Basque Writing 33

LITERARY GROUPS

Collective Action



In this number of Basque Writing we want to examine how Basque writers have approached writing as members of literary groups. This is a story that started generations ago: young and novice writers see the literary system as a rigid environment, and they feel that they have no place in it. For the members of the groups known as Pott and Susa, the need to forge their own path began when their work was rejected by publishers. Rejection and refusal were their starting point. Resentment of that is to be found in most literary groups, all the way from Pott to Behe: the lack of a place for them in the literary system, and their desire to create a space for themselves, prompted writers to form groups.

Such groups provide a haven for writers: protection and complicity, an opportunity to create collectively, a source of self-confidence to set off on their own paths, a way to learn, a school, and intellectual stimulus.

When they are launched all literary groups issue a manifesto. These manifestos are an act of protest, a statement of perspective, and a complaint all at the same time, and in most cases they are irreverent in tone, and a challenge to the literary canon.

In this issue we want to focus on the youngest band to emerge on the Basque scene. They are writers who are currently 20-21 years old, born in Araba, Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia, and they were brought together by the Urruzuno Literature Competition in 2022. They centre their work on texts and images and, above all, immerse themselves in social networks, through which they aim to reach their peers. They get feedback from the social networks.

Behe Banda is the name of this group, and its manifesto, like those of the five groups before it, combines concern and complaint with mockery.

The Academy of the Basque Language defined the word 'behea' (low) as that which is closest to the ground, and we got together at a time when we thought we were very close to the ground.

They asked us why, and we replied: To give an impulse to the Basque language by creating literary texts, or, at least, that is how they should classify us when they send us to the factory to get labelled. In order to cultivate the defencelessness of our recently acquired semi-maturity in the bottomless literary-political-philosophical-scientific-cinema-loving pit, or to mock pedantry in a post-ironic way.

Pomada Banda has just been set up by three poets (Lizar Begoña, Elena Olave, Eva Perez-Pons) and two musicians (Andrea Plaza, Amaia Villanueva). More about this in our next issues.



Laura Mintegi
Euskal PEN

BEHE BANDA (2025-)



June Aiestaran, Irati Oskoz, Maddi Agirre, Irati Fernandez de Okariz, Harri Diaz de Heredia and Irati Larrañaga.

2You all met at the Urruzuno Literature Competition in 2022 when you were between 16 and 18 years old, and by then you were already writing literary texts.

Each of us had taken part in our towns' local competitions, but, above all, in the Urruzun Competition. We started taking part in competitions when we were in the third year of secondary education, our teachers encouraged us to that, but after winning once, everyone started writing what they wanted to. Once you turn 18 you can no longer take part in Urruzun, and the next stage is the major competitions. That led us to setting up our group because there were no competitions we could easily win. Plus, we didn't have much time, and it's really hard to write and get on with your life at the same time.

How did you come to set up your group?

We set ourselves challenges to do different things, we step into discomfort zones, and make each other write things we're not used to writing.

We publish in booklets. We produced the first two as a exercise. It could be a single sentence, and we'd all use that as our starting point, or we'd write about an object. Somebody's challenge would be set by everybody else. It could be a specific style, or subject you were afraid of. Once one of us suggested writing an erotic poem for us to try to become skilful in an area where we were uncomfortable. As we see the group as a sort of school, we had to do something to get us out of our habits.

How important is authorship to you? Does everyone sign their own work, or do you sign as a group?

We do sign the texts in our publications. It depends on each text. But we don't sign our columns in ARGIA magazine. We take turns to write them. Somebody writes, then we all contribute, and the text becomes all of ours. It's a matter of feeling that all of the texts belong to all of us.

Are the texts you write collectively helpful when it comes to writing your individual work?

We are more at ease when we work as a group, that takes the pressure off, but we are all responsible for what we bring out. We all feel freer to say things the way we think them because the group protects us. We don't understate the importance of the individual; we take clear decisions about when we want to sign pieces of work and when we don't. We do what we're comfortable with.

What would happen if you didn't have the group's support? Can you imagine yourself in public life as an individual?

I haven't started thinking about things like that yet, and I don't know when I'll start. The group really protects us. Everything I write goes through the group because I have other things going on too, and when I think about writing, it's for the group. When we were eighteen we felt unprotected, there were no competitions for us. We set the group up as an excuse to get writing, but we haven't ruled out taking part in competitions as individual writers. In fact, the group gives us confidence to publish things, something we wouldn't achieve otherwise. Perhaps at eighteen you aren't ready to take part in all sorts of competitions, but I am now, and I would be able to deal with criticism.

Are there any options apart from competitions?

(Silence) There is another way, but it feels very

distant. Right now I don't feel up to writing and then going to a publishers. At workshops we've never been told how to do that (laughter). It isn't something very public. There are lots of writers around, young writers, and most of them are not known because of taking part in competitions, at least not at first.

You started from below, didn't you? 'Behe Banda' ('The Low Group') is your group's name.

Because that's how we felt. We didn't say our work was poor, but we did feel we were down there, very close to the earth. We felt that nobody wanted to read our work: They're just some kids, they've just started, they know nothing about life… People thought we were amateurs. Just recently we have gained a little bit of credibility thanks to the Durango recital.

That was a turning point.

We wanted to be ground breakers, and that was hard for us at first: we aren't performers, we're writers, and we were trying to create theatre. Our objective is to have a space to give our opinions and share our thoughts, our young persons' perspective, through our texts. Not to be provocative for the sake of being provocative. Our aim is to try to write literature for young people, to try to connect with them.

What do you hold the literary system responsible for?

The literary system is very closely connected with capitalism. We aren't known writers, and we don't want to get onto that wheel. We want to say things from another starting point, we want to control our own media, our own words. The Basque literary system is closed to young people, very tightly closed. It is the commercialization of literature. We thought it was highly disconnected from young people's perspectives.

So the aim isn't for other people to see you are writers? What makes somebody a writer?

We wanted a clean break from the way society sees writers: people writing alone in their rooms, signing their books at book fairs, and then onto the next book. We don't yet describe ourselves as writers. It is possible to write, publish things, and reach people in another way.

What sort of feedback have you had?

We upload texts. Some books appear on a lot of social media, that's how they get known. If you want to reach young people, that's where we are, on the social networks. If we weren't there, we wouldn't reach the public we want to reach. We upload videos and photos with texts onto X and Insta. That's how we've got to where we wanted to be. Our aim was to reach people of our age, and they give us feedback, which is what we want.

If you want to reach young people, that's where we are, on the social networks. If we weren't there, we wouldn't reach the public we want to reach.

How has your group evolved over the last four years?

You can see that in our booklets; each one reflects a stage. We started off very quietly, not knowing if people would read us, just daring to write. The first title was BEHE ('low') because we were starting from the bottom. And then we got angry: we'd published something, and nothing had happened, there was silence. The second one was OMEN ('apparently'), because *apparently* we had done something. And then we had an interview on the radio, and everything changed. Writing our column in ARGIA magazine we've learned to write in a different way, and that's also given us continuity and recognition.

How do you see yourselves in four years' time?

We've got a meeting coming up about our fourth booklet, and we hope it's going to be something different. We aren't looking very far into the future. We don't know if this will still exist in two years' time. When we produce this booklet, if we do, then we'll start doing something else. It depends on what comes along.

Do you look at what other groups are doing, and how they do things?

We did look at them when we first said that we wanted to form a group, above all to learn and see different ways of doing things, but where we are right now, we've already chosen our path, and we don't look at what other groups are doing.

ITU BAND (2013-)

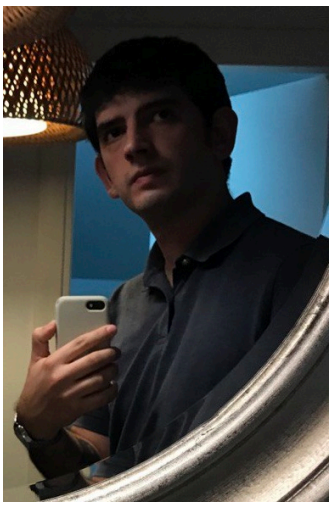


Martin Bidaur
Paul Beitia
Jon Gurrutxaga
Alazne Arruti
Garazi Mugarza
Mikele Landa
Itziar Ugarte
Maialen Akizu

"As the masks we're wearing on the first page put it so well, we aren't just some street lights, but we are street lights. They switch on one-by-one (you can check that by looking out of the window), they cross your paths and cover the streets with their soft yellow light. We swim between coffees as we talk about writing. About writing and about being awake. Because we're young and the wrinkles haven't caught us, not yet. We are not the dystopian generation Sir Beñat Sarasola described. We're here, and we plan to stay (hey, Sarri!)"

What has ITU done for you?

Being part of the ITU group gave me the chance to think about literature in a collective way and write in that way too: to be in the group, each of us writing our own stuff and then contributing to a broader project, thinking about why and to what end we write together… It was a school, a place for experimentation and developing.



Martin Bidaur

LUBAKI BAND (1993-1996)



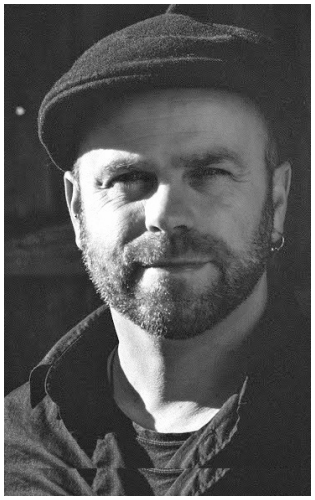
Xabier Aldai
Garikoitz Berasaluze
Harkaitz Cano
Asier Serrano
Eluska Fernandez
Xabier Gantzarain
Manex Mujika
Josu Goikoetxea
Lierni Ibargutxi
Ibon Iribarren
Arantxa Irigoien
Ander Izagirre
Saioa Muguruza
Manex Mujika
Mikel Reparaz
Iñigo Iruretagoiena
Itziar Iruretagoiena

"This is our group. It's coming to seize the lie that the crisis means we have to move fast. Drunk on the echoes of so many stupidities, it has found the need to bring its voice into the light. Our group invites writers hidden in their trenches to come out from their hiding places and open new fronts. Our group is open to new collaborators. Trenches are not closed to people who are wandering directionless, nor to the wounded. If there are any deserts in literature today, it's only the competitions which you name as deserts. We feel the need to promote books, magazines, fanzines, poems, stories and theatre in opposition to competitions."

What has LUBAKI done for you?

A network for prize-winners and the wounded. Friends. Going forward. Enthusiasm. Daring. Wanting to move forward. Open up a path for what's held in silence. A voice. Light. Public space. Sheets of paper. Fellow travellers.

Protection. Opened doors, and keys. Keys for different places. For journalism. For writing books. For helping the Basque language. Lubaki was a breath of fresh air for many people.



Gari Berasaluze

SUSA (1980-1994)



Josu Landa
Mikel Hz Abaitua
Iñaki Uria
Mikel Antza
Pablo Sastre
Maripi Solbes
Xabier Montoia
Eneko Olasagasti

Josu Landa (left), Kike Amonarriz, Mikel HZ Abaitua (dressed up as Chomsky) and Iñaki Uria (right). Parody on Noam Chomskyri at the EUTGn (1980?).

> *When the stars are on heat we capture their forgotten chess sparks. We only go into the sea to play with the metal steam when they are on heat. We can only write when all of our skin is on heat. All we want is that heat of ours to attract you. Life is heat. You have to come here.*

What has SUSA done for you?

When I came to Donostia to start university in 1977 I didn't know anyone in the whole city. I thought of setting up a book club to make friends. I told a fellow student because somebody had said that he had won a prize for young writers. Josu Landa was his name. We looked around for more enthusiastic readers, and we decided to meet once a week to read each other what we had written. Some months later Josu said that we should publish a magazine.

We told him he was mad, but he insisted, and shortly after that we got together to choose a name for the magazine. After people had said several names – none of them accepted – I came up with 'Susa' in reference to Nemesio Etxaniz's erotic poem, and that was accepted. I didn't stay in the group much longer after that, but the magazine carried on, and Susa publishers, one of the following projects, lasted even longer. In fact, it's still running today.



Mikel Hz Abaitua

MAIATZ (1982-)



1989 meeting at Sara Biltzarra

Lucien Etxezaharreta
Itxaro Borda
Jon Casenave
Aurelia Arkotxa
Henriette Aire
Piarres Xarriton
Mayi Pelot
Auxtin Zamora

"A magazine, our one. A few things, all sorts of things, in Basque, well-prepared. Our literature. Literature for what? Our feelings don't just take place, we live through them. Love, work, sadness and hills, hope and the happiness of a single night, all in Basque. Because our things are in Basque. Literature for us. Not a few dead things for cold research and exhibition halls full of"

What has MAIATZ done for you?

The Maiatz literary magazine project began in the spring of 1981, with several northern Basque writers gathering around Itxaro Borda and Luzien Etxezaharreta. The first issue came out in February, 1982. In 1984 it also became a publishers, and since then it has also organized events based around literature in Baiona. The magazine is published twice a year, and there have now been 80 issues; there are also 150 books with the Maiatz logo on them. The objective was for it to be a type of laboratory for northern Basque writers, and so it has been for many well-known writers. The manifesto in the first issue stated the direction which we have followed over almost fifty years now. I don't think we've ever left that path.



Itxaro Borda

POTT BAND (1978-1980)



1978?

Bernardo Atxaga
Ruper Ordorika
Joxemari Iturralde
Joseba Sarrionandia
Jon Juaristi
Manu Ertzilla



2022

Our group can be described in just a few words. The members of the POTT group got together in Bilbao to found a publishers. Like in the French Foreign Legion, we didn't ask to see anyone's CV, and we started off by chatting at the end of a supper party. We were denied an ISBN, but the miracles of bureaucracy were not to put us off: you will have heard of us thanks to our pamphlets. One more things: publishers are not always set up in order to fill the gaps in arts planning. That is no concern of ours. But we do look at a higher calling because we are here to publish our work rather than to provide a service to anyone. That's Pott!

What has POTT done for you?

Aspaldiko kontuak dira horiek: laster 50 urte talde hori sortu It all started a long time ago: it'll soon be 50 years since we set the group up! It was something between friends, and we exchanged things all the time. It was like fire in winter: you light it, and then you must tend it, and, in exchange, it's going to keep you warm.



Joxemari Iturralde

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