



WITHING TOUCHING DISTANCE

A Conversation with

MIKEL ACOSTA from HEGOA DISKAK,

THOMAS BOUTOUX and OIER ETXEBERRIA

After living in London for more than a decade, Mikel Acosta founded the record label Hegoa Diskak in January 2021, during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Now in its third year of existence and after eleven records released as of today, Hegoa Diskak has become one of new music's most regarded young label, giving a worldwide distribution and audience to old and new experimental music played by eccentric, often forgotten or overlooked Basque musicians.

Patently constructed, one record at a time, Acosta's project with Hegoa Diskak is to explore and reveal the width and depth of Basque experimental music with no limitation of genres or styles, from contemporary folk and oral traditions to free jazz, sound art, minimal, leftfield and electronic music. Listening to the whole discography of the label takes us on an uncharted journey through the affective landscapes, the timbres and textures, the drones and tones, the hisses and whispers of the Basque country.

MA Mikel Acosta
TB Thomas Boutoux
OE Oier Etxeberria

TB We are recording this interview, on the 16th of November 2023, on what is a quite busy time for you and Hegoa Diskak. You are releasing two new records this week, one by Bidai, the new collaborative project between two emblematic figures of the Basque scene, Xabi Strubell and Mikel Vega, the other by Doppelganger, which is also a collaborative project, this time between Garazi Navas and Miguel A. Garcia. But that's not all! You are also having your first real instalment on NTS, the iconic London web-radio, with a new programme about Basque Music. And for this first show, you are hosting Verde Prato for some live tunes. So, many thanks Mikel for making time for this interview, amidst all this. And maybe the first, simple question is: how are you feeling about this peak moment?

MA Yeah, it's been a busy week! Very busy actually. I've been waking up every day very early because it almost feels like I'm working while sleeping. But it's been great because it's a lot of things coming together. It's going to be three years in January since I started Hegoa, and it really feels like it's reaching a point now where more and more people are interested in what's going on.



Angel Katarain, 2021

I mean, there has been support and interest since the beginning, especially in the Basque Country, but now I have the feeling it's really taking off. More than anything, I've been really excited with these two new records, and working with Xabi and Mikel of Bidai, and Miguel and Garazi from Doppelganger, whose names and music really deserve to be better known outside of the Basque context. As for the radio show with Verde Prato, it wasn't really planned. She happened to be in London two weeks ago because she was playing a gig, and it just occurred to me that we could do this. I've started recently a new

job as a producer at NTS so it became obvious to bring this together. So yes, new records, new job, new show, and I've also been moving houses. Obviously, it's been a lot, but this is really what I love doing. This is what I wanted to be here in London for, what I wanted to do, and there are more and more things now. So... very busy but basically very very happy... and also happy to be talking with you two today.

OE Me too! You say that what's happening now for you is what you always felt like doing, the very reason why you went to London for. Can you tell us about your decision to move there, which was several years before you started the record label? And how the idea of starting a label, this label, came about?

MA Yes, I moved here almost twelve years ago now. It was music that made me move here. I grew up listening to punk in the Basque Country at the time when it was still very political. Probably it was the tail end of my generation. I simply came to London wanting to be in a band and making a record. That was my dream, it was to make an LP, to put music on a vinyl. And then it shifted. After playing with a few bands in London, and doing a few gigs, playing bass guitar, I started making electronic music in my room with lots of equipment and machines and I did this, for quite a long time. And then I managed to go to university here, which somehow triggered the change. It gave me a lot of time to focus and to really discover what I wanted to do, wondering "where am I going?" And then the (Covid-19) pandemic came

which brought even more self-reflectiveness. I realised that I was never fully happy artistically with the work I was doing in terms of music. I could never finish a project thinking that was worth putting it out or showing it to people. During the pandemic, I think I just hit that point where this idea of founding a record label, which had already been in my mind for some time, made a lot of sense. All of a sudden, I simply thought: "Why not? I could try and start this project now". I got in touch with a few friends who had been running labels, and with their help and advice, I felt "yes, I can do this."



Atanas Akerstra, 2022

TB What were you studying in university?

MA I did a Bachelor of Science in Music Technology. It was three years mostly of science. It wasn't an art degree. Three years in music technology, basically starting from the physics of sound to music theory to audio engineering as well. During those three years, I got a grant from the government in the UK so basically, I was three years just focused on studying and practicing and making music at home. That was in 2015.

TB I was curious to know what you studied because, to go into the work that you are doing with Hegoa Diskak now, I believe that there is almost a scholarly

approach in the way you are running the label. I don't know how you feel about this. Maybe I should explain what I mean by that. First, you are not alone in this. As I see it, you are part of a group or of a generation that approaches music in a kind of historical or even anthropological way. I can see many labels, but also DJs and radio hosts taking this direction lately. From a label perspective it is very different from the way labels used to be run, even ten years ago, around a roster of artists. And it's also different from the re-issuing trend that comes from a crate-digging practice, finding hidden gems here and there across the timeline and continents. With Hegoak, your aim seems to be different, more in-depth, again more scholarly, it's akin to a research, and to operations such as identifying, mapping, making connections, exploring, narrating a particular field. This is how I see what you are doing, not only with the label, but through the texts you write on the label's bandcamp page¹, or this longer one "A Brief History of Post-Franco Basque Music" that you published on the Stamp the Wax website². Does this make sense at all for you to be described as an historian even if only a self-taught one?

MA You couldn't be more right! Yes, I'm interested in the stories. I'm interested in what I find in the music that is not just the music. These are the stories of who made this music and why. How it got there. All this kind of questions: what made this or that person go through that process to make this music? Why? Or why don't more people know about this? Because I think it is amazing music. The stories are the main thing in the end. We live in a social time where people don't have time to ask themselves these questions anymore, they just consume things that are given to them. And well, it's just too easy, you don't make any effort, you don't ask yourself any questions. Whereas I'm really interested in that other side of the story; there is always something more than the music. It's the art, it's about choices, chances, it's about life, ways of living. So yes, I love the stories behind the music, I'm interested in contextualising it, putting things together. Even just for myself: from the very first record I published with the label³, my question was: what the hell? How come Angel Katarain has been producing this incredible music and so few people knew about it or even paid attention, when I believe it's one of the best things to come out of the Basque Country. At the same time, I find it fascinating that almost no one else has seen it this way. But all these questions, I realise it now, tie with my own personal life, with my own journey, and why I left the Basque Country and how I feel about it. It's very political in the end, and this is something I fully realised within the last year.

OE Yes, I would like to introduce now in the conversation the notion of "distance". We have been going through the archaeology of the label, but to me it seems that none of this would have existed without the move to London and if you weren't looking to and thinking of the Basque Country from a distant point of view and maybe a distant way?

MA It's the key, yes! Exactly, it's the key to it all. To be able to contextualise it from elsewhere and recontextualise in this other place. To relate to the music not the way I've been told growing up, which was: "you have to listen to this, this is it, we're fighting for something, we're Basque, this is our culture and so on and so forth..." When you get out of this context and you start seeing it through your own perspective and your own lens, you realise: "wait a second, to be political is not about being on one side rather than on another, not everything is black or white". Being in London made me understand this about the Basque Country, and in relation to music as well. I like music of all kinds, and to always discover things. Starting the label opened up my perspectives on the music made in the Basque Country and made me understand that everything about the label is political, but not in the way I was told politics were about in the Basque Country. Running the label made me understand that doing it was in fact a political decision. The distance is the key. I see my school friends back home and some of them, yes, they support the label, they are interested but they don't really understand what I'm really doing or why I'm doing it. It's not just about putting records out, there's much more to it than this.

TB I wonder if this distance we are talking about doesn't also make you relate to the music itself in a different way, and let you be more affected, emotionally, aesthetically, to the language, to the particular sounds and histories coming from the Basque Country in their plurality, and as you suggest, in their forms of irresolution or contradiction? Maybe this distance also helps being moved, being affected, and therefore to understand things differently than you used to. It's something that characterises the label's discography until now I find: all records have a strong affective quality, displaying moods and atmospheres, which, by definition, are not simple to grasp and name, and yet resonate.

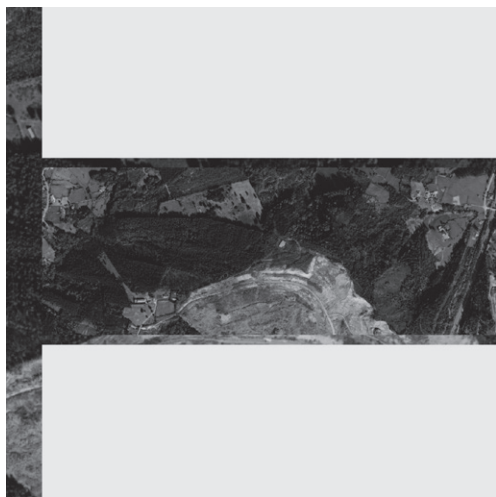
MA You're right. And it's quite funny because I've been going through quite an emotional journey over the last two years, on the personal side. I'm currently 37 years old and I'm surprised I hadn't processed emotions before, because I wasn't given the tools and I didn't even know how to. With all the music that I'm putting out that you say is emotional, maybe it's kind of a way for me to connect to my own past, to my childhood and the things that I've been through. The variety of the music from the Basque Country helps me to go back to my own past to make sense of it all. There's a very interesting and probably complex and broad conversation to be had about that.

OE I think this could be interesting, this articulation of emotions, music and the history of the Basque Country, because I think that politics in this part of the world also has to do with a certain inability to manage emotions. Something that became visible, for example, when the violence stopped. And we can think that this was a big problem.

MA It still is.

OE It still is, yes. It is true that in this part of the world you can find incredible stories where violence and the music scene come together. I think that music somehow catalysed all the violence that is in the air, I feel that it somehow turned it into something organic, it made it pass through your body and at the same time allowed you to free yourself from it. But yes, you talk about emotions and your move to London, and for me it's not just about distancing yourself from the politics and focusing on the aesthetics—or maybe that's not the most interesting way to put it—but maybe weaving the two together in a different way to create other possibilities.

MA That's the thing I realised: you can be political without necessarily being so outspoken about it, without having to give and voice your opinion or any opinion at all. I'm being political simply through what the label is about. To release music from all these different people from there, and bring it out elsewhere, this is already, arguably, more political than what many other people who claim themselves to be super political, fighting for “Basque culture” are doing. This is something that I am learning as I go, basically. When I started the label, it was more just, “I like the music, I feel like people should hear it”. But now, three years in, I start realising that actually it might have been an unconscious choice of mine to have to go down this route, not understanding at first all the other contexts and aspects of what I am doing and why am I doing it. Music for me has always been my drive, my evasion. It was the only tool I was given to manage my emotions. But it was at the time through punk only, listening to and dancing to punk until exhausted. It took me time to consider music as a tool to deal with my emotions in a safer way.



OL UZ, 2022

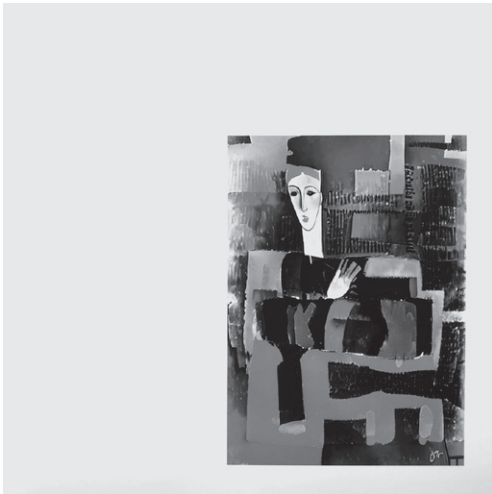
OE I'd like to return to what you said about the (Covid-19) pandemic, because I also feel it's very relevant with the music that you have been putting out through Hegoa. We discussed this with Thomas before, there has been since the pandemic a renewed approach to intimacy within “experimental” music, and I think it is also a characteristic of your label and the different records that you have published so far.

MA To me, it's very clear that the pandemic first gave us time to connect with ourselves, to understand the problems that were certainly there already in

front of our faces, like personal problems or whatever. Before we could never stop and deal with them. And once you start doing that, facing and dealing with problems, you have automatically to become resilient. While you figure out those problems you become a better person, at least you understand yourself in better ways. Connecting with everyone else emotionally, having more empathy, is definitely something that improved with the pandemic. Also dealing with loss and grief and so on. This is a general thing that everyone had to go through because we were locked-in for eight months. So how did it change us? Well, as I see it, it made a lot of us go inwards. In my case, this is clearly what happened. And it translated into connecting to music in a different way. Music was used as a tool during the pandemic.

TB Exactly. I believe that in the future we will be able to look back at the history of music, and the role of music in human lives, and mark the pandemic and lockdowns as a paradigm shift. I don't think this will be true of any other

artistic forms. I don't think there is going to be a before and after in cinema, in visual arts or even in literature, but I believe there is one in music, in terms of music-making and genres, I'm thinking of the post-ambient renewal for instance but also in terms of how we relate to music, and also how we understand music less through a timeline but through cartography, geographical and political coordinates, locales, environments, territories, maybe in a more anthropological way than before. I'm not speaking about world music as we used to understand it, but more the worlds of music.



A. Maiah, *F(r)icciones*, 2023

MA Humanising music. Yes, the projects or the music I end up relating to since the pandemic are deeply personal, and deeply human ones. This is something that has been recovered because of the pandemic perhaps. Music had been quite de-humanised for a long time, in many ways. I agree. It does also in terms of sound and sonorities. I'm always interested in things that are, let's say, unusual. I like more than anything to hear a piece of music and not know exactly where it sits. That's where I thrive. To listen, and not understand if it's classical, if it's folk, not understanding exactly what it is. This happens when there is a blend, when there is an intention to come out of the norm. Again, as I realise it now, it's very political. Again, this is my personal story, when everyone is behaving in the same way, it brings me anxiety. I realised it again last week when I went to a pro-Palestine demonstration here in

London, and I think it was like nearly a million people out there. I don't remember the last time I had been to a march. Because I didn't want to be political in this way. My mom used to say "politics are for people who live from it" and it always stood with me. I never understood why people would get too much on one side or on the other and identify with politics before anything else in life. I could never relate to almost any of the things politicians would say, still to this day. And so last week I made the effort of finally going to a demonstration because there's been one happening every week here, and I was deeply, deeply affected. I had to leave at some point; it was way too emotional. I almost started to cry because it brought back all this malaise from my past. I felt like I was again this ten-year old kid in 1997 in San Sebastian with my mom, where all of a sudden a group of protesters linked to the Basque nationalist left, wearing balaclavas started throwing Molotov cocktails against the police, and everyone panicked and ran in all directions. I also remember a mum with two little kids that were being pushed by everyone and couldn't move, they were trapped. That experience was very traumatic and it was brought back to me last week when I went to the demonstration. All of this to say that everything I do is connected in one way or another to my past, and in the case of music, that relationship is very clear to me.

TB For the time being, Hegoa is only about Basque music. It's not an archival label either. It's not a label that only does reissuing work as many other labels are doing these days...

MA Thank you for saying that it is not reissues. Yes.

TB The way I see it is more a project to write up and unofficial or alternative history of Basque music and bringing to the fore figures who have been active for years but maybe haven't been releasing, or releasing much, or individuals who have crossed paths, and what you try to do is to create the conditions for them to collaborate and concretise their relationship in the form of a record. You have already been releasing younger artists such as Verde Prato. My question now is maybe: is this the project of Hegoa as of now and do you consider at some point releasing music that doesn't come out of the Basque Country as well? I'm sure it's a question that many people have asked you.

MA Yes. Partly because I've got friends making music in Madrid or in Barcelona and they keep sending me amazing music that I'm very much interested in. And there were maybe 2 or 3 times throughout this three-year period of the label, where I thought I could release their music. But now I just see that it doesn't make sense. This project is about this. I could maybe start other projects to be able to do different things. It's actually something I'm already doing, I'm running in parallel a free jazz label from London, so I'm already doing other things. But for Hegoa I think it has to stay that

way. If anything, the only thing I would like to do in addition is putting out books and working with different media, but staying within the ethos of the label. In London, I also recently started with a friend my own distribution company and we are distributing UK labels abroad. So I'm selling my records to record shops in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Europe, Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden... There's an amazing scene happening, in Gothenburg with this record shop and label called Discreet Music. In the U.S. as well. There are all these small pockets of things happening in various places. This is very important to the way I see the label and the music I'm putting out, which is also running counter to the dehumanisation of music that we have talked about earlier. Because basically by putting it out on a record or a tape, or a CD or whatever and sending it somewhere, miles away is about bringing back that aspect of human connectivity. Thanks to the distribution system I have a lot of friends everywhere in the world and we are constantly exchanging music. I have a friend in Madrid who did his thesis on mail art. It's all about that, and it's very much what I'm interested in. I tried for instance, with 2 or 3 records to put them on Spotify but I'm not going to put the next ones there. It just doesn't change anything. It doesn't make any sense to me. If it's about accessibility I prefer to work on this differently. I put a message out yesterday after I released the records to everyone who has bought records on bandcamp. I'm saying, "if you can't afford it, just get in touch and we can work a way out". Because of Brexit, there's a lot of trouble selling vinyl and stuff out of the UK. I'd rather do that than just put it on Spotify.

TB The visual and even the tactile dimensions of Hegoa records are also very important to what the label is and what it stands for, aren't they? It has its own world also visually. How have you been working on this aspect of the project?

MA To be honest, it has been pretty much improvised. I know what I like visually and what I don't like. It's very much influenced by cassette culture, art, and certainly a life of collecting records. That's what influences my 'designer thinking' in a way. But I usually try to collaborate with some Basque artists as well. Every single project has come together naturally, speaking with the artist. What's the idea? What's their vision? I'm putting it together with my vision of their music. For the record of Alberto Lizarralde, the cover was done by Pablo Mirón, who is a friend from Madrid. The idea he had was to scan film in movement. It's a very good interpretation of the music because the music is very much organic and digital at the same time. For Carcascara II, it was handmade, hand-stamped individually on a recycled board.. So yes, the visual dimension is basically working with the artists and not imposing a aesthetic choice over them.

TB Going back to London and the UK, you're beginning to be quite well established there. The label has been really adopted and co-opted by a

whole scene, people like Jack Rollo from Time Is Away, in record shops like World of Echo or All Night Flight Records, and venues like Black Tower projects or Café Oto and so on. Do you have the impression of belonging to a scene that is the London scene much more than finally the Basque scene, in a way?

- MA Oh yeah! A 100%! This is exactly a direct translation of me living here. There's no way at all any of this could have happened otherwise. Jack Rollo is a friend. The relationship with ANF is me buying records from Tom for years and then presenting my label at some point and he was like, "wow this is great". But there was already a relationship, and this is how they are all supporting or contributing to it in one way or another. That's pretty much about me living in London and meeting all these people in all kinds of very different contexts, from going to a club night, listening to techno at 4am in London, to going to Café Oto to see Evan Parker, playing free jazz. It's all interconnected here, which is one of the reasons why I love London. You can listen to punk, free jazz, it's all connected, there are no boundaries. Whereas these boundaries were very much part of my early years living in the Basque Country. It was pretty much impossible to imagine it differently there. Like you were into punk? You were into punk. There was nothing else, it wasn't conceivable to go see a concert by a pop artist. It was just the mentality back then. Maybe I'm exaggerating a bit, but it is the way it felt to me.



Bidai, *Biarrezgaur*, 2023

- OE But it depends on the place. On the contrary, I remember the squat in Azpeitia, but especially in Azkoitia, where I grew up. It was very different, there were no boundaries. From there emerged bands like Akauzazte or musicians like Anari. Punk prevailed, but we also listened to a lot of pop music in those years, such as Nick Cave, La Insidia, The Dream Syndicate, La Dama Se Esconde or The Talking Heads.
- MA Yes, and it's funny because that's exactly the question I've been asking myself: how come leaving so close, in Irun, I never heard of any of this? No one ever mentioned its existence to me. This drives me mad. Or the Audiolab at Arteleku. I've learned about all of this afterwards, here in London, not there. So how is that even possible? What is happening? That is wrong. How can it be that growing up in Irun, I didn't know about this which was half an hour

away. How come I didn't have a clue that things like that were happening?... It says a lot about Basque culture and the way we are hermetic.

- OE It's about how to create common spaces, and inter-generational ones. Which is something I miss a lot today and try to work on, how to bring different generations together, but it's not easy. I see this in the work I'm doing at Tabakalera.
- TB This is very interesting and maybe this brings us back to what we were discussing just before we started recording this interview, when you said you wanted to put more live shows, and you were working on concerts for the artists on the label in the Basque Country and abroad. So maybe we should just advise readers to stay tuned not only for the next releases of the label, but for all these other events and dimensions of Hegoa that are taking shape and gaining momentum right now. It has only just begun.

Notes

1 <https://hegoadiskak.bandcamp.com>

2 www.stampthewax.com/2021/03/04/a-brief-history-of-post-franco-basque-music/

3 *Angel Katarain*, Hegoa Diskak, 2021