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Obituary

Mikel Laboa

Basque singer central to his culture's revival

Michael Eaude
The Guardian, Tuesday 9 December 2008

The Basque singer Mikel Laboa, who has died aged 74, was a legend in the Basque country, the region spanning part of northern Spain and south-west France. Always singing in Euskara, the Basque language, he was central to the region's cultural revival.

His father was a Basque Nationalist party councillor on the San Sebastián (Donostia) city council, who left for exile on the arrival of General Franco's troops in 1937. His mother and her seven children took refuge in the fishing village of Lekeitio, but the family was reunited in San Sebastián in 1939. The old quarter of that beautiful seaside city remained Laboa's haunt until the end of his life.

The post civil war years were tough: not only did hunger and fear rule, but speaking Euskara was forbidden. His family were musical and Laboa learned the guitar. In 1955 a friend gave him a record by the Argentinean Atahualpa Yupanqui that suggested a way of singing about suffering and politics.

At the same time, Laboa was studying medicine in Pamplona. He took his finals in Zaragoza, where, in 1962, at a student concert, he first sang in public in Euskara. In 1964 he married Marisol Bastida and went on to study child psychiatry for three years in Barcelona, where he made contact with the Catalan protest song movement.

From 1967 till its closure 18 years later, Laboa worked at the San Miguel hospital in San Sebastián as a psychiatrist, caring for children with Down's syndrome and autism. With his well-worn clothes and beret, he looked more like a farm labourer than a consultant physician, but combined the two careers with great success.

Laboa had found a Basque popular songbook in the early 1960s and his particular contribution was beginning to fall into place: Basque traditional songs, 1960s protest music, but always with a personal interpretation, including an album of translations from Bertolt Brecht (1969), and Lekeitioak (1988), an album of experimental pieces

involving screams and onomatopoeic sounds that were closer to John Cage than Joan Baez. His curiously pitched, clear, nasal voice, the minimalism of his poem-songs and his commitment to Basque culture struck chords with his audience.

His first records were EPs only published in the French Basque country, but, in 1974, a double album was issued in Spain, Bat-Hiru (One-Three), his best-known record. It includes his hymn to freedom Txoria Txori (The Bird Which Is a Bird), inspired by his work with autistic children: in all, he made 16 records.

In later years Laboa experimented with other styles such as jazz and rock. A younger generation, mainly Basque post-punk rockers, paid him homage in the album Txerokee (1990). In 2003, he wrote the music for Julio Medem's documentary La Pelota Vasca (The Basque Ball). Medem wanted to interview him for the film, but Laboa refused: "I have nothing to say apart from my songs."

The writer Bernardo Atxaga described Laboa as a tall Viking warrior with piercing blue eyes, trapped inside the nervous nature of the singer. For his last performance, on July 11 2006, Laboa overcame his stage fright to perform in front of tens of thousands of people on San Sebastián beach, when he opened for Bob Dylan in a concert for peace.

He is survived by Marisol and their two children.

• Mikel Laboa Mancisidor, singer-songwriter, born June 15 1934; died December 1 2008

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