

Interview With Maialen Lujanbio Zugasti

Estitxu Eizagirre

Maialen Lujanbio Zugasti was born in Hernani (Gipuzkoa) in 1976. She started to sing *bertsos* when she was a child and won several prizes in championships: the children's level of the Inter-school championship twice; the Osinalde Prize; the Euskal Herria National Championship finals in 1997 and 2001 (she ended second in 2001); the Gipuzkoa Championship in 2003. Lujanbio performs around 100 times a year and is one of the most solid representatives of the young generation.

Lujanbio is not only a successful *bertsolari*; she also has a degree in Fine Arts and does some work in creative writing. She served as the screenwriter for the film *Ilargiaren skretua* (*The Secret of the Moon*), as well as some short stories. She publishes editorials in newspapers regularly.

Lujanbio was also outstanding in sports when young. She played handball from beginners to junior levels, and she played for the Euskadi National Team in 1991-92.

How did you start singing *bertsos*?

There's one opinion that holds that *bertsolaritza* is transmitted through the family, that we carry it in the blood. That wasn't my case. We didn't live in a *bertsolari* environment; when I was little I didn't hear *bertsos* at home. My father and grandmother had a passion for *bertsolaritza* but kept it to themselves, and when I started to sing they began to sing those *bertsos* they already knew. Since I didn't get that influence from home, I started to sing *bertsos* at the *ikastola*¹ at the age of 11, like so many others of my generation. I remember watching a neighbor when he started to write and sing his first *bertsos* at the *ikastola*. I was curious, but it wasn't really all that important to me at that time. And then, without knowing why, I also began creating *bertsos* on my own. I didn't know the rules or the logic of the *bertso*, nothing, but somehow I did it.

There were another two kids who had a passion and talent for *bertsolaritza* at the *ikastola*, and we all began singing our *bertsos* in class: one day one of them would sing a *bertso*

¹ The *ikastolas* are Basque schools created at the end of Franco's dictatorship. The education is in the Euskara language and the schools transmit Basque culture and history. They are official schools nowadays.

to me, the following day I would sing the answer, and so on. They might not have been “real” *bertsos*, but at least we wanted them to be. When our teachers realized our enthusiasm, they proposed the founding of a *bertso-eskola*² within the *ikastola*. From there, we started to learn the basic technique at the *bertso-eskola*, refining what we had previously done on our own.

Up to what level did you learn at the *bertso-eskola*, and where and how did you learn afterwards?

It’s never been intentional; it has happened without being really conscious of what I was doing, mostly without thinking about the next step, with no intention of getting anywhere.

I went to the *bertso eskola* because I’ve always liked the language very much and I liked the whole process. On the other hand, it was also due to the group environment that we had. At the *ikastola* we learned the basic techniques, as well as the culture surrounding *bertsolaritza*: old *bertsos*, things about other *bertsolaris*, and so on. The *ikastola* gave us the language and the *bertso* in all its scope, and through this a bigger interest in tradition and the Euskara language emerged. It gave us the context in which we could start singing; it was the initial push.

But my evolution as a *bertsolari* has been pretty peculiar. I didn’t come out to the town square after being taught at the *bertso-eskola*—I started to sing in public much earlier. Therefore, I’ve learned things from both places . . . or maybe more from the town square. For example, when the *bertso-eskolas* at the *ikastolas* got together and the municipal *bertso-eskola* was created, I hardly attended. Sometimes due to laziness, other times due to lack of motivation. The group had an excellent environment, but I wasn’t motivated to go into that white classroom in the culture hall every Tuesday evening; I felt a little strange doing that.

If you didn’t sing *bertsos* at the *bertso eskola*, what did you really get from it?

I’ve always identified with the group at the *bertso-eskola*. It’s given me the human part of it, the possibility of doing things as part of a community or group. The week of the *bertso*, the parties, the performances . . . it was a group of persons who had the same enthusiasm, and we shared our feelings about the *bertsos*. It was a group with whom you could talk about *bertsos* and performances . . . it was more a bunch of friends than a place to learn for me.

What were the *bertsolaris* like when you were little?

I didn’t know any *bertsolari*, I didn’t have any idols. It isn’t that way nowadays. Today *bertsolaritza* is an activity with prestige, and is fashionable; most of the *euskaldunes* (people who speak Basque) know us because they see *bertsolaris* on television and other places.

When we started, just 15 years ago, the *bertsolaris* wouldn’t appear on TV, they didn’t have any prestige. It is almost the opposite now. Children used to make fun of us at the *ikastola*

² *Bertso-eskolas* are extracurricular classes within the *ikastola* that teach how to create *bertsos*. Most of the *bertso-eskolas* were created first at the *ikastolas*, and after that most of them became the town’s *bertso-eskola*, where children from all schools could attend.

because we sang *bertsos*. Singing *bertsos* used to be more of an adult thing, something for old men, something traditional and out of fashion that belonged to the *baserritarras* (peasants). The tendency to call *bertsolaris kaxeros*³ seems to be a thing of the past, but that's not true; we're called that now because we sing *bertsos*. Our friends couldn't understand why children like us loved doing those "old people" things.

Some years later a spectacular revolution took place; *bertsolaritza* was in fashion, and some of us youngsters came onto the scene. We changed from being seen as "country people" to being seen as modern and fashionable.

The Interschool Championships⁴ created the big push to sing in public. You've said that in those days you didn't have any references or intention of becoming a well-known *bertsolari*. What kind of advantages does that background offer?

When I started, I didn't even want to become a *bertsolari*. When you attend a championship, you do things the best you can, but the push to get to the town square was also by inertia: we got in during high tide and the flow took us from stage to stage.

I think the lack of ambition helped me later. It wasn't important to realize there were places where I couldn't sing. I didn't need to get anywhere, and therefore I've been doing things without a certain path. Those paths have emerged as I've continued.

How do you remember your great jump into the town square?

It was something really forced and being a woman helped a lot. There were some *bertsolari* women before me. I knew from the beginning that Arantzazu Loidi was one of them and that she won the Interschool Championship, although nobody told me about it. Perhaps that helped me unconsciously, that I was the only girl in the Interschool Championship. While I was getting to the finals and they saw I was singing *bertsos* in a mostly correct manner for my age, everybody started talking. I remember some newspapers called me in order to interview me when I was just 12 or 13. By then, the little girl who sang *bertsos* was a great character.

I remember one of the first calls I got was the key to get into the *bertso* world. I was called from the town of Hondarribia to sing on Women's Day. They needed two women and two men, but there weren't many *bertsolari* women then. That's why they called me, though I was only 15. When I was told I had to sing with Egaña and Lizaso, I answered that that wasn't possible. I had great difficulty in completing the *bertsos*, and I said I thought it was too much for me. Their response was the following: "If you're into this, there's no backing out." I didn't know what to say, and I couldn't refuse. That performance was the beginning of the town squares phase. Why? Because it was transmitted on TV. Television has had great influence in the process of entering the town squares and making us become public people. That performance ended

³ *Kaxero* is a kind of insult given to the *baserritarras*; there are very few *baserritarras* nowadays in *Euskal Herria*, and people had a tendency to despise them.

⁴ The Interschool Championships are competitions in which girls and boys of school age could participate. Many people and media attended to see the finals. Maialen won this championship twice.

pretty well, and it was shown on a program about *bertsolaritza* called *Hitzetik Hortzera*. From that point on, I started to be known by everyone.

I was asked to sing in other places and it was really difficult to avoid all the different performances: how to say yes or no and to whom. Since I was 15, I couldn't perform with the best *bertsolaris* because I had problems finishing a *zortziko txiki* (the smallest strophe, with four rhymes). That's why it was so forced—they had put us on a level where we didn't belong. It was something new to see a young girl singing *bertsos* surrounded by all the great *bertsolari* men.

At the beginning you were practically the only woman. What was that like?

It wasn't so unnatural for me. I've always been really enthusiastic about sports and I was used to playing with boys. Estitxu Arozena, Iratxe Ibarra, and I all started at the same time and we used to talk a lot about our situation. Relationships among girls and boys were very natural in our generation since we had been together for so long at the *bertso-eskola*.

I've always received acceptance and support from the veteran *bertsolaris* because they felt comfortable with new people. There are many other activities where new generations may be considered as competition, but not in our case. We had heard that *bertsolaritza* was about to disappear, so the arrival of new young people was welcomed. I think the veterans' attitude was exemplary. I would love to have that capacity for being so receptive with future generations. But they could also be paternalistic and protective of the tradition. I guess the new situation was difficult for them as well, singing together with a teenage girl. When the young people sang *bertsos*, we were a bit aggressive, but the older singers made an effort not to be too aggressive in exchange. Our part was difficult, but theirs wasn't easy either.

The public, even the women, had a hard time accepting women singing in public, or believing that their words would be of any importance. Many thought it was surprising, and others probably thought it was just a passing fad, and that we would leave just as we had come. One of the first comments was, "she did it well in spite of being a girl!" This wasn't a joke; they hadn't seen a girl sing *bertsos* and they were surprised to see that I did it well. What we can conclude from this is difficult, of course. Some would say they would never get used to listening to a girl singing *bertsos*; they thought it wasn't the same. We've heard all kinds of comments, and I feel that I've heard too many bad things. In general, I believe listeners ultimately accepted us because the *bertsolaris* themselves had accepted us. In that sense, I will always appreciate the protective attitude from the veteran *bertsolaris*, even when they were overly protective.

You've said you were invited to sing many places because you were a woman. What was your attitude toward this?

We took advantage of the opportunity we had been given. We were invited because we were special, and wherever we went we tried to sing *bertsos* the best we could. It's been hard work. "I'm not going to shout, I'll be silent, but with time you will accept that I can sing good *bertsos* and you will listen." That has been our logic. It has been a very smart and very female strategy. I believe that it has been the right path.

When you were 18, you went to Bilbao to study Fine Arts.⁵ What happened in Bilbao?

My time spent in Bilbao was my student phase—those days when you leave your parents' house and share a flat or move in with friends. It is you who has to impose rules upon yourself. Everything is a discovery . . . it's wonderful. I live in a small town, and Bilbao is a city. There you can see things you won't see in small towns: the cosmopolitan environment, all kinds of people, all kinds of ideas . . . it is very enriching if you're receptive. You meet old rockers and new people, there are many more experiences to be had. Things happen and you do things that aren't possible in a small town, and since you're anonymous, you discover new aspects of yourself.

I was already singing *bertsos* from town to town by then. Bilbao in general hasn't been so Basque-oriented and enthusiastic about *bertsos*, and since I was anonymous there I was more relaxed.

After the initiation years, you reached the growth years. When and how did you improve your skills?

Just moving ahead gives you the opportunity to improve. The training of our generation has come only after long practice. After performing so often, your skin hardens, you learn the tricks to being on stage, you go to many towns and meet a lot of people . . . all this enriches the *bertsolari* and gives us the chance to think.

But I believe that personal improvement of the *bertsos* is linked to the different moments in time. When you're 15, you are not at the same point in your life as when you're 25. You have more experience, your ideologies develop in the widest sense, you're becoming more and more of a person, and that's reflected in the *bertsos*, without a doubt. After all, when singing *bertsos* you are also talking, it comes out of your mouth, from your perspective and from your experience.

When we were younger our way of making up *bertsos* was probably more limited regarding the themes, with fewer dimensions, more direct, more consistent, and perhaps even more rebellious. As time goes by, you start to see things in a different way and your way of singing *bertsos* changes: you have more dimension, it's more complex, more subtle.

How has your way of singing *bertsos* changed as time has gone by?

At the beginning I would take advantage of the situation of being a young girl in an adult man's world. In those days, besides what I could do, the context conditioned everything. Since *bertsolaritza* is a dialectic dispute or argument, we youngsters had to appear to be prouder, stronger, and more stable than we really were in order to be up to the level of those great and veteran *bertsolaris*. That provoked us to develop a more aggressive way of singing *bertsos*.

⁵ It is said that Bilbao is the only city in Euskal Herria, because half of the two million inhabitants in the entire Euskal Herria region live there, and therefore the city has a very cosmopolitan atmosphere.

People were surprised because we maintained that stereotype for several years, and people thought we really were that way.

As you mature and you feel more and more comfortable with the *bertsos*, you have other necessities. You need to talk a different way, about other things, with other tones. And you also try to intensify your way of singing *bertsos*. I started out very generally, but little by little I started to modify my image and my *bertsolari* persona, getting closer and closer to where I am now. Maybe the most evident indication of that evolution was the Euskal Herria Championship in 2001.

What exactly was the change that took place in the 2001 Championship?

It was a very conscious change. I used that championship as a platform to show the people a process I had been carrying out for a long time, in order to break away from my persona and say: “I can do better than singing answering *bertsos*, or funny, provoking, and insolent *bertsos*.” That was a bet I had with myself, but the process came from long before. I wanted to take my way of singing to other dimensions.

I did it consciously, but the problem is that people expect something from you, which corresponds to who they think you are. People don’t think it is credible nor do they like it when you change. In general, people accept what they expect and they can’t accept what they do not expect. My feeling was that by trying to change my expected persona I was sacrificing the people’s approval. I actually heard less clapping. But that was what I wanted, that was my choice. I had already drowned in my stereotyped persona, so I didn’t always want to do what people expected from me. I was also more mature and wanted to move on to other things.

I made a great effort to demonstrate to myself and to the rest of the people that I could also perform more serious subject matter well; that what I might say could also be interesting, or even that I had something to say; that I could also sing softly, and could sing *bertsos* directly from the heart; that I could sing with other dimensions, and get out some other aspects of my personality I did all this to open myself.

I began to try to change my performance style. For example, the logic in my way of singing up until then was quite stressed: I would leave the reason till the end. For example, I gave the final reason first and then I would add everything on top of it. In that championship I tried not to put everything at the end, or to finish the *bertsos* in such a radical way—so serious, but softer and suggestive. I tried to balance the load of the *bertso* in another way.

That year you left with an expedition during which you saw a lot of the world. How did it influence you as a *bertsolari*?

I don’t know up to what point it influenced my *bertsos*, but although you’re not conscious of it in the moment, all personal experiences are kept inside yourself. I went seven months without singing. That hadn’t happened to me since I started. I returned motivated to work hard, fresh and willing to sing.

That tendency of the *bertsolaris* to go on holiday is new, since most of the performances are done during the summer, when the rest of the people are on holiday. Until now *bertsolaris* have lived for the *bertsos*. You, on the other hand, like to get out for a while. Are you looking for a new way of life for the *bertsolaris*?

I can't understand things as the rest of the *bertsolaris* do. I don't feel things the same way and I don't want to live them that way. Some *bertsolaris* went on holiday before I did. But there's also a saying that in a certain way, "you are at the people's service" (since the *bertsos* promote Basque culture, language, and the freedom to express yourself, since we were oppressed for so many years). When you were called to perform, it wasn't well accepted if you said no. Even accepting tradition up to a point, I believe that taking a break every once in a while is better for everyone, since they will return in better shape and will sing better.

Until now the *bertsolaris* have had a *bertsolari* way of life. They are *bertsolaris* whether they are singing *bertsos* or not. I think I would get exhausted if I did it that way. I don't see myself doing that. I sing *bertsos*, that's my profession nowadays, and also my greatest passion, but I have another life besides *bertsolaritza*. Although both lives are intermingled, "I improvise *bertsos*" more than "I am a *bertsolari*."

Regarding your personality, how do you think *bertsolaritza* has shaped you?

My mother says she was shocked when I started to sing *bertsos*. She said, "how can you get yourself in front of the public being so shy in your private life?"

I don't know to what extent *bertsolaritza* has shaped me, or if it was just myself singing *bertsos*. The only objective data I have is that I am 28 now and that I've been singing *bertsos* for 17 years, of which I've spent 13 years in the circuit going from town to town and being well known. I can't imagine my life without it. When I was younger, while discovering the world, I was already a *bertsolari*. My life rotates around this. To be known and to sing in front of people molds your character.

How important is personality in being a *bertsolari*?

I think it's important to have certain features; one of them is being secure in oneself, since you're getting on stage in front of the public to express your opinions. I don't think there has to be a special way of singing *bertsos*. That wouldn't be interesting. Fortunately, we never know how we become *bertsolaris*. Maybe those who expect less from it are the ones who succeed. You need charisma so the public listens to you, to attract people, to communicate . . . and fortunately, no one has found any chemical formula to produce this yet.

Nowadays there are many *bertsolaris* with good personalities and good stage presence, more than there are offers to sing. And I think natural selection will be driven more by personal qualities than by the technique used. In my opinion, those who are more charismatic will go on; those who have a special personality, those who have something special to say, or even those who have a special way of saying it, a particular way of seeing the world, or a special sense of humor.

What kind of work does the *bertsolari* have to do off of the stage?

Although it may seem you're not working, you are always alert, like a microphone or a tape recorder. The basic training consists of stocking everything useful in your head. You're always thinking about everything. What I do during the year isn't done for the *bertsos*, but at the end it serves for that too; I'm aware of the news, I think about things that are happening, I define where I am with regard to the events But you really prepare yourself consciously for the championships.

Those of us who sing *bertsos* have a natural enthusiasm about the language, and we have a special attitude with regard to a nice sentence, a joke, or a new word. When we hear a song we listen in a special way.

What are your sources of inspiration?

Books, television, movies . . . and also the street. When we walk on the streets we are alert, we watch, we try to see things, what kind of details can awaken some interest in our minds That fieldwork is very nice: when I am out of my familiar context, or in another city, I see new things and I describe them.

The sceneries fill you up a lot, but do they also empty you?

On one hand, going from performance to performance is a real physical beating. On the other hand, nowadays *bertsolaris* are known in the Basque world; they are a reference, they are well known. That's not just because of being famous (in fact, the Basque community is very small and the *bertsolaris* are not that well known in the Spanish-speaking world), but you are a known face. That's satisfying, but also tiring.

Besides that, the Championship also involves getting into the media world and it also means everyone has to be in charge of the right measures to follow. Right at this moment, I'm in a crisis with the media. I don't feel like appearing on TV or in newspapers. Maybe it's because TV and newspapers are like this: they make you become a star and people only know you because you appear on TV. I don't feel the need to say anything at this moment. I don't feel like being seen by the whole Basque Country, or appearing on TV or becoming famous. I don't want to become a public person, although in fact I am one because I sing in front of the public. I accept what's expected from me, but from that point on I try to control it: if I'm being interviewed, I try to say interesting things. I try not to appear in the thousands of insubstantial programs on television, because they require you to do silly things.

And this is the contradiction: our activity is in the public eye, but at the same time I try to hide among people who also appreciate discretion.

Last year you participated in the opinion section in the *Berria* newspaper.⁶ I guess that added to your exhaustion.

Yes, lately I've been giving everything of myself daily. It has been exhausting and now I feel like hiding. Every morning I've shown my face to the people. But it has left me with a very good feeling. It has forced me to work day after day, to write everyday, and writing is similar to singing *bertsos*: it is creative, it involves mastering the language, word games, ideas, and ideologies Although they are two different activities, deep down they are very similar things. They force you to think about themes and to elaborate upon your point of view. It has been very enriching for me.

“Language” is a word that has come out frequently. How does a performer actually *feel* a language? Does the fact that the Euskara is a language spoken by the minority limit your production?

No matter if many or few people speak it, the language belongs to me. I can't conceive the language as something external, as a tool used to write or to sing *bertsos*. I *feel* in Euskara. Euskara is my way of understanding the world, my way of behaving, my first language, my sense of humor, my way of feeling, my way of speaking. It comes out spontaneously. It's not an ideological matter, it isn't something external. It comes from inside; that's how I feel it and that's how I do it. Now, when we are starting to go abroad, you may think we can't go far with Euskara, but I can't imagine myself working with another language. It's our way of singing, and the main feature of our identity. Why can't we go abroad? What can we do—shall we start singing in English? That doesn't make any sense. The objective isn't to become one in this world, it is to be ourselves, and to let our identities become known, but always in our way, not transforming things into another language.

The *bertsos* have connected you with tradition. Are they a modern instrument at the same time?

As we have explained, there was a change in a very short period of time. We *bertsolaris* were considered part of the tradition, and then we started to appear on TV. We were a bunch of youngsters who were aesthetically very different from the previous *bertsolaris*. Ideologically our world, our musical references, and our hobbies were very different and very modern. Also our problems were very real: drugs or even the way we dealt with our relationships. It was a small revolution.

I'm more a product of our time. The older *bertsolaris* are more of their time. That has been one of the loveliest things that has happened in the *bertsolaritza* these last years: we have passed from a world that seemed very closed and traditional into a world in which we are able to

⁶ The *Berria* newspaper is the only newspaper published in the Basque language and distributed throughout the whole Basque Country region.

demonstrate that *bertsos* can adapt to any context, since they are something verbal and improvised. That's one of the biggest values of the *bertsos*.

We might be asked to sing in a little rural town any weekend, where we can be asked to sing on their themes and we sing mostly for elderly people. The following day we might have to go to a squatter house in another town, with their youngsters It's very important, because we can demonstrate that *bertsos* adapt to all different situations. Within two days you can sing in a tavern in a city and in the festivals in a little town.

You won the Gipuzkoa *bertsolari* championship in 2003. Who did you dedicate that triumph to and why?

I dedicated it to the women, mostly those who have stopped half way from their objectives, those women who didn't see their dreams accomplished due to societal pressure. Why? Because in order for me to win that championship many other women have sung *bertsos* before me, opening a path, and maybe they never won any championship nor had any success. They did silent work, daily, invisible, getting no praise or appreciation at all.

How do you see the situation for *bertsolari* women today?

More and more girls are joining up And what pleases me most is that the issue is more present among us: how women feel in front of the public, what kind of importance the words of women have, what credibility for people, how they feel aesthetically in front of the public I think this will all help us analyze and go forward. We all have a great deal of subconscious values and attitudes, although we don't realize it. Those are values that are very present in our society, since the *bertsolari* world is a model of society. And without noticing, those values are conditioning us, they are restricting us. It would be good for everyone—not only women—to have the necessary attitude to detect those things in our subconscious.

How does the *bertsolari* dress up to appear on stage?

One of the features of *bertsolaritza* is we that don't have specific clothes for the stage. The *bertsolari* normally has a drink in the bar before performing, and gets to the stage with the same clothes, with that shirt and jeans. I think it's an interesting phenomenon, since it shows our proximity to the public: it says, "I'm one of your kind." When the performance has ended, the *bertsolari* doesn't go to the dressing room; instead, he mingles with people and has a drink with friends. Although that can be a little hard on certain occasions, it is also interesting that such a successful phenomenon is so close to the people. Although by their activity *bertsolaris* are artists, they're not characters; they are close to everyday people.

We don't even pay close attention to the stage very often, which is often very crude or simple. There is a tremendous contrast between the success that *bertsolaritza* has and the treatment it receives; we don't dress up just because we might be on TV. That would mean that globalization has absorbed us. Following what's fashionable, or the standard, or what's on TV is not interesting. We have to preserve our own features.

The importance of the clothes is that they agree with each *bertsolari*'s persona. People listen to your *bertsos*, that's true, but they also watch you. Depending on the clothes you're wearing, you may not feel like yourself and then you won't sing comfortably. Besides, it can happen that with a certain message given out by your *bertsos* your clothes might not be believable or coherent. We all think about how to dress for the performances. Those who wear worn-out jeans don't do so by chance or because they're careless; they wear those clothes because they decided to do so. That means that behind those clothes there's an implicit message, a contrast, that at the end you find interesting.

With the actual performances, and since TV began to take part, I understand that there are aesthetic matters that need to be taken care of. It's a matter of moderation.

You're collaborating with Bertsozale Elkarteia.⁷ Why?

I think the majority of us identify with Bertsozale Elkarteia and we feel it as our nucleus. I also feel indebted to them, because we're singing and there's a lot of people working in the Bertsozale Elkarteia, and I have also started to participate. I agree with the project. We define what we want our world to become and we are using certain strategies in order to obtain that. Things have been done right so far, and there's a lot of work left to do, mostly due to the special situation we have here in the Basque Country. There are three languages and Euskara is the minority language, so it's in danger of extinction. The constant political conflict affects the *bertsolaritza* tradition.

⁷ Translator's note: Friends of the Verse Association in the Basque Country.