

Interview With Joxe Agirre Esnal

Laxaro Azkune

Joxe Agirre Esnal (Oranda) was born in an Oranda country house in the outskirts of Azpeitia on April 13th, 1929 into a family with six siblings. Esnal is now married and has four children of his own. Throughout his life he's worked as a farmer, cart-maker, stonecutter, and *bertsolari*, among other professions. His first performance as a *bertsolari* occurred on the balcony of a bar in 1952. Since then he's traveled throughout the Basque region, improvising *bertsos* and adapting continuously according to the four generations with whom he has shared the stage.

As a *bertsolari* with substantial technical proficiency, Esnal has been recognized largely for his keen instincts as an improviser. Although he's earned important prizes, championships have generally not been his strong point. Despite this fact, he has won the affection and admiration of the *bertsolari* community and a book has been written based on his life and work.¹

What are some of your memories from childhood?

As a child I had very bad health, to the point that my family once thought I had died and left me in the cradle, but after a while, by chance, I began to recover. The first memory I have from my childhood, from when I was about three, is that I had to learn how to walk again. I remember my uncle grumbling at me, asking me to do things in order to make me walk. That's the earliest memory I have.

How large was your family?

After the war there were 13 people in our house—six brothers and sisters, my parents, grandparents, two uncles, and one of my mother's sisters. At the time of the great hunger, there were 13 mouths to feed.

¹ The book, entitled *Mozketaren maixua*, was written by Joxe Agirre.

What kind of friends lived nearby?

In the closest country house, Oranda-Goika, in Abeta, which is a little further down . . . we used to play with several of the kids. We didn't have any toys compared to children nowadays, and we would do whatever possible to enjoy ourselves. Wooden bicycles and so on.

Did you have time to play?

Yes, we used to play. But when we were around nine or ten years old, we had to help a lot with the housework. I was very young when I started to cut the grass with a scythe.

What kind of games were you used to playing?

Catch and go, blind man's buff, and other games that usually consisted of us covering our eyes while the rest would hide Another of our favorite games was to look for birds' nests. We used to climb trees better than they do now

Did *bertsos* have a special place in your games?

I've been an enthusiast of *bertsos* since I was little. My grandfather had some special *bertsos* he had composed during a hard winter that killed several sheep and left those still alive really damaged. He composed around 12 or 14 *bertsos*, in *minor bederatziko*.² He didn't like to sing his own *bertsos*, though; he used to sing *bertsos* created by Udarregi and others that he knew by heart. By that time I already had some interest in the *bertsos* and I would ask him to sing whenever he played with me, but he never sang his own *bertsos*. I feel sorry not to have remembered them. According to what I've been told, they were really good, but since he didn't know how to write he neither wrote them nor taught them to anybody at home. They were lost. He died when I was 12. He suffered so much his last years; he lost his mind, he would cry for fear of hell. He said that if the priests were right he wouldn't find salvation.

What were your school days like?

I mostly hung out in Lasao, a neighborhood of Azpeitia. I started school when I was nine and left at 11. Mine was a quick career. And during those two years I didn't attend class half of the time. At that time we already had to help at home and there was a lot of work to do, like taking care of the sheep

What memories do you have from your school?

As I recall, it wasn't that bad at all. I had a good memory and I was good at learning by heart. Mr. Justo, the priest of our neighborhood, was our teacher and, although there were older

² Translator's note: *minor bederatziko* is a strophe composed of nine parts.

people than me at school who had been there longer, he once asked something—I don't recall it right now—something we had to learn by heart, and I was the only one to recite it correctly. I remember he told me once, “it's you—not the rest—who should attend school.” At the end of my school years I took my First Communion on Ascension Day. My birthday is in April and I remember I was about to turn 11. From that point on, I was entitled to work, so that was the end of my schooling.

At that age you don't usually think that school will be necessary for the rest of your life and since your parents didn't think much of it, either—and there was so much work to do—anything else was more important than school. In those days, work meant everything, to learn how to work and to be educated through work. When I was 11 I remember I spent an entire day cutting hay with my father, in a field close to our house. I worked at that country house until I got married. After getting married I started to work in the quarry.

Any more memories from your youth? Any entertainment?

We didn't have much time to have fun. We only had one day a week free—Sundays—and more than once we had to work on a Sunday because my father said so. He would simply say there was work to do and we would do it without complaint. Everything was different then. When we had enough time to have fun, we had a place near home where a pilgrimage would take place every Sunday; there was a cottage there and that was our meeting-point. There was one kid in our group, Mario, from a country house called Abeta, who still lives in Arrona and who played the accordion a little. He would play the accordion and we would dance . . . that was our way of having fun. We also used to go to other places nearby where other pilgrimages took place, like Koostite, Villa Plata, and others. And as I mentioned before, this only happened on Sundays and we were really happy when we could celebrate, since it wasn't possible every time.

What were some of the most common jobs that you had to do in the country house?

Tending to wheat, hay, fern . . . one after another. Apart from that we worked a lot with the oxen driving a cart. For almost ten years I worked as a cart driver, sometimes hauling logs of wood and other things . . . from Izarraitz to the country house called Badioleitxo. During winter we always worked as cart drivers. Normally we had a couple of oxen and sometimes we had a third one just in case one of the oxen got injured. Besides that, we also transported a lot of firewood for the bakery, from the backside of Izarraitz. There were no paths like today. From Izarraitz we'd go down to the country house Gallegi and from there to Azpeitia on the road, carrying everything we were able to. But we were always afraid of getting fined, since our carts had very thin wheels and if it was hot they would make furrows on the heated asphalt, which we could be punished for. Besides that, the road wasn't the best place to go with the oxen . . . Really, I've made so many trips like those that I'll never forget.

What about pilgrimage places, dances, *bertsos*?

I used to dance and also to sing *bertsos*. One of our friends in our group came from Abalzisketa, and he worked as a servant in the country house Bentaberri. We both worked as cart drivers and, since he was as enthusiastic about the *bertsos* as myself, we used to sing during our work—he would propose a “forced starting” and I would answer.

Did you like listening to other *bertsolaris*?

In Azpeitia, around Saint Thomas’ Day, an important festival always took place where the best *bertsolaris* would perform. Uztapide, Basarri, Zepai, Txapel . . . and later Lasarte and Lizaso also joined up. I was still too young.

That would have been after the Civil War.

Yes, I was seven when the war started. During those years festivals were forbidden. That would only happen later. In those days, loudspeakers didn’t exist and I remember that Txapel didn’t have much of a voice but you could still hear him perfectly when he sang from the Town Hall balcony. There was total silence, you couldn’t hear a fly. By then, every *bertso* I heard I could learn by heart.

I was still young but the *bertsos* attracted me so much. In those days the *bertsolaris* used to have dinner in a bar in Azpeitia—it was frequently the Bar Tomasena. After having dinner they would start singing and we would listen as if hypnotized. Those were different days. After a festival today the *bertsolaris* normally return home, but it didn’t happen that way before; they would stay in the town and sometimes they would put on a much better act than the one they had already given. It was that way in those days.

You started publicly singing verses on Saint Agueda’s Eve, correct?

Yes, for many years I sang verses on Saint Agueda’s Eve, up until I got married. I got married on January 31st, and the following February 4th we were still on our honeymoon, so that was the first performance I missed. There have still been only a few times that I’ve missed them. The last ones have been just in these last few years, due to exceptional reasons.

My first performance in public was with a person called Mandiolatza who could also sing *bertsos*. I didn’t dare sing alone, I was too shy. I remember later that I sang with a person from Loiola, Ignacio Errementari, but the rest of the time I just went along with my group. Then I took part in one or two performances in nearby neighborhoods: Madariaga, Aizpurutxo, Martirieta . . . There were no more than four performances in public a year. Then I attended—or more correctly, my friends forced me to attend—the *bertsolaris*’ championship in Aguinaga. I was lucky enough to win and later I started to take part in more festivals. In just one year I did more than I had performed in my whole life. You have to consider that I wasn’t that young, since I was already 29.

When you were young, you were also enthusiastic about sports, *aizkolari* (wood-cutting) . . .

I was preparing myself for a career. One of those decisions you make in the moment. People in the Landeta neighborhood challenged the Izarraitz neighborhood to a race, and my uncles who were there accepted the bet, putting some money on the Korrale bar. The candidate from Landeta was some fellow called Lesaka, who is now a Jesuit. I began to prepare myself to compete as well. But they wouldn't give me water when I was thirsty, since they thought it was harmful. I wasn't that fat, and, together with the weight I lost, I became a skinny thing. What suffering! Then, Lesaka's family didn't let him bet since they thought it wasn't good to get into the habit of gambling. The bet was suspended.

I also spent some time as an *aizkolari*, doing some exhibitions during the pilgrimages we made to the Izarraitz neighborhood with Errekartetxo, Jáuregui, and so on. I also took part in some bets on *aizkolaris* in the bull-ring of Azpeitia, against Xagua, Bildotxola I was really enthusiastic, but I lacked strength.

If I'm not mistaken, in one of those bets you also met a person who later would become your best friend as a *bertsolari*, Imanol Lazkano . . .

I was around 24 or 25 and there was a challenge from the group Landeta against the group of Izarraitz. Imanol was with the Landeta group and I was with the Izarraitz group. Imanol was around 17 or 18 years old. I think it was in San Sebastián or somewhere nearby, and it was a holiday in Azpeitia. We met face to face in the Etxezuri bar, as if we were two rams. We did what we could. The best part is that we ended as friends and it was a lasting friendship. We promised each other that if either of us received an invitation to sing, we would call each other, and so we started to sing together. How many times have we sung together since then!

Do you remember your first performance as a *bertsolari*?

I believe the first time was from the balcony of the Arrona bar. José Lizaso used to sing with José Blanco, but Blanco couldn't do it at the last minute. They knew I used to sing and so they called me . . . probably that was my first official performance. And later I think it was in Madariaga. Then, together with Imanol, they would call me to perform for lunches at the Brotherhood of the Third Order. I don't think they paid much, but they demanded a lot.

Do you remember being nervous during that first performance?

Time helps you to forget things, but I'm sure I was pretty nervous. I had a bad time during all championships, but I think that my worst moment as a *bertsolari* happened in Asteasu. I'll never be able to forget that! We just had our youngest daughter and we didn't know if she was healthy or if perhaps she had some kind of deficiency. The festival conductor didn't know anything about this, I'm sure, but it happened that he gave me the following theme: "two *bertsos* for a subnormal child." I didn't have a good time at all. I was out of my mind! That was the

worst moment I've had as a *bertsolari*. Later I had to sing similar things more than once, but you get over it with time.

We can say after Aguinaga's championship that you were officially a *bertsolari* . . .

That's right. After that Imanol Lazkano and I have traveled together to many places to perform. José Lizaso is two years older than me, but he started to sing with the best *bertsolaris* much earlier than I did. He used to sing mostly with Uztapide, Lasarte, and the rest of that group. I also used to go to Lizaso's bar, and sang with him more than once. He even invited me many times to sing together, but I didn't dare. I could have started much younger if I hadn't been such a coward. I wouldn't have gone to the Aginaga championship if it hadn't been for my friends who registered me without saying a single word . . . when the date arrived I couldn't say no. They just put me in the car and said, "let's go sing!"

Those performances you didn't dare to do when you were younger are being done now . . .

It will be difficult to overcome what wasn't done before.

Do you think your family and friends have helped you become a *bertsolari*? Have you felt restrained at any point by them?

At the beginning I got some reprimands at home. My mother didn't usually scold us too much, but whenever I got home later than midnight on any Sunday, she would turn really serious. "You've returned home really late tonight," she would say. "I'm sure you've been singing *bertsos* and those silly things. We will not raise our children that way." That's what she would tell me.

I just remembered that during my first official performance, from the balcony of Arrona bar . . . that day had many ups and downs. It was the harvesting period. I remember the day before I was cutting wheat with a scythe—that's how we used to do it at home—and I remember it was really hot and I was exhausted. The performance at Arrona bar was the following day, and I remember my father telling me when I got home that one of his friends, a man who lived in a country house near ours, had asked about me. My father answered that I had left to sing some *bertsos*, and this man replied, "Have you let him go to sing *bertsos*? I don't think it is good idea that the son of a country house family goes to sing *bertsos*." That was what they thought of the *bertsolaritza* movement in those days.

Then one day I had to sing with Uztapide. That was my first performance with Uztapide, and it took place in Olaberri. After we sang, some of the people on the festival committee approached us and asked Uztapide, "How much was it, Manuel?" "It will be five hundred *pesetas*, and the tip as you wish," he responded. Do you realize how much five hundred *pesetas* was in those days? I returned home so happy. It was normal that we gave all our money to our mother if we ever earned anything, which was difficult. The following morning I gave my mother all of the money and she asked: "so this is what you made singing *bertsos*?" I said yes,

and she said, “I wish you had to go every day to sing!” That’s true. My mother used to reprimand me much more than my father.

Your brothers and sisters, your friends . . . they have supported you?

A lot. Brothers and sisters, friends . . . a lot of people have cheered me on. The hardest people were at home.

When you were younger, do you think the *bertsos* helped you to get attention from girls?

I don’t know if they have helped much; there were people much quicker than I in those matters.

Your wife has always accompanied you along the way as a *bertsolari*.

She’s never said anything against it. On the contrary, she also liked *bertsolaris* and it provided a good income for our family, so it was really necessary. I’ve always accomplished all the promises I’ve made to her. We had a day each year in which most of the *bertsolaris* would meet with our respective wives. We wouldn’t ever agree to sing anywhere else on that day; that was a sacred day.

Your sons and daughters are also proud of their *bertsolari* father.

Completely.

How were you able to combine your job with *bertsolaritza*?

Those years when I worked as a stonecutter, I always worked part-time since I worked for a country house. Sometimes, when they needed a lot of help and it was really necessary, I didn’t go with the *bertsolaris*, but this happened only a very few times. On days like that the owner would say to me, “since it is we who pay you this time, it is better for you not to go.” This happened sometimes, but not often. In those days, after spending two days singing I returned to my job and the owner told me, “You have to sing today too because Mitxelena has called asking for you to go.” I turned around and said, “Let’s sing!” At that time I didn’t have a telephone at home and I used to get the messages at the quarry.

And who was in charge of the work at the country house?

When I started to work at the quarry there was less work to do than at the country house . . . the cattle grazed freely and, although there were things to do, it wasn’t too heavy. I’ve said there was less work, but it was always too much. Then you had to go home and start all over again with the work there, feeding cattle and so on. The same as in the morning, since I had to feed them before I left for work. The day was very long.

Has religion influenced you in any way in being a *bertsolari*?

I'm sure it did at the beginning, but fortunately for me in my *bertsolari* life I've always had priests who have supported the *bertsolari* movement a lot. In the town of Azpeitia, Mr. Jose Larrañaga ("Txortena"), Mr. Juan Bautista Ezeizabarrena, and others, they all were very enthusiastic. We also used to go to the monastery in Markina town. The Lekuonas, Aranaldes, and others have been very good friends of ours.

As a *bertsolari* you've had to sing in all kind of events—festivals, verses, after big celebrations, championships In which have you felt more comfortable?

In those performances following large-scale dinners I've always felt the most comfortable. Saint Agueda's Eve is very hard work. More than once I have gotten back home and said, "no more," but the following year I've gone back there again, since you tend to forget the bad things, fortunately. I've always felt more confident in those events after such dinners and nowadays it's the same.

Why is that?

That's how I am. I've always felt uncomfortable and nervous in town squares. In the events after those group meals I'm more relaxed. There's no other reason.

Regarding those *bertsolari* performances, it is not the same performing in a festival in the town square as it is in a theater or *pelota* court. I've participated in all kinds, but it depends a lot on the mood you are in on that particular day.

Does it have anything to do with your partners or colleagues?

Are there any bad partners or colleagues? They are all great, both men and women; I get along perfectly well with everybody. When I think about it, I probably feel most comfortable with youngsters.

But in spite of everything, you feel better with those partners with whom you sing more often. During one particular period I used to sing a lot with Imanol Lazkano, and right at the beginning of the song I would know where he was heading. That eases things a lot, gives you more time to think about it. It is worse not to have a clue where your partner is heading and to find yourself blank. That's really hard.

Who are the *bertsolaris* with whom you've sung most?

As I've mentioned before, for a long time it has been Imanol Lazkano. After the championship in 1982, and since there were a lot of festivals with eight finalists, I sang with José Lizaso more than with Lazkano. I've sung with Lasarte, Azpillaga (a very good partner to sing with) . . . I've sung a lot with Lazkao Txiki, too. He began performing in public very late, the same as me.

What has *bertsolaritza* meant in your life? How much time have you devoted to creating *bertsos*?

It was more time before than nowadays. I used to sing while milking the cows and doing work.

I'm sure that whenever you are alone your mind starts to sing.

Once in a while, you're right.

Are there any ways you have tried to improve? How did you learn?

By listening to the others. You may hear good rhymes by someone, you might hear a certain sentence by somebody else . . . all those things remain in your mind. Not only among the *bertsolaris* but also among the public. You can find a pearl from any conversation, that's why you need to be alert at all times. In our days we didn't have schools to become *bertsolaris*; we learned by always paying attention to what's being said. During the festivals, due to my limited knowledge level, my greatest worry has always been, "let's see if I don't get a theme I don't know anything about"

Maybe you don't read enough?

Almost nothing at all, and what I read doesn't stay in my mind for as long as what I hear. It was the same then. What I read I quickly forget, what I hear lasts longer.

How did you learn *bertso* technique?

In order to sing comfortably you have to think about the last strophe and then you need to lead the *bertso* toward that final sentence. If the last strophe is powerful enough, it will be fine. If you get the two last strophes instead of just one, it's even better. But it has happened before that I had to sing without any last strophe. We all have certain bad days in which you don't get anything in your mind, but since your partner has finished you have to start, and do the best you can! But it can also happen that after those bad moments, the most brilliant ideas start to come. This work is that special.

What's your most difficult exercise?

Without a doubt doing the theme-based series alone is the most difficult for me. I feel contest is much easier. I've even heard Uztapide say more than once that he also thinks that theme-based exchanges were his most difficult work. He used to say, "we're used to answering our partner and therefore this is the hardest for me as well."

Why do you feel so comfortable with the *punto corrido*?³

In our case—Imanol and me—it's because it's an exercise we've practiced a lot and we know each other very well. Imanol is a very good partner for the *punto corrido*. Two persons are better at doing that exercise. At one point in time it was very popular to do it with three, but it's tricky. The person who starts lets his partner know how he wants to finish in order for him to open the path for the final goal to be made by the first person, instead of finishing it himself. If he went ahead and finished, he would impede his colleague saying what he had already planned and therefore the partner would feel betrayed. When this happens with two people, you have to answer each prompt coming from your partner and I like that better.

What's a good *bertso* for you? What's essential?

Good rhyme and an exact meter, and if you can also say things pretty well that's even better. If the rhyme is bad, that can't be a good *bertso* for me, no matter how much content it has. The first things for me are the good rhyme and the exact meter.

How do you explain that your presence is still requested alongside the young *bertsolari*? What's your secret?

Well, I don't know. I don't do anything special, I always do the same things, I do what I know and what I can. I'm really glad they call me. Even more, if they are youngsters who call me to go together to a festival, that makes me even happier. At my age I don't really feel comfortable when driving; my eyes, as well as the rest, are not at their best. As a driver I've never been good and now, with all those roundabouts on the road I feel lost in places I know well. When somebody calls me to go someplace together I feel enormously happy.

We still can see you feel comfortable singing *bertsos* . . .

Not really; it is easier for me now to forget things. Not every day is the same, though. I don't always get it right, but what can I do? One of two options—either I retire completely or I just go where I'm being called to go. There's no other choice.

In your life as a *bertsolari*, it's probable that you've had to experience several changes. What do you think has changed most?

Mostly those theme-based performances done alone with *bertsos* with many strophes. We got that trend from Bizkaia. I never heard either Uztapide or Lasarte sing longer *bertsos* than the major *hamarreko*,⁴ unless required, no matter how good they were. In one of the championships

³ Translator's note: *punto corrido* involves leaving the line open for a partner to follow the *bertso*.

⁴ Translator's note: the major *hamarreko* is a strophe composed of ten parts.

he was obliged to sing in minor *bederatziko*, and he also had to do a *poto*.⁵ He wouldn't sing unless required. Those famous *bertsos* sung to the Mother were also sung in minor *hamarreko*. He wouldn't go over ten strophes when intervening alone. There's been a radical change in that sense. On the other hand, the *bertsolari*'s own work has changed a lot. I remember I spent three days in Huizi town, in Nafarroa; two were spent with Mitxelena and one with Lopategi. That's not good, either. In those little towns it's always the same people you sing to. I still remember what I saw then—pigs grazing right in front of our eyes while singing.

You have probably sung to everybody in your life—to the country house world, to everyday people, to the priests . . .

The best for me are the little towns. The majority are people from country houses, like myself, and I've always felt comfortable in that world. It's always been easier for me to sing themes for them. I've always been worried about not knowing anything about the theme I was to sing, more than the *bertso* itself. What do you say if you don't know what the theme is about?

Have you changed your technique of singing *bertsos* in any way?

Not me. And how could I start to do new things now?

Have you ever trained in the minor *bederatziko* on your own?

Why should I practice that if I know I'm not good at it?

You've told me before that your grandfather composed in minor *bederatziko*.

That's true. I've also composed some and I've sung them on Radio Loiola. But I know I'm not good at it.

You've also noticed a change in the Euskara language, am I right?

I've lived through the unifying of Euskara, the new standard. Youngsters nowadays are better prepared than us because they learn at school. We are what we've learned at home. But when singing, everybody uses the most standard Euskara, more than when we talk. It's always been that way.

How do you define the work of the *bertsolari*?

Some contest ought to exist, some opposition. You lose interest if you don't say anything. During Uztapide's times, everybody would pick on him if he was in the group, but he always defended himself perfectly. It doesn't consist of only picking on someone. To be honest I have to

⁵ Translator's note: a *poto* is a repetition of the same rhyme with the same meaning.

say it's easier for me to contradict than to say something favorable. Some listeners nowadays claim that we're too nice to each other.

Who have been your idols?

I've always liked Lasarte very much; his rhyme and his exact meter were enviable. I've also liked Uztapide a lot. Basarri would say many things; he didn't have such an exact rhyme as Lasarte, but he wasn't bad either. He had a technique of rhyming two by two—he'd put a distance between the first two and the last two, but not too much.

How have you worked the rhyme out?

That comes naturally. Not even those who learn at the bertsolari schools have the same ability. I've thought more than once when hearing somebody else that "the one I'm thinking about is perfect," but he used another one that I thought was worse . . . but that depends on each one. Amuriza worked the rhyme a lot and I guess I have that somewhere in my mind, but I've never worked on that material.

On the other hand, some awful rhymes have been proposed in some championships. As some people say, on a certain occasion Basarri sat down without singing at all since the rhymes were so difficult they made it impossible to create a bertso. You need guts to do that in public. If that happened to me, I would have insisted on answering and I would have done something pathetic. Basarri realized it was an impossible task.