

The mosque and National Institute
of Arts on rue du grand marché
(Emmanuel Bakary Daou)

SOUNDING OUT...

BAMAKO

Welcome to the freewheelin', music-mad capital of Mali. Violet Diallo takes us on a tour

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A Friday or Saturday evening taxi ride around one of the popular residential quarters of Bamako will reveal the extent of music-making in the capital. Whether it is part of the lead-up to a wedding, or simply a Balani neighbourhood dance held in the street, the excitement is infectious, sound systems are generally erratic, and visitors are welcome to stop and listen. Dust, decibels, and dance all mix under minimal lighting, giving children an early taste for public music-making. Parents and older siblings may have gained knowledge of music in the family village, without electricity, becoming connoisseurs of a local style of music as traditional musicians play in the light of a bonfire, or the moon. Through the system of national Biennale Arts Festivals in the 70s and 80s, the best of these traditional artists gained fame nationally, and sometimes abroad. This practice has recently been re-launched.

It is rarer to discover the afternoon *Sumu* in connection with a wedding or a baby's name-giving ceremony. If you are lucky enough to hear of one, this is where the traditional praise singers are at work, and

you may find a ceremony featuring one of Mali's major stars – who will be richly rewarded by the family holding the ceremony. The brilliant festival costumes of all involved add to the attraction.

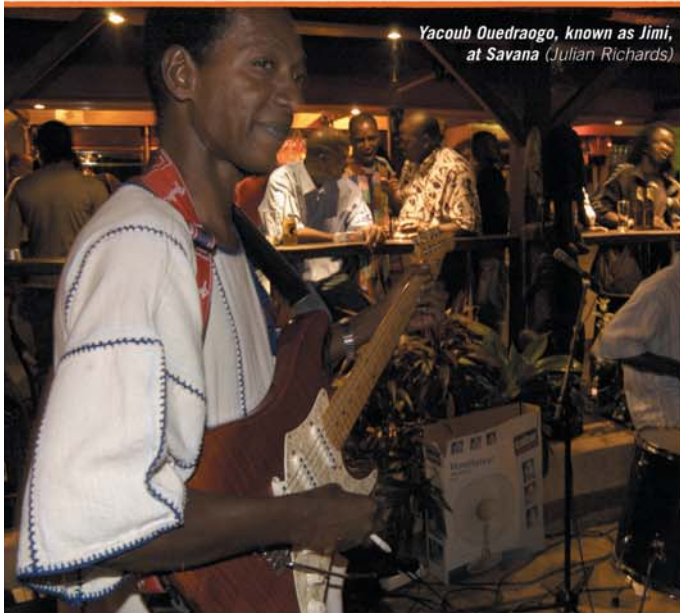
Venues offering live music have multiplied with recognition of the high quality of Malian musicians' recordings. Public performances in open-air spaces are squeezed into the part of the year that is neither the rainy season (July to September), nor Ramadan (starting around October 4 in 2005). During the music season, at a crescendo in the main tourist season (December to February) there is a wide variety in Bamako. It ranges from informal village voices, to regular entertainment spots, concerts, and yes, mega concerts, given by big stars for whom the local market cannot support regular performances, particularly because they may have large backing groups.

Street banners and posters generally announce major concert appearances by stars such as the duo Amadou and Mariam, Salif Keita, and on rare occasions Ali Farka Touré, visiting town from his northern village. There are also highly popular local

artists not well known outside Mali, or who are gaining experience before reaching the international market. They include the local rap groups, Tata Pound, Les Escrocs, Magic Black Men; traditional hunter artists such as Sibiry Koné; northern Mali music stars including Tartit, Afel Bocoum, Haya Arbi. Music is such an integral part of life that it is rare to find a Malian who does not have a favourite style and performers. Ask any taxi driver who he recommends, and you will be entertained right up to the door of your destination.

CONCERT VENUES

In addition to the two large halls, which are the venues for major concerts (The **Culture Palais**, and the **Congress Palais**), there are two sites which have regular concerts. One is the **French Cultural Centre**, which has evening performances, generally at the weekend, in a small, well-equipped theatre with an appreciative audience. The other is the **National Museum of Mali** which has a regular 'Musical Thursday' at 5pm in the outdoor theatre of its splendid new buildings. The



Yacoub Ouedraogo, known as Jimi, at Savana (Julian Richards)



Idrissa Soumaoro, regular at Eden Village



Savana restaurant and taxi service (Emmanuel Bakary Daou)

artists are often unusual 'village voice' groups, and the space, designed to exhibit Mali's culture, gives a clear view of costumes, instruments and techniques used.

RESTAURANTS WITH MUSIC

On Friday evenings, Bassekou Kouyaté plays with a group of musicians, often including the Mande singer Kasse Mady Diabaté, at the **Chez Thierry** restaurant in Quinzambougou, a small, friendly garden restaurant which has a menu with southern European style cuisine.

Also on Friday evenings, the Malian diva Oumou Sangaré plays in the garden of her own hotel **Le Wassulu** in Kalaban Coura, but as she is popular on tour circuits, it is wise to call ahead to see if she is performing on the date of your visit (tel: +22 3 228 7373).

The great Salif Keita is another artist frequently on tour abroad. However, he makes appearances at his own club, **Le Moffou** in Kalaban Coura but it is essential to telephone in advance to make sure he is in town and is performing - normally at the weekend (tel: +22 3 228 7521/228 7582).

The **Espace Bouna** is a much larger area in the newly built ACI 2000 zone on the site of Bamako's first airstrip. Most people go for a drink and to hear the music, but there is also a restaurant. The highlight of the music is the appearance of prize-winning guitarist, Djelimady Tounkara, and the Super Rail Band, playing on Saturday evenings. Good local salsa groups play there on Friday and Sunday evenings. This attracts locals in a town which loves to dance.

The pleasant **Savana** restaurant in Korofina

has a varied menu that is particularly good value. The Burkinabe guitarist Jimi plays there every Saturday evening, and jazz groups play on Wednesday and Friday.

The smart **Salam Hotel** features the Bafing Jazz group for dancing on Friday evenings, and Toumani Diabaté the *kora* player also performs there, although not regularly as he, too, is often overseas on tours.

More salsa groups play at **Eden Village**, a spacious riverside restaurant in a mango grove on the road to Sebeninkoro. The French radio 2004 world music prize-winner, Idrissa Soumaoro, plays here on Saturday evenings with his small group and it is usual for visiting musicians to be invited to join in. This is a favourite Bamako dance spot.

POPULAR BARS

New groups in popular bars may be just that - making up in infectious enthusiasm what they lack in technique. But dropping in to hear them play is inexpensive, and you may preview a future big name. One of the best is **Eden Parc** in Badalabougou - not to be confused with the more upmarket **Eden Village**. What other capital can boast two Gardens of Eden to display its music? This bar has live music every evening and attracts the local motor-scooter audience in large numbers. Prepare to stay late to hear the star performer Lobi Traoré (a Top of the World artist in this issue) who plays on Tuesdays.

For atmosphere, try the friendly **Foly Blon** bar in the Hippodrome where youth in large numbers crowd into a small area, and dance to amateur groups. The best time to

go is on Thursday when a more rehearsed percussion group plays regularly.

For the more adventurous, take a taxi to the door of the railway station **Buffet Hotel de la Gare** where Malian music was given its first outing in the modern world in the years after independence. The site has been affected by the more recent economic downer of the railway system, but there are still interesting groups playing at the weekend, and occasional appearances by the Super Rail Band.

FESTIVALS

Festival of the Desert at Essakane, Timbuktu (early January) Saharan music and well-known world music stars, all among the sand dunes and traditional tents. www.festival-au-desert.org

Ségou (February) Centred on the river Niger and involving varied cultural events as well as traditional music with the Super Biton Band and other stars.

West African Hunter's Festival (May) Last held in 2001, it will feature music with hunters' harps and bards playing and singing in the oldest form of Malian music.

Artistic and Cultural Biennale (September) Concerts, dance and other cultural events from the regions, organised throughout the capital.

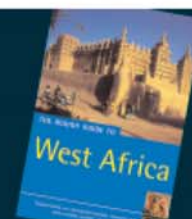
New Year A high point for concerts throughout the capital - often major free performances in public areas.

First week in July French inspired week-long music festival, including street performances in the Hippodrome area, between the Akwaba restaurant and the Foly Blon bar. |

THE ROUGH GUIDE TO WEST AFRICA

Informative, erudite and insightful. What I found invaluable was the engagement with the region's ethnic and historical background.

The Observer



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