

## Modern Music in Mali

MAMOUTOU KEITA

Mali is known throughout the world for the dynamism of its culture and the wealth of its musical patrimony. Stars of international renown such as Salif Keita, Ali Farka Touré (right), Oumou Sangaré (below), Habib Koita, and others have made Mali a flourishing seedbed for music. Over two thousand Malian musicians have recorded at least one album, thus providing radio stations and the national television station with abundant material for locally produced programs. The Malian government itself sponsors several modern bands as well.

Modern music is played with Western instruments such as the guitar, the piano, and the accordion, which made their way to Mali during the colonial era. In the colonial African army, soldiers formed musical groups called "Gobbies." After their demobilization, the conscripts—inspired by the music—returned home with old guitars and accordions and formed their own bands. All the cities in Mali with military barracks had one or two bands.

The repertoire of these first bands consisted of Western classics such as waltzes, marches, and rock, played on brass, wind, and percussion instruments. The wild popularity of rock obliged African musicians to adopt the electric guitar, which in turn enhanced the bands' technical possibilities. A few years after Mali's independence in 1960, the new cultural orientation of the government dictated that bands

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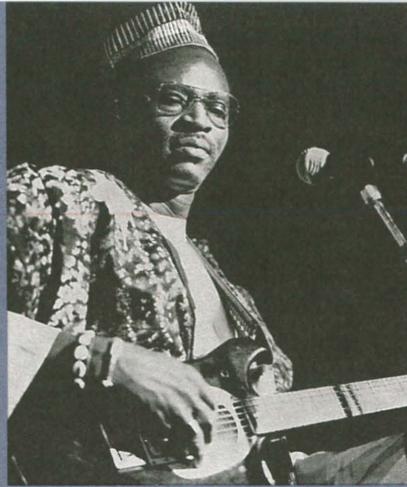


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adapt the country's musical heritage to modern instruments.

It was the boom era for modern bands in Mali. In addition to the national ensemble, almost every neighborhood and school had its own small band. Among them were Pionnier Jazz, Askia Jazz, L.T. Band, and the Orchestre du Lycée des Jeunes Filles. Every major city also had a musical ensemble. The best musicians of a particular region formed a regional group. The decade of 1970 to 1980 marked the heyday of the "band era," with such giants as the Ambassadeurs du Motel, the Rail Band, the Las Marvelas del Mali (now Badema National), the Biton of Segou, the Kanaga of Mopti, the Kéné-Star of Sikasso, and the Mystère Jazz of Timbuktu.

With the advent of democracy, regional and local groups, which were all sponsored by the government, slowly disappeared

and were replaced by numerous independent bands. This new freedom allowed many young talents to blossom, and made possible the exportation and profitability of Malian music. Today, music is Mali's third most important export commodity after gold and cotton. Albums by stars such as Toumani Diabaté, Oumou Sangaré, Salif Keita, Ali Farka Touré, Kar... Kar, Rokia Traoré, Abdoulaye Diabaté, and Neba Solo are sold all around the world, making Mali a major center of the international entertainment industry.

Malian music has thus moved beyond the traditional to embrace the global. Reggae, rap, and hip-hop have become the genres that have attracted youth, because through these they can express their concerns about such social problems as unemployment, pollution, and corruption. Mali also now has a music video industry, with "Top Etoile," a nationally televised music show, as its outlet.

Today, music is no longer the preserve of *griots*; the profession is now open to all those who have the talent and perseverance, making Malian music a synthesis of melodies, rhythms, and tempos—the very stuff of a multiethnic culture. ■



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