

THE ORIGINAL
SOUND OF MALI

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MR BONGO • LP • 135

Malian music is arguably deeper, more sophisticated and lyrical than any other form of African music. And this is largely down to the Griots, ancient storytellers and historians who represent a vital link between the old Mande Empire and the days of French Sudan before Mali became an independent state in 1960.

On 19 November 1968, President Modibo Keita was deposed after a coup led by Moussa Traoré. The young captain wanted to usher in a more modern society and he used culture to do it. At the helm of a new government, he replaced La Semaine Nationale de la Jeunesse (National Youth Week) with the famous Biennale Artistique et Culturelle de la Jeunesse in 1970. Every two years, musicians, orchestras and dancers from all over Mali gathered in the capital city of Bamako. Through these artists and the Griots, the people suddenly had a new voice.

Thanks to the ORTM (*Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision du Mali*) in Bamako, these artistic statements resonated beyond the festival. Most of the Malian productions from the 1970s were recorded there before being broadcast across the state, from the countryside to sprawling regional cities. That decade represented a truly halcyon period where political and economic disenchantment had yet to hinder musical creativity. Like their colleagues in Western Africa – particularly the Guinean orchestras – Malian bands plugged in their guitars and organs, recruited fantastic lead singers and sharpened their horn sections. In the process, they developed a whole new Bamana and Mandingo repertoire with Fula and Songhaï influences.

By the late 1970s competition was still fierce in Mali with incredible records by the likes of Rail Band du Buffet Hôtel de la Gare de Bamako, Super Biton de Ségou, Kanaga de Mopti, Sidi Yassa de Kayes, Le Kéné-Star de Sikasso or Super Djata de Bamako. Some of these orchestras were privileged enough to record a whole album under the aegis of Boubacar Traoré, sound engineer at Radio Mali and unsung producer of so many great Malian recordings that decade. His sessions managed to fuse tradition, progression, raw expression and sheer enthusiasm.

Despite this run of success, the general atmosphere in Bamako began to wane as Moussa Traoré's policies began to squeeze the people. The political and social situation in Mali became increasingly tense. Several teacher and student strikes occurred in 1976 and 1977. Moussa Traoré's answer was to tighten his grip.

Hailing from a famous Mopti family, bandleader and songwriter **Sory Bamba** started to play the trumpet in the 1950s. He was soon emulating the highlife sound he had heard from Ghanaian fishermen travelling north along the Niger River. After formal musical training in the Ivory Coast in the 1960s, he

played and recorded with Manfila Kanté (of Les Ambassadeurs fame). Back in his native Mali, he spent months studying the Dogon people's rich culture. With the support of Mopti's governor, he transformed the regional orchestra into L'Orchestra Kanaga de Mopti, named after a famous Dogon's mask.

Fascinated by tradition yet keen to move forward, Sory Bamba was one of the first Malian musicians to showcase the Korg electric organ in his music. Kanaga is even considered Mali's answer to Pink Floyd thanks to Mamadou "Zorro" Soumaoro's amazing keyboard wizardry. By the mid-1970s, the orchestra was comfortably one of the best in Mali, second only to Super Biton in the Biennale competition.

By 1974, Sory Bamba recorded his first solo album, featuring the song *Ya Yoroba (Women with Large Bosom)*. It achieved wide acclaim across Mali, a tongue-in-cheek hit and a nice nod to his forthcoming Afro-futuristic experiments. Tentemba Jazz would cover the song a few years later, a bona fide Malian classic.

Idrissa Soumaoro is the songwriter behind *Ancien Combattant*, a Pan-African anthem from Guinea to the Congo. He studied composition and piano, first at the Institut National des Arts in Bamako in the late 1960s and then in the UK as a guitar and keyboard player. He became a Braille music teacher at the IJA (Institut des Jeunes Aveugles de Bamako) in the mid-1970s. He was also a member of Les Ambassadeurs du Motel along with Kanté Manfila and Salif Keita.

At the time, Soumaoro's influences ranged from Bollywood music to Wasulu hunters' music, salsa, funk and rock music. He went on to start a new band at the IJA called L'Eclipse, whose members included young blind guitar player Amadou Bagayoko and his wife Mariam Doumbia. (Bagayoko and Doumbia would later team up as the famous Amadou & Mariam, of course. A perfect name.) L'Eclipse de L'IJA mixed together the day and the night, the moon and the sun, man and woman...

'Ampsa', Soumaoro's only LP, was released in late 1978 thanks to sponsorship from the German Democratic Republic. Today, it stands as a loving tribute to an unsung golden age of Mali music, the culmination of a decade of electric experimentation and exploration. Soumaoro's keyboard drives the whole record while Mariam Doumbia shines with her stirring and youthful lead vocal. A true masterpiece, 'Ampsa' is full of nuggets such as *Nissodia (A Joy of Optimism)* and *Fama Allah*, an amazing ode to god sung by Mariam Doumbia – IJA's sweetest voice according to Soumaoro. The album's hypnotic organ riffs and breakbeats heralded a new funk in Mali. Unfortunately this important release quickly disappeared without trace due to a lack of promotion and poor distribution.

Super Djata Band de Bamako was of the great African ensembles, up there with legendary guitar bands such as OK Jazz, Bembeya Jazz, Orchestra Baobab and Rail Band. They possessed a fiercely unique and electrifying sound, led by the great guitar and percussions master Zani Diabaté.

Diabaté, a descendant of Mali's most famous Griot family, was born in 1947 in the Sikasso region. As a child he was taught how to play the kora and balafon, later also learning to dance. At 16 he joined Ballet National du Mali, an official dance ensemble in the mould of Ensemble Instrumental National du Mali. Ballet National du Mali was formed to promote Modibo Keita's cultural policy of "authenticity" in the 1960s. While there, Diabaté befriended fellow musicians and dancers Alou Fané and Daouda 'Flani' Sangaré, who came from the same region and shared the same cultural references.

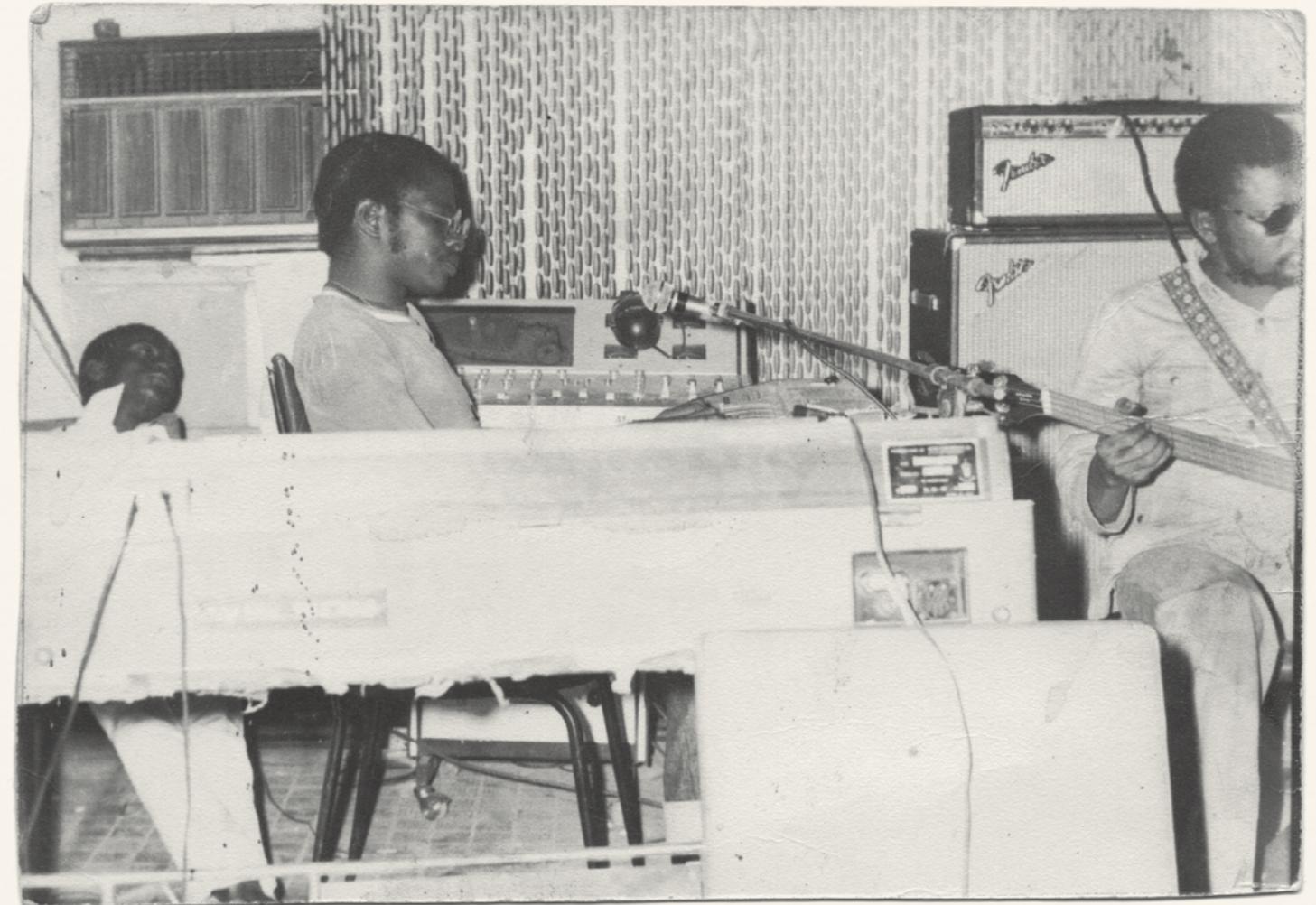
The trio joined forces as the Ganoua Band with Diabate playing guitar and Fané and Sangaré singing and playing the kamele ngonni (which literally means "young man's harp", an instrument popular with Wasulu hunters). Maré Sanogo played the djembé and other percussions. This small local outfit expanded with the arrival of three other Ballet National musicians. Together they became Super Djata Band, one Mali's first private orchestras.

Thanks to their leader's experience, the band quickly rose to fame within the Bamako region. Despite a lack of official support, Super Djata Band started to record its compositions with engineer Boubacar Traoré at Radio Mali's tiny recording studio. By the end of the 1970s, the band's repertoire was already wide and diverse, an appealing blend of folk and modern instrumentation. Super Djata Band's musical genius lay in its ability to absorb myriad influences to create something new.

As early as 1968, **Fané and Sangaré** started to record the first modern kamale ngonni songs as a duo. These were later released on three LPs in the Ivory Coast. *Komagni Bela* was composed and sung by Fané with Sangaré on backing vocals and kamele ngonni. Utterly hypnotic and mesmerising, this number is deeply rooted in the southern Wasulu region's rich cultural traditions.

Combining this hunters' music with bozo fishermen dances, Mandingo chants, Fula repertoire and a touch of psychedelic guitar, Diabaté's Super Djata Band eventually came to the forefront of the emerging "world music" scene. Perfect timing as this was during the 1980s when other legendary groups such as Les Ambassadeurs and Rail Band were on the wane.

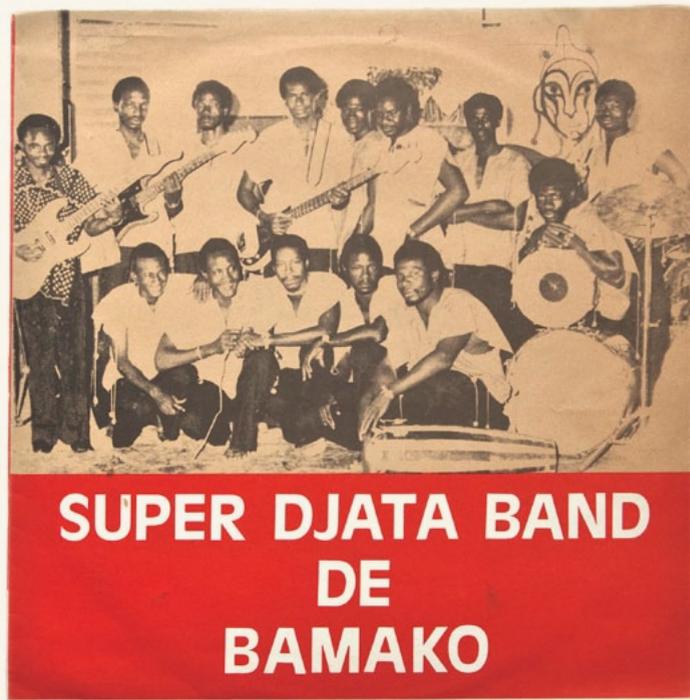
"Good evening Mali!" sings Flani Sangaré on the infectious *Mali Ni Woula*, the opening track on the yellow Super Djata Band LP 'Feu Vert 81-82 Vol 2'. It is a cover of a song by Nawaha Doumbia, who hails from the Wasulu town of Bougouni. Sangaré sings it loud and clear while Diabaté's intrepid guitar surrounds her with circular rhythms. Super Djata Band were obviously in very good



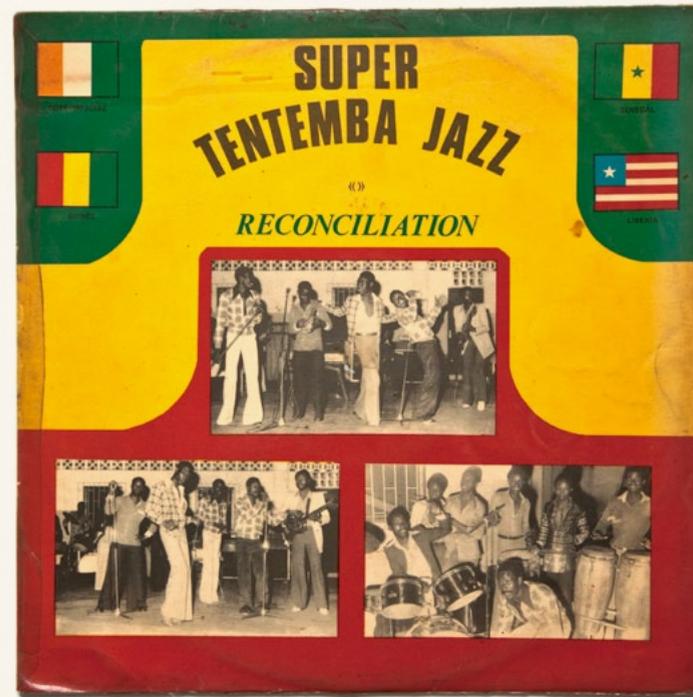
Idrissa Soumaoro.



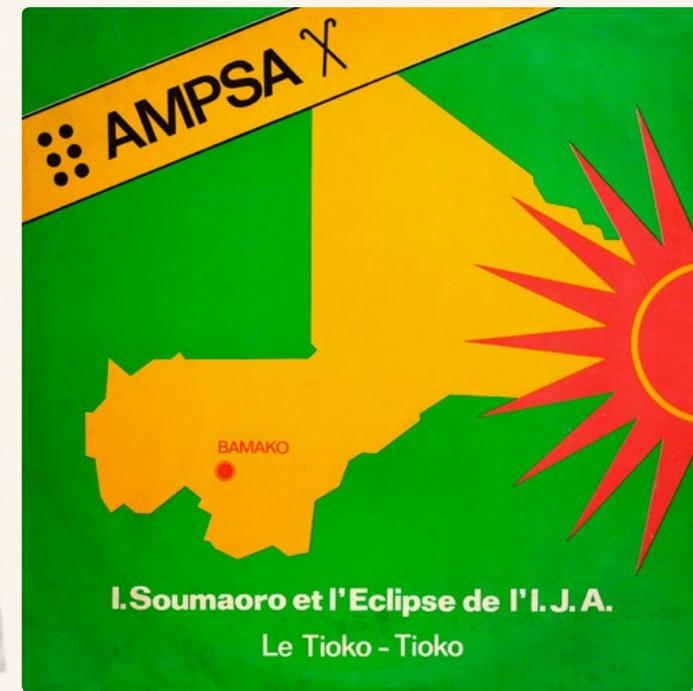
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Disco Rama, 1982.



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Disco Rama.



Super Tentemba Jazz — Reconciliation.
Editions Shakara Music.



Idrissa Soumaoro et L'Eclipse de L'I.J.A. — Le Tioko-Tioko.
ETERNA, 1978.



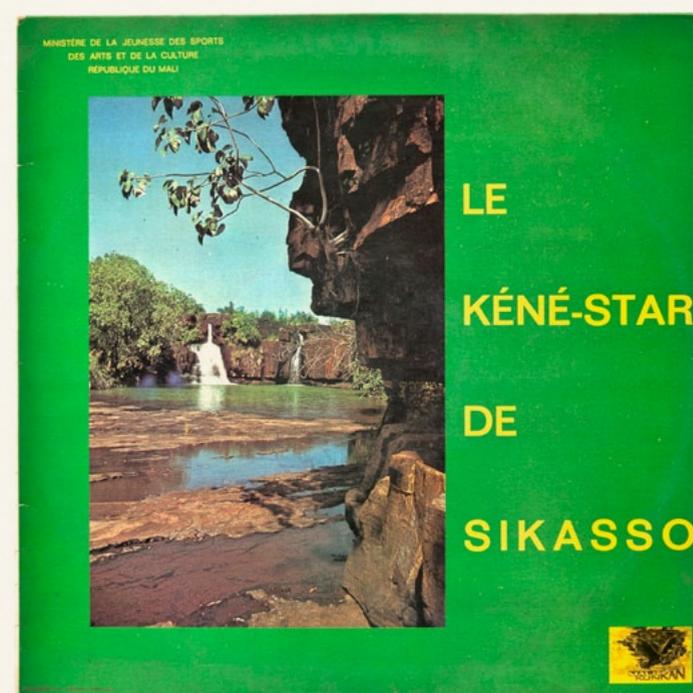
Le Super Djata Band Du Mali — En Super Forme. Vol. 1.
Musique Mondiale, 1982.



Super Djata Band Du Mali — En Super Forme. Vol. 2.
Musique Mondiale, 1983.



Zani Diabate et Le Super Djata Band Du Mali — Volume 3.
Éditions Omogidi Music.



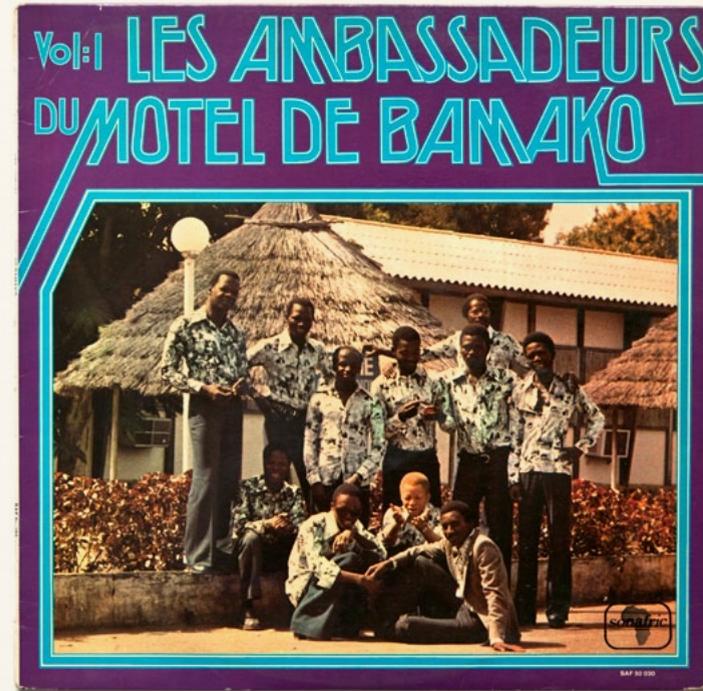
Le Kéné-Star De Sikasso — Hodi Hu Yenyan.
Mali Kunkan, 1977.



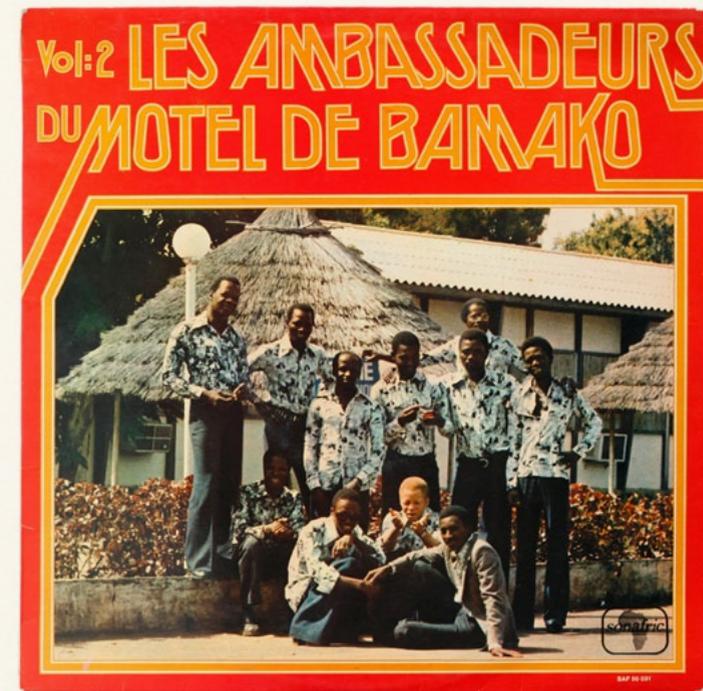
L'Orchestre Kanaga De Mopti — L'Orchestre Kanaga De Mopti. Mali Kunan, 1977.



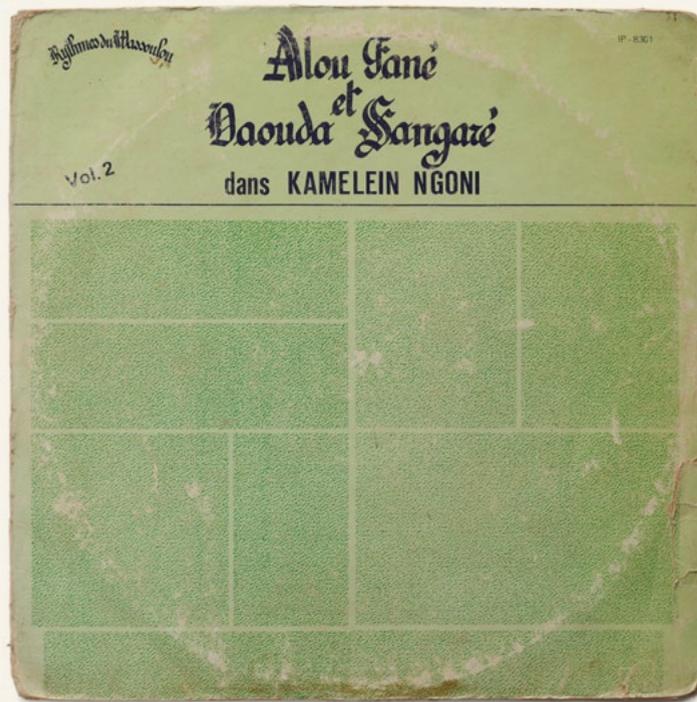
Alou Fané et Daouda Sangaré — Kamalen N'Gonin. Disco Club de la Bagoué, 1982.



Les Ambassadeurs Du Motel De Bamako — Vol. 1. Sonafric, 1977.



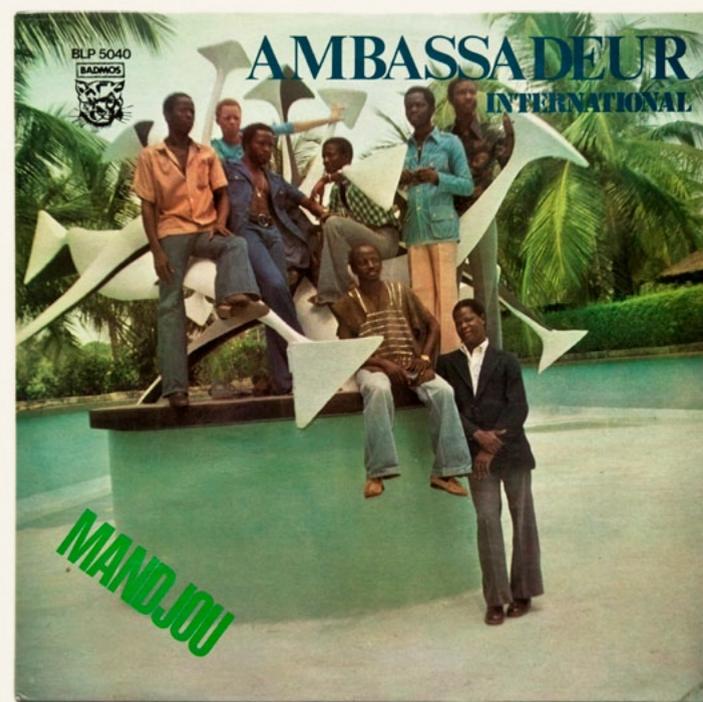
Les Ambassadeurs Du Motel De Bamako — Vol. 2. Sonafric, 1977.



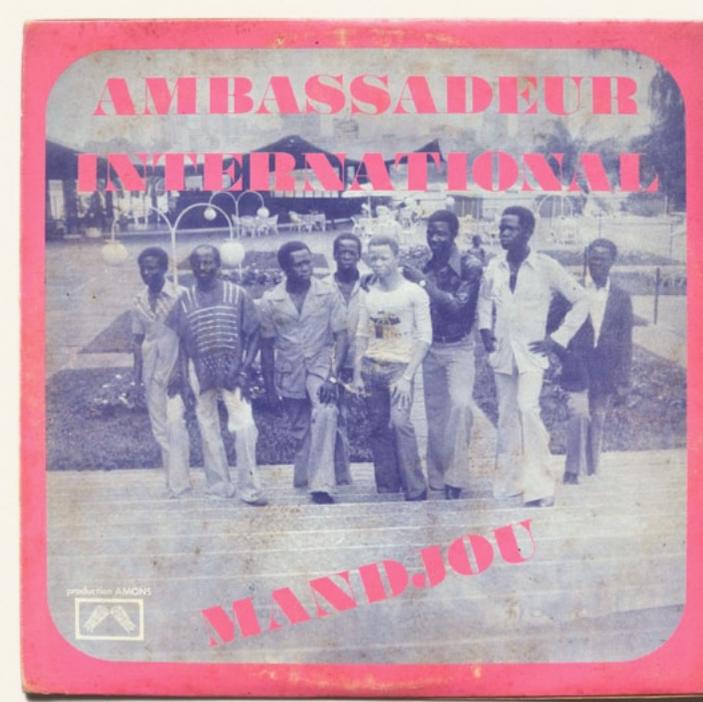
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RCAM, 1975.



Rail Band — Rail Band. (Folk-Rail 3)
RCAM, 1975.



Rail Band — Rail Band. (Folk - Rail - 4)
RCAM, 1975.



Rail Band — Rail Band. (Rail - Danse 1)
RCAM, 1975.



Rail Band — Rail Band. (Folk-Rail 1).
RCAM, 1973.



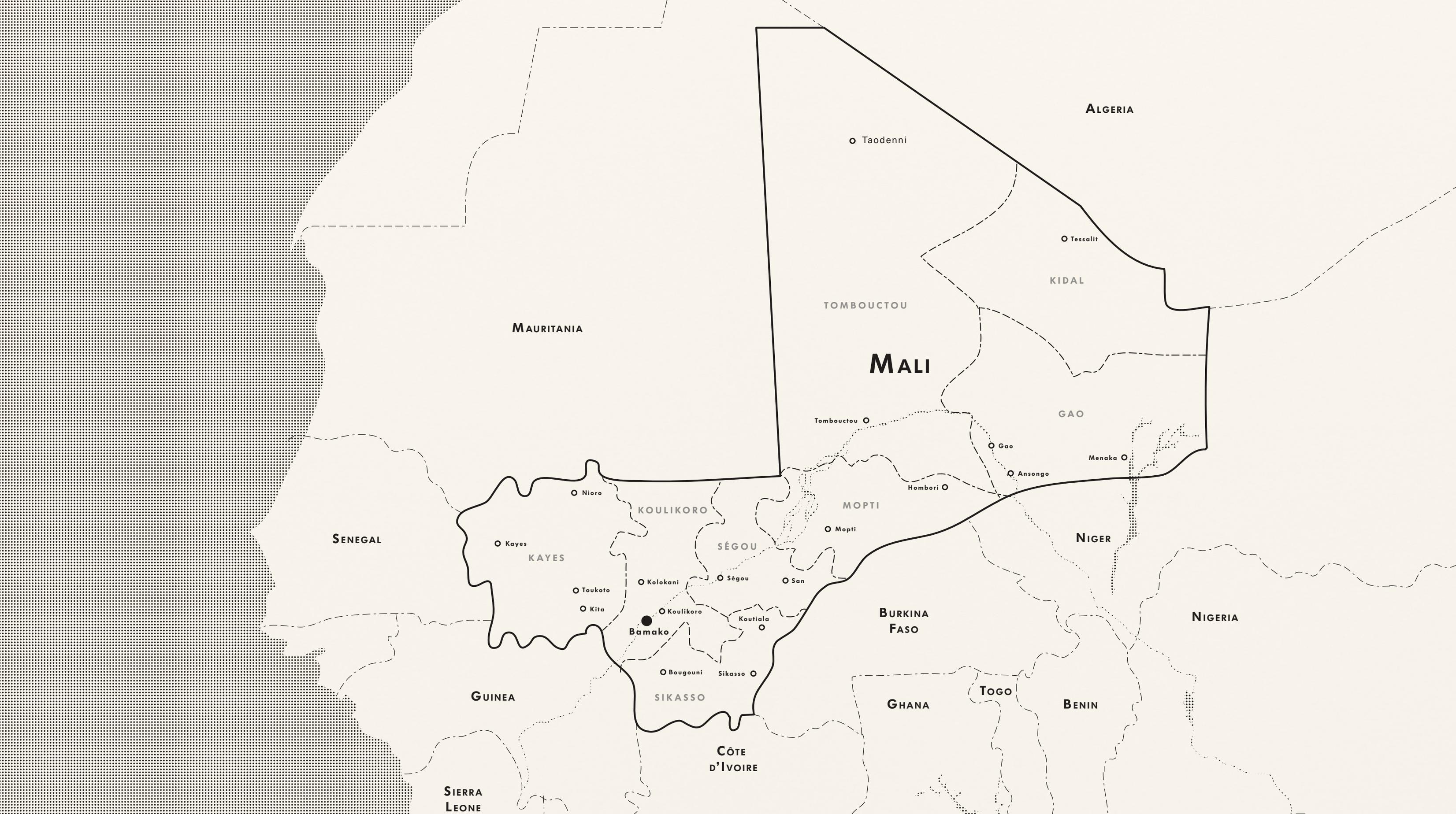
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Mali Music, Bärenreiter-Musicaphon, 1970.



Rail Band — Mouodilo/Diaba.
His Master's Voice.



Rail Band — Moko Diolo.
RCAM, 1973.



ALGERIA

○ Taodenni

○ Tessalit

KIDAL

TOMBOUCTOU

MALI

Tombouctou ○

GAO

○ Gao

Menaka ○

○ Ansongo

Hombori ○

MOPTI

○ Mopti

NIGER

KOULIKORO

SÉGOU

○ Nioro

KAYES
○ Kayes

○ Kolokani

○ Ségou

○ San

○ Toukoto

○ Kita

○ Koulikoro

Koutiala ○

Bamako

○ Bougouni

○ Sikasso

SIKASSO

BURKINA
FASO

NIGERIA

GUINEA

GHANA

TOGO

BENIN

CÔTE
D'IVOIRE

SIERRA
LEONE



Les Ambassadeurs Du Motel De Bamako, 1975.

spirits on this number as Sangaré name-checks all the orchestra's musicians at the end of the song.

Another deep and beguiling number, *Fongnana Kouma* shows the mellowness of Sangaré's voice. This is the opener to Super Djata band's "green album", 'En Super Forme Vol 1'. Tight percussion work and the eerie guitar of Diabaté give the song a panoramic, polyrhythmic feel. More rugged and hard to find is *Worodara*, a pure Malian garage rock number. Diabaté's guitar prowess is once again to the fore, stirring us up with a swirl of rhythmic energy.

Diabaté's bluesy playing calls to mind greats such as Magic Sam, Jimi Hendrix and Freddie but he belongs in a class of his own. Rail Band's Djélimady Tounkara and Super Biton's Mama Sissoko notwithstanding, he has singlehandedly elevated Malian guitar playing to a true art form with a style that's influenced by his experiences as a dancer and percussionist.

Bold and impetuous, sometimes unpredictable, Diabaté always followed his body's movement. It was almost as if he rode his instrument. On stage he would often burst with joy and maul his electric guitar like few others had in the history of Malian music. A Diabaté solo would set the pace proud and fierce, without hogging the spotlight. With their circular rhythms, kinetic energy and heartfelt singing, the Super Djata Band selections on here are a powerful testimony to the group's unquestionable greatness.

At the end of a decaying train line between Mali and Senegal, amid a neglected garden full of hibiscus, palm and bougainvillea trees, stands the Buffet Hôtel de la Gare de Bamako. In its 1970's heyday, this used to be an entertaining hub for a diverse clientele. Night people, businessmen, travellers, policemen, politicians, diplomats, hookers and music fans all played their part – drinking, dancing and rejoicing to the sounds of an orchestra crammed on a tiny stage a few steps away from the crowd.

That orchestra was called **Rail Band** and their seductive rhythms soundtracked a golden period in Mali between 1970 and the early 1980s. They were led by Tidiani Koné, a Griot and jazzman determined to go back to the roots and avoid following a crowd of Afro-Cuban or European imitators. Koné was the first to appreciate the quality of Salif Keita's voice, taking his chance to recruit the young albino singer at the end of 1969.

The Rail Band was formed to "explore and propel Mandingo repertoire in order to aim at the neo-classicism of African chanson". Combining Mandingo and Bamana folklore, French pop, Congolese rumba, American rhythm 'n' blues and hints of calypso, the Rail Band's ascension paved the way for numerous West African orchestras. They performed five days a week from 2pm till 6pm. They would then change, dine and take the stage again from 9pm until the last customer had left the Buffet Hôtel in the wee hours of the morning.

The Rail Band seemed to know almost instinctively how to go down in music history. The sheer intensity and dedication of the musicians, led by Koné, was mindblowing. By 1972, guitar player extraordinaire Djélimady Tounkara's arrival enabled the Rail Band to reach new heights in a dazzling ascension of recordings. His rumbling electric guitar instantly became one of the band's trademarks. Guinean balafon and kora player Mory Kanté and singer Magan Ganessy also joined in, as the Rail Band became Bamako's finest orchestra. Every night, music lovers stopped by the Buffet Hôtel in order to get a drink and have a ball.

Koné, Keita, Tounkara, Kanté and Ganessy starred on the orchestra's magnificent second album in 1973, released courtesy of Rail Culture Authentique Malienne, a state-sponsored record company. Leaving behind the Mandingo tradition, it features some of the fiercest and toughest music ever committed to wax with the instant classic *Moko Jolo*, one of Mali's heaviest Afro-funk cuts, showcasing Mamadou Bagayoko's devastating drums and Cheick Traoré's robust bass playing. That raw recording sound captured at Radio Mali possesses a timeless quality.

Salif Keita quit the band in 1973 to join Rail Band's main rival. While the Rail Band bridged tradition and modernity, another Bamako ensemble was on its way to becoming Mali's first dance orchestra. **Les Ambassadeurs du Motel de Bamako** was founded in 1969 with the support of police officer Tiekoro Bagayogo, who wanted his share of nightlife excitement. The name "ambassadeurs" is apt given how each man represented the best that Mali music had to offer the world.

Saxophone player Moussa 'Vieux' Sissoko led the band until the arrival of Guinean guitar player Manfila Kanté. Starting in 1975, they released a series of five 7" singles. On their last one, keyboard player Idrissa Soumaoro sings *Tie Colomba*, composed by Manfila Kanté – a heady music of organ and Wasulu hunters' music. Crisp and fresh, it sounds almost as good as *Mbouram Mousso*, a heavy slice of Afro-fusion music. Another hypnotic song, it tells how family ties were being dismantled in modern Malian society.

Les Ambassadeurs du Motel de Bamako recorded their first LP in 1976. They released another two albums together, which combined their previously released singles with an additional three unreleased tracks on each volume. *Fatema*, on volume one, is an Afro-Cuban charanga gem laced with flute and violin and featuring Senegalese singer Ousmane Dia. That same year, Les Ambassadeurs toured Upper Volta and Guinea, meeting président Sekou Touré.

In February 1977, Les Ambassadeurs and Super Biton represented Mali at the legendary FESTAC in Lagos. By 1978, most of the band had settled down in Abidjan, where they became Les Ambassadeurs Internationaux. As

the economic capital of West Africa, Abidjan attracted many musicians but not all of them were able to fulfil their ambitions. Despite being a struggling orchestra among fierce competition, Les Ambassadeurs managed to release one of Africa's greatest songs that decade.

Composed in Bamako, developed in Abidjan and sneakily recorded in a Radio Télévision Ivoirienne (RTI) studio at night, *Mandjou* is the ultimate artefact of Les Ambassadeurs heritage. The track was dedicated to Guinean president Sekou Touré, who was a huge admirer of Salif Keita's voice. Bandleader Kanté Manfila travelled to Cotonou, Benin, to make some test pressings. At a time of rampant piracy in Africa, these would be even more crucial in attracting the interest of distributors.

Mandjou took West Africa by storm when it was released at the end of 1978, even before several of those pressings were made available. A Cuban son montuno in its percussive pattern, Keita's paeon to Touré caused quite a stir, not least because a member of the noble Keita family was not supposed to be singing praise songs to the powerful. But his voice was irresistible and able to convey every nuance, from deep despair to hope of gaining recognition after a troubled year spent in Abidjan.

There's a real sense of urgency in the song as a powerful message is delivered with great conviction. Balafon player Kaba Kanté, guitar player Ousmane Kouyaté, keyboard maestro Cheick Mohammed Smith and trumpeter Kabine "Tagus" Traoré are all on top of their game, making this a great Les Ambassadeurs moment and without doubt one of West Africa's greatest songs.

Tentemba Jazz is an often-overlooked ensemble from the late 1970s. Based in Abidjan, the West African group featured Malian, Guinean, Ivorian and Liberian musicians, led first by Ousmane Diabaté and then by Mohamed "Kalifa" Koné. With the help of Sékou "Sadjona" Kanté, Koné composed most of the band's repertoire, a combination of jazz, psychedelic and Mandingo influences. They released three LPs and a couple of singles between 1977 and 1984. *Mangan* appeared on an album called 'La Réconciliation' and probes the new relationship between Guinea and the Ivory Coast. It's a brilliant example of the enduring power of Mandingo music.

By the mid-1980s, the band had vanished into the long Abidjan night, as the Ivorian capital quickly became the new capital of Malian music, fashion and culture. By 1988, Biennales were a thing of the past and it was truly the end of an era.

by Florent Mazzoleni, 2016.

Album compiled by Dave 'Mr Bongo' Buttle and Vik Sohnie (Ostinato Records).

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Dedicated to Malick Sidibé.



