

Salif Keita's incomparable call

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Today, Salif Keita, the Malian musician, celebrates his 70th birthday and 50 years in the industry.



Salif Keita. Image credit Flickr user [Sebasu](#) (CC).

On November 17, 2018, Afropop superstar Salif Keita (who turns 70 in August) [announced his retirement](#) from the recording studio at a raucous concert in the otherwise sleepy town of Fana, Mali (125km east of Bamako). Released in conjunction with the concert, Keita's most recent album, [Un Autre Blanc](#) (Naïve Jazz 2018), would be his last. But, much like the show in Fana, the album signaled not so much a closing, as a new beginning.

The French title means "An Other White," a reference to those, like Keita, who live with albinism (a congenital lack of pigment in the skin, eyes, and hair) on the African continent. On stage in Fana, Keita announced the end of a long and storied musical career in order to focus his efforts on raising awareness about albinism and combatting prejudice and violence against

these “other whites” in Africa. In May that same year, an albino girl named Ramata Diarra, just five years old, was [the victim of a ritual killing](#) in Fana. Keita had come to make a statement.

He did so by drawing on his most precious tool, his voice. While subdued in speech, Keita’s voice is strident and soulful in song. It is difficult to imagine a retirement that would quiet its potency. Even as Keita enters the golden years of his life, his famously golden voice (*voix d’or*) resounds as forcefully as ever, as he demonstrated on stage in Fana. So far as one can tell, retirement from the studio does not mean retirement from the stage. Indeed, as of this writing, [Keita is still on tour](#).

For more than half a century, the political force of Salif Keita’s music has been intimately bound up with the distinctive grain of his voice, its embodied resonance. That voice is gritty, but pitch-perfect. And it is loud. It wells up from the core of his body, takes shape in his chest, gathering texture in his throat before projecting from his mouth. At its most intense, when Keita’s voice cries out (often at the outset of a song, and again at its climax), his body is still, but tense and reverberant, every inch devoted to the act of voicing. When Keita sings, his body is an instrument. And when he cries, Salif Keita *is* his voice.

In the Mande heartland of southern Mali, Keita’s homeland, there are many ways to understand what it means to sing. Functionally, singing is represented as “a call to dance” (*dɔŋkili*), or, when addressed to a particular interlocutor, a “laying down of lineage”—a call to praise (*fasada*). At its most virtuosic, singing is compared to the playful banter of marketplace haggling (*teremeli*). At its most esoteric, it commands the subtlety and style borne of a deep linguistic acumen, literally “the language of the griot” (*jelikan*).

Keita is an undisputed master of all these modes, though to achieve and be recognized for such mastery has meant transgressing quite a few social norms in Mande society (the story of which is best told by his cousin and childhood friend, Chérif Keita, in the book [Outcast to Ambassador: The Musical Odyssey of Salif Keita](#)). But what sets Salif Keita apart—what makes his voice “golden” and his vocal statements so forceful—is something more fundamental about the sung voice in Mande music. For when Keita cries out, his voice is nothing less than a call to community. (You can hear what this musically tailored “call” sounds like right from the start of the 1987 track, “[Sina](#),” a praise song for Keita’s father.)

Perhaps the most salient cultural reference for Keita's call is the vocal form known as "calling the horses" (*ka sow wele*). A battlefield cry intended to gather and inspire the mounted ranks of past kingdoms—a call to arms—"calling the horses" is today a vocal prelude to any lifecycle ceremony in the Mande world, calling on family and friends to come together in celebration. Keita's incomparable call captures both senses, affectively combining a sense of activism and entertainment—politics and pleasure—that constitutes his community of listeners as a feelingfully engaged audience.

To be sure, Keita's call resounds among multiple audiences, and has been made to imagine many communities in the course of his long career, different in kind and occasionally dissonant in character. For example, Keita's "stunning voice" (*voix terrible*) as front man of the Rail Band in 1970s Bamako brought him and his new band *Les Ambassadeurs* to Sékou Touré's Guinea in 1975, where he famously (some say infamously) knelt before the Guinean President (some say autocrat) and improvised a praise song that would launch his international career, "[Mandjou](#)."

Consider also the political force of the track "[Nous Pas Bouger](#)" (which Manthia Diawara pithily translates as "[We Won't Budge](#)"), released in 1989 and directed to the plight of undocumented African migrants in France. If "Mandjou" charts a musical path from the local to the global (via the postcolony), "Nous Pas Bouger" interpellates the everyday realities of those marginal to, yet no less embedded in the forces of globalization. All of these communities—urbanites and migrants, cosmopolitans and autocrats—have, at one time or another, heeded Keita's call.

Which brings us back to Fana. By announcing his retirement as a "call to arms" in support of albino communities throughout Africa, through a "call to dance" before a select gathering of friends and locals, Keita affirmed, once again, the irreducible potency of his verbal art, at once intimate and expansive. Whether or not Keita decides to enter the studio again, it is clear that his politics will remain substantively vocal, and will continue to resonate among communities from Fana to the world.

REFERENCE: Skinner, R., (2019). [Salif Keita's incomparable call](#) from *Africa is a Country*, 25 August 2019. Available at <https://africasacountry.com/2019/08/salif-keitas-incomparable-call> online. Accessed on 6 September 2019.