

Interview with Andoni Egaña Makazaga

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Andoni Egaña Makazaga, born in 1964, is without a doubt one of the greatest *bertsolaris* (Basque oral poets) of our time. A three-time winner of the Euskal Herria¹ Championship and an expert on the art of improvisation, Makazaga also has a degree in philosophy and is the author of numerous books and scripts. He is a person of great shyness, and, similar to many other great timid people, he hides his shyness behind a courageous and playful exterior. In a way, he is like Zarauz, the village he was born in on the coast of Gipuzkoa, which shows its kindest and sunniest side to all visitors but requires more time to reveal its inner side, its history, and its everyday life.

You live in Zarauz, the place where you were born. Are you comfortable there?

Zarauz is a very practical place to live. And I need very little public life here: I work at home, I'm not a person who likes to go out a lot, I don't even go downtown with my family (my wife and children) on a Sunday afternoon. That's not my way of life.

In spite of living in a village on the coast, you're not much of a sailor . . .

Our father was born in a country house and our mother on the boundaries between the city and the country. This background has affected us, so we were never really sea people.

In Franco's days, you were one of the first students at the *ikastola*² in Zarauz. You studied almost entirely in Euskara³ when this wasn't easy at all.

¹ Euskal Herria refers not only to the politically defined Basque Country, but also to the cultural Basque Country, which geographically includes the Nafarroa, the political Basque provinces (Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, and Alava), and the three provinces in the south of France, making a total of seven provinces.

² An *ikastola* is a Basque primary school.

³ Euskara is the native name for the Basque language.

It was difficult, mostly for my parents. People in the village had the suspicion that we only sang at the *ikastola*. They also thought that children studying at the *ikastola* would have no future, that we were fools. At the beginning of the '70s, many people thought that way and very few took risks.

What kind of child were you?

I was a good boy. Maybe nowadays the concept of “being a good boy” has changed. We spent most of the time on the streets and only once in a while did we break a shop window playing soccer. If a boy does something similar now, we would crucify him. Some time ago even the good boys did things like that, so just imagine what the bad boys could do! I was also a good student until I was a teenager, but those were very difficult years. From when I was thirteen until I turned seventeen I had a bad academic history. There were continuous strikes and I didn't like some of the subjects, like math, physics, and chemistry.

Do your former teachers make comments about you? Do you think they expected something from you?

Maybe. But I'm pretty sure they didn't expect I would become a *bertsolari*. The *bertso* (verse) wasn't believed to be a channel of creativity. The general opinion was that *bertsos* couldn't encourage creativity. On the contrary, they believed singing, poetry, or literature could. Practicing the *bertso* was a very personal decision. Just have a look at Basarri,⁴ who lived 300 meters from my childhood home. His society⁵ was 50 meters away, but I wasn't conscious of that. I wasn't conscious of the *bertsolari* phenomenon, although I knew of its existence through the radio, listening to my grandfather, and also because Joxe Agirre⁶ would spend the night at our home once in a while, after he had finished his verse serenade on Saint Agueda's Eve, very late at night.

I know you had very good teachers . . .

Yes, Imanol Urbietta⁷ was the person who made the biggest impression on us. We began with Imanol when we were ten, and he remained as our teacher for four or five more years, but I believe he's been our spiritual tutor for many years after that. His way of life, his ideology, has always been based on creativity: you are free as long as you create, so create! You realize all this after turning 20, and then you think: “well, I've been lucky!”

⁴ Basarri was a famous *bertsolari*.

⁵ “Societies” were meeting place for groups of men.

⁶ A *bertsolari* from Azpeitia.

⁷ A Basque musicologist.

You mentioned the old times before. Those were very hard times with regard to politics.

But they were also very good times. Ever since I was thirteen, I had a political consciousness. If I watch a 13-year-old boy nowadays, I think he's very immature. And in fact he is. In June '75, when I was still fifteen, Txiki was killed⁸ . . . he lived in my neighborhood. We used to play soccer with him and his brothers, and I think that from 1975 on any neighbor from Zarauz had less chance of being racist toward immigrants. Until then we used to call them "Koreans" or *mantxurrianos*⁹ . . . and then they killed Txiki, and Txiki was from Zalamea (in Extremadura).¹⁰ Humans learn from everything, and we learned this lesson pretty well.

Was *bertsolaritza* well known in your family surroundings?

Once a year my parents brought a tape home. That tape contained some *bertsos* from Jose Agirre and Imanol Lazkano.¹¹ My parents and their group of friends used to organize a banquet each year (and still do), and they invited Agirre and Lazkano (and still do) to sing. I was eleven or twelve years old. I listened to that tape in which the *bertsolaris* would kid my parents and their friends, my uncles and aunts, and I could understand everything. Once a year I was delighted to listen to that tape. I realized that the *bertso* wasn't only something you could hear on the radio, it was something everybody could sing. I also understood it was a mechanism used to joke about my parents, or my uncles and aunts, or an old bachelor fellow.

What led you to begin improvising? More than once you have mentioned the 1980s championship, Amuriza's¹² performance, and the fact that his *bertsos* were filled with complex content. Nevertheless, your background wasn't the best: a youngster from Zarauz with a leftist ideology . . .

I believe a lot of factors played a part in this situation. On one hand, regarding Amuriza's concept of *bertsolaritza*, I was already studying philology at the university. One of my teachers was Juan María Lekuona,¹³ who taught classes on oral literature. He was another great teacher I had. The year before I had decided I wanted to study, mostly because during the previous

⁸ Txiki is the nickname for Juan Paredes Manot, a historical activist and member of the armed organization, ETA.

⁹ *Mantxurrianos* is a disdainful term used for people coming from La Mancha, a region located in the middle of Spain.

¹⁰ Extremadura is a region located below La Mancha, so people from this area were also disparaged with disdainful terms.

¹¹ Imanol Lazkano is a *bertsolar* from Azpeitia. Until recently, he was also president of the Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte (Friends of the Verse Association in the Basque Country).

¹² Champion in the 1980s and a historic figure in *bertsolaritza*.

¹³ An academic in Basque language studies and a researcher of Basque oral literature.

summer seasons I used to help my father at his work. He sold furniture, and I didn't like that. It wasn't physically hard, but I felt useless and I hated feeling that way. My father would say, "hand me the sander" or "give me the screwdriver," and then he would say, "that's not the screwdriver, those are the pliers!" Well, when I was 16 I realized I wasn't good at manual work, but I was a good student—I could pass all the exams with no problem. I think this is an important factor relating to the *bertsos*. At the end of secondary school, when we had to do an exercise on *bertsos*, I realized I could do it faster than the rest—even though I didn't have any knowledge on the matter—and I probably did it much better. In those moments you think, "see, I'm good at this." Besides, when you are 17 you ought to know what you are good at and what you aren't. And, if possible, you should like what you are good at.

How did you start to improvise *bertsos*? What was the original preparation?

I don't remember, but it must have been a very basic concept. I recall two of Amuriza's books, *Hitzaren kirol nazionala* ["National Word Sport"] and *Hiztegi errimatua* ["Rhymed Dictionary"]. I needed support and I started from there. I also analyzed *bertsos* from previous years, mostly from the championships in the '60s. I stole those books from the public library . . . well, I didn't really steal them, I borrowed them but never gave them back. I still have them at home. Imanol Murua, the former mayor, admitted that the theft was worthwhile and believed I would give them back to the inhabitants of Zarauz some day.

This is a land where people love betting on anything, for any reason and at any time, and you have always liked that. Was this a bet made on your own, to be able to perform by improvisation, to be brave?

I don't think so. I remember that from the beginning I used to think I wasn't prepared to perform in public, that I would go blank once I heard the theme, being by myself with the microphone. But as I was learning more and more, I hoped maybe one day I would become a kind of Professor Lekuona, or even the judge in a contest. That was also of great attraction to me, and I sincerely believe it is not a bad starting point for any youngster nowadays. Of course, I was full of doubts; *bertsolaritza* schools—*bertso-eskolak*—didn't exist . . . they were just starting to be established then. And I didn't understand to what extent the strength of being able to stand face-to-face with the public was something innate or something learned, and also the serenity you need to perform any proposed theme.

Your next step was to register in the Lizardi contest.¹⁴

I sang at my cousin's wedding. That was my first performance in public. In 1982, unlike before, I decided to take all my exams in June. This way I would be able to prepare for the Lizardi contest. I am a little chaotic in everything I do, when preparing for high goals . . .

¹⁴ An improvisation competition in Zarauz.

That meant a whole year of planning . . .

Yes, that's true. I remember I had passed all exams in the summer of 1982; I was a youngster in Zarauz, I worked every morning with my father; maybe I would go to the beach at midday, then I would hang out for a while in the bars. I would have a nice siesta and then I would work on a series of rhymes. I suppose I thought it was a foolish investment. I didn't know for sure while I was practicing if I would be brave enough to register my name in the contest.

But you registered yourself and won the prize. Did you already feel like a *bertsolari*?

No, no way. These days any kid can improvise better than we did those days. But I won and then I left to work in Vitoria. I won that prize a month before Felipe Gonzalez won the general elections. After a few months I attended another contest (with a bit of apprehension, of course) and I was lucky enough to win it, too. Ever since then I began to feel serious about it. I was still nobody, but I wasn't nothing, either.

When did you feel like a *bertsolari* from head to tail for the first time?

I think it was in the 1986 Euskal Herria championship, during the semi-finals in Bilbao. Until then I wasn't sure at all. After winning my second prize, I started to perform here and there, I got a job in *La Voz de Euskadi*¹⁵ as an editor, and later the army called me up. But I didn't waste my time. I had two clear objectives: the first one was to go on with my training as a *bertsolari*, and I would do it by myself. The other objective was to finish my military service. While the rest of the boys went to the canteen, I would remain alone, studying or singing *bertsos*.

You participated in the 1986 championship. You got to the finals and there were several people of the same generation as you. That was impressive.

I think the importance of the 1986 championship lies in its origin. During the spring of 1985, the *bertsolaris*' association didn't yet exist and it was then that some people started to take the first steps. They felt frustrated with the organization of the previous championship (which the Basque Language Academy was in charge of), mostly because of the division made between *bertsolaris* of type A and *bertsolaris* of type B. Our first meeting took place. It was a very strong hook for me. We thought that self-management was possible, and therefore the organization of the following championship relied on us.

What was your way of improvising, your singing style?

I guess it was very similar to today's. The style was less purified. But I wouldn't dare to define my way of improvising in those days. I guess it was similar to the present way.

¹⁵ A Basque newspaper.

What did you feel in the Velodrome in San Sebastián, in the presence of 10,000 people?

It was an incredible feeling. I think we all felt the same. It was our first time singing there. In those days, *bertsolaritza* needed a quality improvement in the communication media. We had to add the self-management to it. With all these factors, and with a great dose of self-confidence, we decided to do the final in the Velodrome. And there we were, as if in a cloud, troubled by emotions, each and every one of us. We were wondering what we were doing to get so much attention from so many people.

What was that *bertsolari* collective like, and the people close to you who organized that championship?

I felt comfortable with them from the very beginning. I can't recall when everything began. We organized several meetings in order to found an association and I met a lot of people in the same situation who were starting to get moving. Jon Sarasua was four or five years younger than me, he was around 20, but I could see that whatever he wanted to do wasn't bad at all. The same happened with Koldo Tapia's incentives. I also very much liked what other *bertsolaris* wanted to do. I enjoyed those meetings very much, listening to different anecdotes from my colleagues, and that also helped me to fill myself up, while I was assimilating things. I could see it was something real. And something I have never seen, and I haven't seen yet, is jealousy.

When the Bertsolari Elkarte, later known as Bertsozale Elkarte, emerged, a lot of people thought it was a *bertsolari* syndicate. Later it was proven to be something else.

As I already said, this association emerged due to the 1986 championship. When it was created, we knew perfectly well what should and what shouldn't be. After the championship's success, there was this temptation of creating a *bertsolari* enterprise in order to organize, for example, competitions among the most famous *bertsolaris*. But we could see two things very clearly: that first, it wouldn't be a lucrative enterprise, and second, we wouldn't create a syndicate to defend the *bertsolaris*' rights. Just the opposite, we would be a cultural association. I identified myself with that project, but I had to wait until I returned to Zarauz to involve myself directly with the management. This association has been of great instruction to those of my generation. On several occasions we have had strong discussions, but only very few times did we have to appeal to the voting stage. This meant we learned to be flexible, in order to obtain a consensus. Personal satisfaction played an important part in this as well—vital satisfaction, I mean. Working in the association means a way of locating yourself within a social construction. It requires a great volunteer effort, but you get a lot in exchange: what you learn, what you feel once you see your objectives fulfilled How can you compromise yourself in a society, Basque society, which lives immersed in conflict, holding out the temptation of being unnoticed, which is always easier than taking part? You can do that if you locate yourself in your own space, where you will be able to work comfortably, and you won't sneak away. The association has provided us with that space.

What was your working plan? Did you have everything well planned or did you work by intuition?

It was always done by intuition. When we decided to attempt a sociolinguistic analysis on the social support of *bertsolaritza*, for example, it wasn't easy for us to explain why we did it, or when we thought it was essential for our future if we had a documentation center, or even the championships. Or when we decided to introduce ourselves in the media. For many, TV was a deceptive medium, but others understood we needed that step in order to continue to exist in 20 years' time. Nevertheless, we managed everything ourselves, with the support of our people. Those were important decisions and had a great degree of intuition.

In the following championship in 1989, you were already a consecrated *bertsolari*.

We were lucky. If you do something really showy in a championship, people will remember you. Peñagarikano and myself sang a series of quite showy *bertsos* in '86, and the rock group called Negu Gorriak added them to their first record—a song called “*Bertso-hop*.” That gave us, both Peñagarikano and me—and also *bertsolaritza*—a great push. Now we could reach the youth.

How did you prepare for the 1993 Championship? You've mentioned more than once that preparation is very important; what do you base it on?

Right before a championship, and even before performing anywhere, *bertsolari*s know that they're about to improvise and that there's a risk of being ridiculous, and that's the reason why they should prepare themselves carefully. The target is to try to avoid the maximum amount of ridicule. With that in mind, everything else arrives with no problem. But much too often you work too hard on the technical part, the mechanical, and then you lose the punch. If you work the rhyme, the meter, the melody . . . everything comes out mechanically and you wouldn't surprise even yourself, so you won't the public, either. People can perceive this through the way you are looking, through your way of singing. But the opposite can also happen: if you don't work the technique enough you may have very good ideas, but it's easy for you to make mistakes any minute.

Those days belong to the period of increased success of *bertsolaritza*. What is the lesson we can extract from those moments?

Personally, it brought about a change in my life. From 1988 to 1990 I had around 100 performances a year. From '91 to '92 I had around 150, and from '94 to '95 I had around 180. My whole way of life changed. I didn't need two salaries any more. That's why I left my job as state official in Vitoria and chose to investigate my artistic possibilities 100 percent.

A proliferation of *bertsolaritza* on TV took place at some point. What did this mean to the *bertsolaris*, specifically the program on *bertsolaritza* called *Hitzetik Hertzera*? After that, you were famous people.

Like nowadays, we were famous in a very discreet way, and people are very respectful.

But it's true that you are so affable that anyone can go to your house and ask for any reasonable favor, which is not very common in other places.

Very few years ago, before we met the improvisers from all over the world, we didn't have any external reference. We aren't musicians, and we don't have any Michael Jacksons or Miguel Bosés among us; we are *bertsolaris* and we react as our body requires, in a very natural and close way. And if all this affects you, you can do an easy thing: go home.

But you must go through periods of crisis, either through saturation of performances, or by singing without stopping, day after day...

Yes, but maybe this is because we exhibit ourselves so much in public, and there's a very simple reason for that: we're so normal, sometimes too normal. I know myself very well, I watch myself every day in the mirror. Do people expect a political opinion from me? I haven't got that kind of capacity for synthesis. Just because I can sing in 10/8 syllables doesn't mean anybody can ask for a complex opinion. It is at this point where the crisis takes place. I might be able to give an opinion in a showy linguistic way, but that's all.

Nevertheless, you express an opinion when asked for it.

Of course, you can't say no. I'm not skeptical. It's not that I don't mind, either. But I don't see myself as a political analyst or as a philosopher. Not even as a poet.

What is the "automatic pilot" for *bertsolaris*?

This expression is more of a saying than the truth. Theoretically, the meaning of "automatic pilot" is to improvise without much interest but with a lot of professionalism. It means thinking that in a given place you don't have to think much, since you will get through the performance singing the same topics as always. We say this more than we do it, and if we ever do it is due to incapacity. As soon as we get to the stage, and after watching what kind of public we have, figuring out the whole context, we learn to realize that a very well sung topic is better than an original idea that many of them wouldn't understand.

"Automatic pilot" means professionalism more than laziness, then.

That's it. Last Monday we performed in Getaria at noon. The public in Getaria is not too exigent. We had to sing from the town hall balcony, after the people had drunk more than seven

txacolis.¹⁶ It is quite clear that in that situation you need a “heated” performance; you can’t start in a very slow way, pampering the concepts or, even worse, doubting. But there are several ways of singing very normal things. Therefore, before getting to the balcony, you have to review everything you know regarding Getaria: “Let’s see, Juan Sebastián Elcano was born here, he went around the world, his statue is a few meters away, but we mention it every single year . . .” and then, on the way to the town hall you can see a picture hanging on the museum door and . . . “Ah!, Balenciaga, the great tailor! Balenciaga was born in Getaria.” You get it in your mind and keep it. You should never start your performance saying “Here we are, in Elcano and Balenciaga’s birthplace . . .” Too easy. That day, my partner was Sebastián Lizaso, and he more or less started singing like this: “Here we are, in January, the *txacoli* was excellent, it is a very nice day, the sun is hot; well, you are very pale. Quite the opposite, you are red as a tomato but your color doesn’t come from the sun, it’s due to the cider bars in Astigarraga . . .” and we got to a moment when the sun was really hot where Sebastián mentioned his shirt and also mentioned I was wearing too many clothes; then I could sing that that was my little homage to Balenciaga. That is what people most appreciate. And then you can start with the “automatic pilot,” relying only on your professionalism, with no previous schemes, and when you get to this point you start to feel the satisfaction of a job well done. It is called automatic pilot, but when watching Balenciaga’s picture and keeping it in my mind, I knew that 99 percent of the public would know whom I was talking about.

So the *bertsolari* should focus on the public code.

Yes, that is the most important. What’s the difference between poetry and *bertsolaritza*? A long time ago this was a recurrent question. People used to think that poetry talked about high-level concepts and that the *bertsos* only talked about mundane matters. That’s not true. The difference is, where poetry leaves an open space for interpretation and the reader has to close it, in the *bertso* the message given is 99 percent straightforward. Of course, there is also no possibility that you can hear a *bertso* one more time, once it’s sung.

Have you ever found yourself thinking that the public wasn’t at your level?

No, no way. It is not a cultural concept, it refers to cultural references. Therefore, if you notice that the public you are singing to belong to a world far away from yours, you must adapt yourself to them. If you go on with yours, and if the communication fails, it would be your fault. You can use it once in a while as a pose, to reinforce the stereotype that people have over you, but not in the global speech of the performance.

Have you ever seen an older *bertsolari* feeling uncomfortable in the opposite situation? Let’s say one of them is performing at a university, for example.

¹⁶ *Txacoli* is a new dry white wine typical in the Basque country.

He may be worried before starting, worried by the subjects they could propose. But this is also a fiction. Even though he might not know anything about the subject given, the *bertsolari* always has an answer and it is simply: “ask about something else because, sincerely, I don’t have a clue on that,” and that’s exactly what people are expecting from him. For this reason, the championships are very hard. People expect a lot from each and every one of the *bertsolaris*, and since the subjects are given out in a raffle, sometimes what is sung is not that good.

Does the championship standardize all *bertsolaris*?

No, the only difference is that what you can forgive in a normal performance is not forgivable in a competition.

You were the champion in 1993. Did you expect it?

I never had the sensation of “well, I will win the *txapela*.”¹⁷ I’ve always attended the championships thinking, “they’re going to see what’s good.” Of course, in order to think this way you have to be prepared. And I think that way about the audience, believing they are going to enjoy their time with me, that they are going to be amazed. The rest is not important: the judges, the punctuation, how well your colleagues can perform With that prospect, the championship shouldn’t make you feel afraid, and that’s what is most important.

What are the benefits and drawbacks of being a champion?

Not too much on either side. I felt comfortable between ‘86 and ‘93, as if I was levitating, and enjoyed all performances. And there were many performances before winning the championship. I haven’t felt I’ve benefited in that sense. And regarding the burden, it’s been as heavy as I could bear. And I assume that burden with pride: all the compromises and the meetings . . . it doesn’t occur to me not to attend only because I’m the champion. It’s a personal compromise that you accept with great pleasure. For the whole society I represent the *bertsolari* in a certain way. Therefore, since I’m the champion, I have to behave as a “good boy,” and that might be a small disadvantage when improvising, since I’m more of a bad boy than what I have proven to be in these last years. I would do, and will do, bigger, crazier things when I’m on stage. And I’ve already done some.

In 1992 and ’93 a new generation of *bertsolaris* emerged: Maialen Lujanbio, Unai Iturriaga, Irazu How did you welcome them? What were your expectations when listening to them?

I believe that if we ever made any mistakes, they wouldn’t have been done out of mistrust or not wanting to support the new arrivals in a proper way. We might even have been too paternalistic, but with the best of intentions. That was precisely our biggest error. And even more

¹⁷ *Txapela* is a black beret of a bigger size that is normally given out as a prize in all kinds of competitions.

if we refer to women, certainly in regard to Maialen. But it was wonderful to see all those new people coming. And they have fulfilled all our expectations, both as a generation and individually.

Is it true that you had a small disappointment during the finals in 1997, since contestants didn't perform as was expected?

Yes, it's true. But now I realize that was normal. They did exactly the same as Sarasua and I did back in '86. Exactly the same. They didn't watch the place they were about to sing. They arrived at the place and got excited—to be there was enough for them. When you first come to such an important event, you don't feel obliged to excel, but at the same time you feel beside yourself with joy and think, “how wonderful, how grateful I feel for being here,” and the day passes by. In order to improvise you need to keep the balance between your emotions and your mind, and that's really difficult in a championship. On the other hand, I would feel disappointed by a *bertsolari* who didn't feel excited the first time he was there. Later, in the second or third final, everything is different. You ought to give everything and forget everything else.

I'd like to know about the state of mind of the improviser when improvising. What does he see? Does he see the public or does he focus on the microphone? What kind of images fill his mind?

Different things each time. Sometimes you don't see anything, or you look at your colleagues seated behind you and you see them blurred. Or you focus on somebody in the audience and you don't see anything else, you may be nervous and can't look anywhere else but at your colleague or your own leg. It is an uncontrollable feeling.

How do you visualize the *bertso* itself? Can you see the words, the rhymes, or are they just images?

In my case they aren't images. I see lines. I can see the end of the *bertso* and that *bertso* runs way down. And depending on the structure of the *bertso*, I see the way the point can change into a narrowing path. That's the key: to look at it from a distance, even though you don't do it on purpose. I have to get to that point with strength, but first I have to figure out the distance I should start from. If you start from a point very close to the end, you will lack ideas to base the *bertso* on. On the other hand, if you start from too far away, the connection with the end will be too long. Of course, this is only theoretically speaking. When improvising, the appropriate distance emerges naturally. The ideal would be the absence of doubt: “I will finish this *bertso* this way, this is what I want to say.” But usually this does not make the most satisfactory *bertso*. And the *bertsolari*'s ambition is measured through each *bertso*. There are different ways of confronting a *bertso*. You can shoot an idea for each line or you can “elaborate” the initial idea. If you tend to shoot several ideas, your stress increases immediately, since you have to adapt to

the rhyme and respect the meter, but you have to think about the following idea at the same time. Sometimes you're not inspired and you make mistakes, but when it works out

What has been your experience these last years? What has your evolution consisted of?

I guess this is related to your way of life. I'm the champion of the *bertsos* and I have become at the same time a person with a good reputation—never mind if it's only because I'm older! I've been offered work from everybody, but never a job! Therefore I continue improvising. This is normal; who would dare to offer me a job? Anyway, I'm well placed. But on the other hand, that generation of *bertsolaris* you have mentioned, who are in their thirties, are already people with a certain status, and by their forties will have an enormous reputation, but they might not have a cent in their pockets.

Does this perspective wear you out?

I don't think so, because we like what we do. But if we observe the history of *bertsolaritza* we will see that each one of us who's chosen it as our profession has no other choice than to continue it, just the same as the worker in the factory. I haven't had severe economic problems, but Amuriza says he has. And the next generation will have to continue with this because it's their only source of income. And this situation makes me think. On one side we have an enormous reputation, but on the other side it means an enormous obstacle if we still want to be creative. I believe I have to say that I was lucky. As Patricia Highsmith said, "you should only work from your twenties to your thirties." I already did that. And that gives you a sense of security. When I was 30 and said I couldn't see myself improvising when I was 40, I was serious. I could see the accumulation of shows, a lot to eat, a lot to drink, a lot to smoke . . . but you can stand all of it, because it's also gratifying. Do you realize what good times you have being a *bertsolari*?

You haven't been a big traveler. But you've been to Veracruz in Mexico back in 1996. What was all that about?

It was our first attendance at an international meeting on improvisation. We didn't know each other, and they didn't know any of us. We were strangers to them. Those were the Tenth Latin American Encounters and of course everybody improvised in Spanish. I did it in Euskara. Koldo Tapia was translating my *bertsos*. They couldn't believe I could improvise in a language different to theirs, that even though I spoke Spanish I wouldn't improvise in Spanish. What for? I was sure I would do worse than them! Until that moment we all had the idea that our way of improvising was unique to the whole world. During these last eight years we've realized that there are many forms of Latin American improvisation and many other ways of improvising. The fields are opened. Now we know ourselves much better. When you have to explain what your work consists of to somebody else, it is compulsory to meditate on your profession, to get yourself in front of the mirror. You get to know little things from other people, and also big things. I always ask the rest of the improvisers, be it in Mexico or in Cerdeña, if they ever start

from the end. And yes, they do start from the end. It's surprising. And if all these different ways of improvising, so far away from each other, have come to this common point, this means it is possible to transfer it to other arenas.

In general, we have two kinds *bertsolaritza*: those with proposed themes and those without. Which type do you feel most comfortable with?

Normally, before starting I feel relaxed if I know it will be about proposed themes. It is curious to realize we feel steadier with proposed themes than without. With the free or open type, if you have an impetuous day or perhaps if your mind is clear, it conditions the improvisation a lot. But honestly, satisfaction is much higher in the performances without imposed themes. It is difficult even for a *bertsolari* to figure out how he or she began that day's improvisation.

Theater or *pelota* court audiences and the general public are two different types of audiences, I guess.

Distances are different. Performances in smaller venues usually work better: it's you, Jose María, or you, Pedro Miguel, or you, the butcher. This situation doesn't happen in a bigger theater. What we do on stage is not natural because of the microphone. We are the only ones that joke about our partner without even looking at him. We look up front, toward the audience.

And in spite of facing the audience, the audience does not know exactly what you will do.

Yes. The communication phenomenon is very difficult, very strange. And we don't know why. If I know beforehand that the night's audience will be really enthusiastic about *bertso* and will have enough time to listen to us, most surely we will start with a minor tone, not really explaining what we want to say, but suggesting ideas instead. Why? Because those who really like the *bertsos* are interested in the suggestions made as much as the explicit reasons. The line of the *bertso* continues and the public thinks, "he's going to get there." If he's not a real fan, if the distance between me and the listener is too big, well, I wouldn't start with a minor tone, but a higher tone instead; I would like to wake them up, attract them to me.

In what moment do you realize that what you're doing really works? Or are there ups and downs?

Ups and downs continually exist. The championship is the best example. But in any performance, after having dinner, in a theater, you need to learn that you'll never touch bottom, not even if it's not your best day. You need to fight and you'll find a theme with which you'll be able to communicate. And if you're doing really well, then don't get tired, go on! It is hard to find that connection point with the audience, but it is very easy to break at the same time. You should be alert at all times.

You give great importance to the way *bertsolaris* sing. Also to the gestures. Is it a matter of cadence, like the one Lazkao Txiki¹⁸ possessed?

Lazkao's style was extraordinarily exaggerated. What he spoke he would accompany with his body, his soul, his gestures, everything. I like that, because you prove you are creating at the very same time that you are expressing yourself. Now I say this, later I say another thing. It's a way of overtaking the *bertso*. There are other ways, of course. Lizaso, for example, clears it away, he lightens the *bertso* itself, but at the end, there it goes, an important idea. And, well, he sings in a way that accompanies what he improvised: he sings without even blinking until he gets to the end and then he accelerates, or he gives his voice more power. I think *bertsolaris* are all very conscious of their abilities and when singing they tend to reinforce them. The young *bertsolari* may be more preoccupied in seeing the *bertso*, in singing in a more proper way, but once you overcome the technical barrier you start to give each expression its own color.

There is an infinity of occasions on which you travel to the same places over and over again. What do you talk about during the trip? About your job, perhaps?

Matters related to *bertsolaritza* take up maybe 20 percent of the total time, since we talk about anything and everything. On our way back home, it is really possible that we comment about the theme we didn't succeed with, or we did succeed with, which themes have cleared a path without previous schemes. Maybe the whole clue for it to work is friendship. Probably Lizaso, Peñagarikano, and Sarasua have been those whom I have paired with the most frequently in free-style performances, and they are all my friends. It's a different friendship in every case. It's curious, but I think that we haven't once dined all four of us together. I know I could never get really mad at them, nor them at me, and I'm also positive that if there was any kind of problem we could make it work the following day at the latest. This situation allows you to breathe and improvise, to be relaxed.

You don't like it when your partner makes a mistake in the improvisation . . .

No, and it is not because of our big hearts, but because we are practical people. It is almost impossible for you to perform correctly if your partner makes a mistake. I don't know if it's about empathy or communication. And the mutual respect is very important. For example, we have two *bertsolaris* improvising in a controversy with a free theme—one of them carries the baton, the other one follows him; so here we find ourselves with two different kinds of loyalty and each kind of loyalty has to play its part. He who carries the baton bears the whole weight by proposing two themes, but he also enjoys the freedom to propose whatever theme he feels like. Well, this *bertsolari* should propose a theme and squeeze that theme into a series of *bertsos*. If he changes the theme rapidly, the *bertsolari* that follows will get lost in a continuous, pure, and hard improvisation. That's why each theme should be kept for a while. But the *bertsolari* who follows the trail should also show his loyalty: he should answer and not sneak away, no matter how

¹⁸ Emblematic figure of twentieth-century *bertsolaritza*.

uncomfortable or detached he is from the proposed theme. Everything gets complicated in a festival, with a large group of *bertsolaris*. Nevertheless, it is frequent that the *bertsolari* who's not performing at a certain moment "throws ideas," whispering to the one improvising at that moment. And that *bertsolari* gets those ideas and sings them. I think this is the nicest interchange that can take place on stage. The scene consists of a market of ideas. We don't stop talking and it's very necessary. If you close yourself down you will crash over the microphone. I know very well when my good day is: when I hear the theme proposed to the others and I think of a good *bertso*, and right away I tell it to my partner. Whenever that happens, by the time you are behind the microphone you know you'll always have something in your mind.

How do you manage with the following generation of *bertsolaris*, with people younger than you?

I've worked with all of them, but only once in a while. It has always been a very good relationship. But here's the problem: I have trouble when starting off. With *bertsolaris* of my own generation, like Lizaso, Peñagarikano, it's not important to me to open the way or, on the contrary, to follow the trail—that's a conceptual job. But I prefer that my partner sing the first *bertso*. Should I make all these people listen in order for me to sing any triviality? I still can't get that idea out of my mind. And with younger *bertsolaris*, it is I, due to my age, who should start. And that's hard for me.

One of them is Maialen Lujanbio, a legend in *bertsolaritza*, and not only for being a woman. You've observed her evolution.

When she excelled, people admired Maialen from a masculine view. When she was 15 she improvised pretty well, she was hard, and people claimed, "What big balls she's got!" It was something really sexist, she was judged by supposedly masculine attributes: her temper, her impulse, her starting off . . . later she evolved without losing any of the previous attributes. She's managed to build her private vision of life, she's managed to create from using her own specific language. It's impressive.

You found yourself face to face with her in the 2001 finals. At the end of the performance you hugged each other, which moved the audience—people stood up when you won for the third time.

In that final it was very clear for me if I wanted to win or not. I almost didn't want to win, but I wanted to do a very good performance. I don't like the face-to-face act, and when only Maialen and I were left I didn't want to win, I wanted her to win. But I couldn't do it badly either. I felt trapped.

To be a *bertsolari* requires continuous contact with the people before, during, and after each performance. They are always exposed. Regarding this reality, what are the qualities a *bertsolari* should have?

One shouldn't become arrogant, that's for sure. We're not that good; we simply measure words and make rhymes. And I guess that, further from that point, each one of us needs certain qualities, different for each case. But there's something we all have in common and this is the feeling that we are in a certain linguistic community that belongs to a minority. This is something essential. I can speak in Spanish and communicate in Spanish when required, but my way of expressing my life day after day is the same as when I'm onstage. It wouldn't work any other way. The audience wouldn't believe it.

How does your family handle your profession as a *bertsolari*?

Well, I believe I've been lucky with that, although I also sought out this situation. I never liked mystifying things, and today my own sons aren't interested at all in my public life. My wife is not "a wife behind her man," and she wouldn't accept that, either. Others would.

Would you like your son or daughter to become a *bertsolari* some day?

That's a frequent question. We could have three options here: they could be bad *bertsolaris* (and we wouldn't have any more problems), or they could be mediocre (and we would have a little problem, because they would like to be good), or they could be really good (and I know what it means to be a good *bertsolari*). For all this, I'd like them to just work out the ability to improvise, because this would allow them to excel in other areas. My daughter is 16 and one day she confessed she might want to become a lawyer. I told her then that it would be appropriate for her to register in a *bertso* school, where she could learn how to confront an audience—she would learn how to express herself and to refute ideas.

What are your hobbies? You're a well-known long distance runner.

I always played sports. When I was 16 I started to practice marathon running. I love everything epic, and a one-mile race is not epic at all, it's simply a race. I feel a marathon is an adventure.

What kinds of things do you read?

I love the physical experience of reading newspapers every morning. I prefer it to the radio or TV. Regarding the rest, I've read novels just because I enjoyed it so much, but I think these days I'm going through a phase where I'm hooked on literary essays. I usually read with a sponge mentality, willing to learn what I read. I don't get obsessed, but I know that everything I absorb I can use later in my improvisation. The more consciously you read and learn, the easier it will be for you to use it while improvising. I believe all information we absorb in different ways stays in our brain in different stages.

What makes you happy and what do you hate?

Lately it's hard for me to decide what makes me happy. I live so balanced . . . I've grabbed the measure of the day-to-day life. I do work, but I don't feel it is work. *Bertsolaritza* offers me much happiness. What do I hate? I'd need to look deeply . . . I hate the absence of empathy. I hate those persons who see somebody else suffering and they don't suffer themselves. I can't stand the feeling of property, I hate that tendency people have to make up "necessities." That dependence on e-mail, on mobile phones, on having a dog with a pedigree! I love freedom. I like people who simply know how to behave, and also people who know how to handle situations. That's beautiful. But they also need to be good at both.

Where do you place *bertsolaritza* in our actual society?

It is difficult to specify. *Bertsolaritza* shows at least one feature: we can manage an activity without having a plan beforehand. This doesn't mean that there's no elaboration, but in a society where everything is planned, with previous reports, we are people who improvise. And maybe we are admired for this reason.