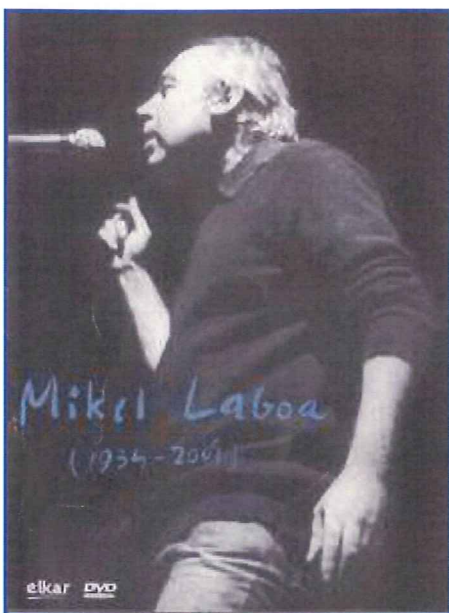


John Potter

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Mikel Laboa: Basque CDs & DVD

The new album by the young Basque rock band Lain (reviewed here recently) includes a song written by Mikel Laboa who died in 2008. Laboa was one of the most important figures in Basque music. A singer, songwriter and musician who rose to prominence during the 1970s, along with Benito Lertxundi he was one of the 'new Basque' musicians who gave the traditional music and culture of his homeland a fresh impetus. Laboa frequently combined poetry and song and he wrote one of the most representative and best loved Basque songs 'Txoria txori' ('A bird is a bird') as well as many other compositions and experimental works. Elkar Records has released *Leketioak*, a double album compilation which is now on CD for the first time.



Also released by Elkar is *Mikel Laboa (1934-2008)* – a DVD documentary of his work. Laboa himself was involved with preparing this when he died and his widow Marisol Bastida took over the project and directed the documentary which runs to one hour and 40 minutes. The first part of the DVD contains interviews with Laboa in which he describes his life and work, while the second part comprises interviews with other musicians who were close to him. There are also images from the Basque region where he lived and some concert footage. A short CD accompanies the DVD and includes the concert offered during the ceremony in which the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa awarded him its Gold Medal. It's a fascinating documentary and the good news is that it is also subtitled in English as well as in French and Spanish.

Mikel Laboa was equally adept when singing on his own with an acoustic guitar or when accompanied by a full orchestra and he often did both in concerts and on albums. His artistry spanned folk song, poetry, jazz, and the avant-garde. Although he sang mainly in Euskara (the Basque language) his singing was sometimes very unusual with the use of yelps, screams and sounds long before the likes of Bjork and the Cocteau Twins were trying out similar concoctions.



The experimental compilation *Lekeitioak* was originally released only on vinyl in 1988 and it includes three very different versions of his song 'Gernika' which was inspired by the same events which Picasso represented in his similarly titled painting. Also on the album is the remarkable 24 minute performance track 'Komunikazio-Inkomunikazio' in which Laboa speaks and sings his own words as well as digressing into a version of The Beatles' 'Yesterday' followed by the song 'Piedra y camino' by the late Argentinian songwriter Atahualpa Yupanquil.

His last performance was in July 2006 when he opened for Bob Dylan in a concert which took place on the beach of his hometown Donostia-San Sebastian. As if all this wasn't enough, Laboa had studied medicine and psychiatry as a young man and for many years pursued a parallel career working in a hospital as consultant physician for children with autism.

In a music world increasingly dominated by commercial considerations, giant corporations, and by the English language, it's important to recognize artists such as Mikel Laboa too. And no doubt there are many other unsung heroes who create bodies of work which often go unrecognized in the wider world because they sing in unfamiliar languages or don't have the power of international music companies behind them. Laboa commands enormous respect in his own land and was a massive influence as an innovator in the field of Basque music and culture. Most importantly, his music is simply well worth the effort of getting to know.

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