

Part Two – Rail Band (Mali)

The Rail Band, or formerly called the Super Rail Band of the Buffet Hotel de la Gare, Bamako, is a band established in Mali in 1970. The band rose to fame primarily because it was one of the first West African musical groups to combine Afro-Latin rhythms with traditional Malian instruments. In this six-minute track, the song immediately begins with a blend of Western musical instruments, such as the saxophone, with West African instruments, such as the kora, a long-necked lute of the West African Malinke people, all forming a rhythm driven by drums, saxophone, electric guitar, kora, and other instruments. Then, a male voice (potentially Salif Keita, who later launched a solo career) begins to sing in the Bambara language – the national language of Mali. After a few minutes of singing, Salif pauses for an electric guitar solo, followed by a saxophone solo. The song is patterned by an uplifting array of instruments interacting with one another – what we may call “polyrhythms” (rhythms occurring simultaneously in space and time) but African ethnomusicologists may call simply “rhythm.”

The Rail Band was briefly mentioned in class while discussing the coextensive moment of politics and music in Africa: whether there is a difference between a political statement created by a musician on his/her own right and a political message sung or produced by musicians funded by a political party. The majority of the class concluded that, indeed, there is a difference. At the core, the motives and power dynamic between the two musical creations are from opposite sides of the coin, affecting the ways the audience perceives the song’s message and speaks to the supposed truth and rhetoric that the song is attempting to employ. The Ministry of Information and the railway administration sponsored the Rail Band since its creation in 1970. It was the norm for the Malian government to support cultural occasions as an effort to uphold national traditions. The Rail Band was no different. Thus, these sponsorships call into question whether the musicians’ message was pure in itself, prompting us to ask: were the songs created as a benefit to the people or as a benefit to the government, or are these entities ideally the same? In general, music and media are utilized as a vessel for influencing public opinion and perception. For instance, RTML (Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines) was the primary tool used to incite the Rwandan genocide from 1993-1994. It seems as if the Rail Band could be viewed as no different than a political tool used to fulfill an agenda.