits, or boxing gloves. In the evenings, Sidibé would head to clubs with a DJ friend and shoot the local party scene: girls in prom-style dresses, boys wearing a wide variety of flares, tight shirts, tunic-style suits, and trilby hats. “This is an ambience that you only saw in the parties, during the night, in fact,” Boutté says of the starkly different day-to-night styles. “This is the first time that the boys and girls could touch each other and could dance together.”

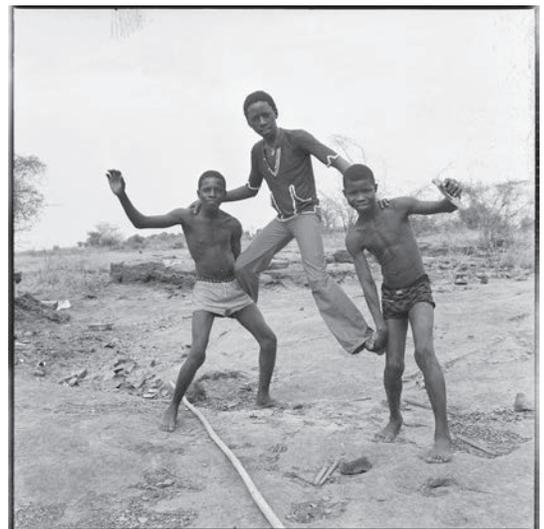
The following mornings, tired partygoers would show up at Sidibé’s studio and buy photos. Sometimes he went with them down to a river to continue the fun and photographs — groups pose in swimsuits or topless, arms slung around each other. “There are no adults in the photographs,” Boutté points out. Most of Sidibé’s subjects look like teenagers, and some of the images have an undercurrent of flirtation or eroticism. “They came out to the Niger River so they were alone — they could do what they wanted.”

Sidibé died last April, leaving an enormous collection of almost half a million negatives. He spent most of his career in Bamako but earned worldwide acclaim toward the end of his life; in 2007, he became both the first photographer and the first African artist to receive a Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale. “It was a crazy, crazy decade of freedom, of joy, of opening up to the world and to liberty,” Boutté says Sidibé’s time. “Malick made an archive of a history of Mali that we don’t know in Western countries.”

Click ahead to see moments he captured.
“Malick Sidibé: The Eye of Modern Mali” runs until January 15 2017, at Somerset House, London.



Amis des espagnols, 1968



Au bord du fleuve Niger, 1976