Early lessons

15-year-old Violeta in Quinta Normal Park (1932)

Life and work are inseparable for Violeta Parra, and from her earliest years, her surroundings weave the beginnings of a lifelong creative career. She grows up in the midst of a popular culture steeped in religion, festivities, attachment to the land and multiculturality. She teaches herself to play the guitar and gives her first performances alongside her brothers. She joins the circus, tours towns and soaks up stories, songs and legends, traveling the length and breadth of Chile discovering its folklore. In Santiago she performs Chilean folk songs, soon adding music of Spanish origin to her repertoire. As a member of the Doroteo Martí theater company, and under the pseudonym Violeta de Mayo, she wins a Spanish music competition. She forms a duo with her sister, Hilda, and together they record several albums. However, she soon embarks upon a solo career that sees her grow into the real Violeta Parra.

The first songs that reached my ears were sung by my mother, who was born and raised in rural Malloa, near Chillán, and by my father, a man from the city and a teacher of early literature and music. My father's repertoire consisted of habaneras, waltzes, small-town tunes and songs, salon music, love songs... There were certain essential characteristics that distinguished these turn-of-the-century urban songs from the folk songs of the same era.

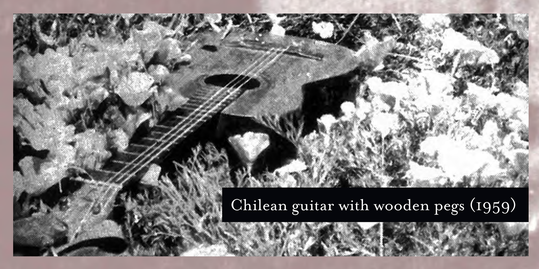
(Violeta Parra in the book Cantos Folklóricos Chilenos)

Violeta and her first husband, Luis Alfonso Cereceda Arenas (1938)

Violeta Parra was open to everything that came her way in terms of stimuli from the community and nature [...] she has tremendously extensive roots, and that is why the people feel a connection with her. And she is also acknowledged by many others who have this link to the very nature of humanity.

(Fidel Sepúlveda in the documentary Viola Chilensis)

Violeta with her mother, Clarisa Sandoval, in her Casa de Palos de La Reina (1960)


Chilean guitar with wooden pegs (1959)

Week after week
my first age passes.
Better not to mention school,
I hated it with all my heart,
from book to bell,
from pencil to blackboard,
from bench to teacher.
And I begin to love the guitar,
and where I feel a party,
there I learn a song [...]
As I was born a wanderer
not even the devil could get his hands on me
if I was inconstant at school
I was constant in losing myself in the hills.
I spend my time as in exile
happy with the birds
dreaming of angels.
This is how the end of the year catches me
sitting on some benches.
I would like to be a little tree!

(Violeta Parra, excerpt from the composition Canto para una semilla, included in Décimas autobiografías)

Violeta de Mayo and Chabelita at the Casanova patisserie (1945-1946)

Collecting folklore

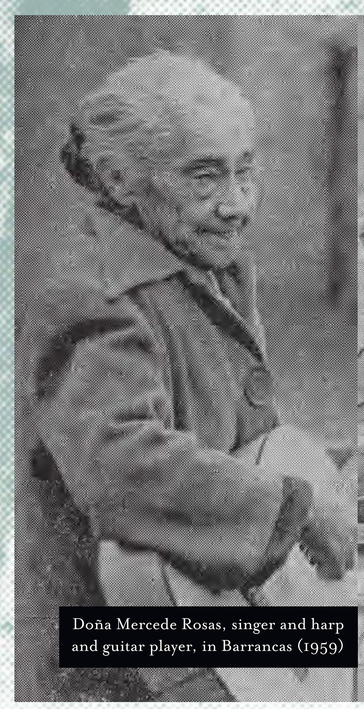
Don Isaías Angulo, singer and player, who taught and gave Violeta her first guitarrón (1959)

Folklore is the cornerstone of Violeta's creative universe, as it bears her memories of the music performed by her relatives and her mother, Clarisa Sandoval. Encouraged by her brother, Nicanor, she focuses on local culture, which becomes the hallmark of her work. She memorizes songs from the most diverse of genres, and with no knowledge of musical notation, first with her notebook and later with her recorder, she travels the central zone, the coast, the mountain range, north and south. She connects with Easter Island and Chiloé, discovering local songs, customs and expressions. She collects stories, melodies and texts to reclaim their roots, to revive them through her creations, and to transmit them to the world. Through music and song she revitalizes the popular and traditional culture that is absent from the official versions.

Violet's recorder, acquired in the former USSR during her first trip to Europe

I never would have imagined, as I went forth to capture my first song one day in 1953 in the district of Barrancas, that I was about to discover that Chile is the best book of folklore ever written.

(Violeta Parra in an interview for Revista Musical Chilena, 1958)



Doña Mercede Rosas, singer and harp and guitar player, in Barrancas (1959)

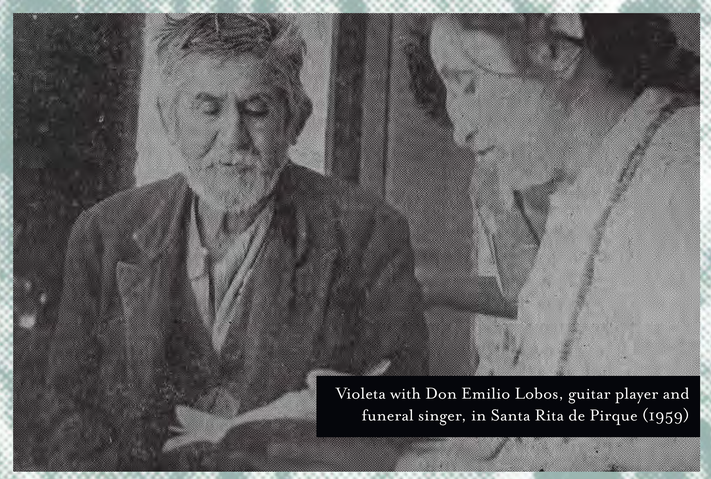
Doña Francisca Martínez, 106 years old, singer and teller of stories and legends, in Rosario, Rancagua province (1959)

I was a bag of verses and sayings, but "con el viento y lagaruga to'o se arruga" —my memory has wrinkled, and now I remember very little, said Doña Rosa Lorca when I went in search of her songs. But as I wander down Memory Lane, verses spring out that are "pica'ores como zancu'os", she added.

(Violeta Parra in the book Cantos Folklóricos Chilenos)

These works have been in the archives for many decades, as a memory of a time when the main bulk—if as such we may refer to it—of our intangible heritage, most fortunately, was saved. The prodigious memory of our singers, male and female, of our narrators and of our popular orators.

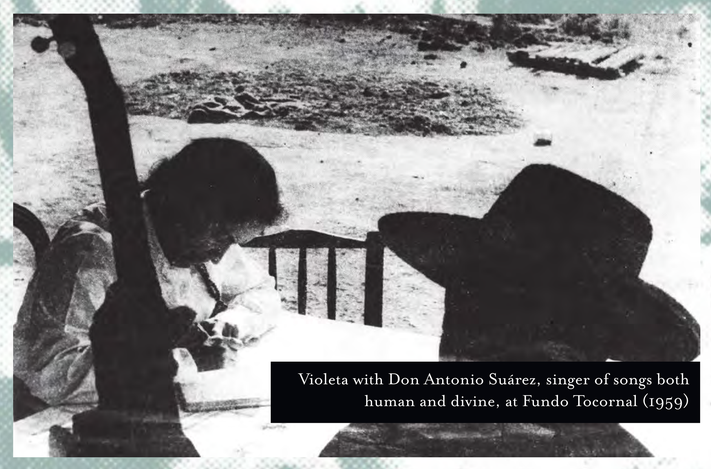
(Gastón Soublette in the book Cantos Folklóricos Chilenos)



Violeta with Don Emilio Lobos, guitar player and funeral singer, in Santa Rita de Pirque (1959)

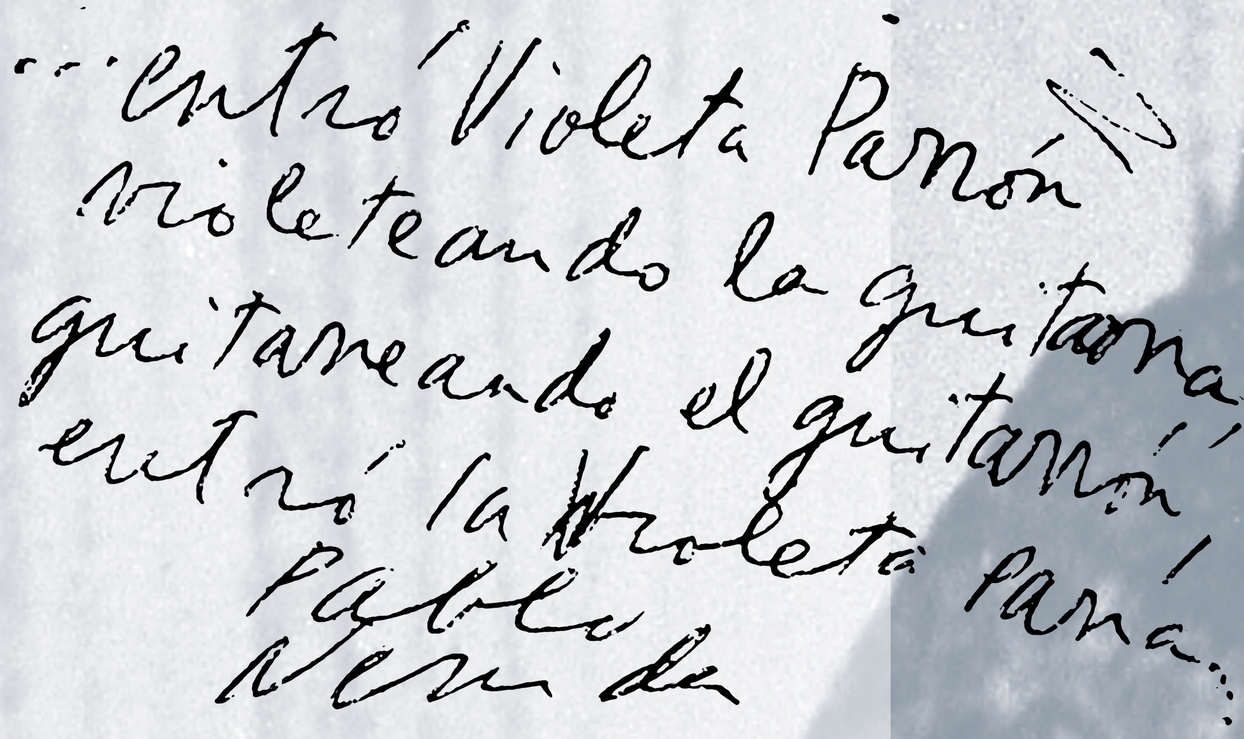
My dream would be to travel the entire country, immersing myself in its music to get to know it, and then make it known to others.

(Violeta Parra in an interview for Ecran Magazine, 1954)



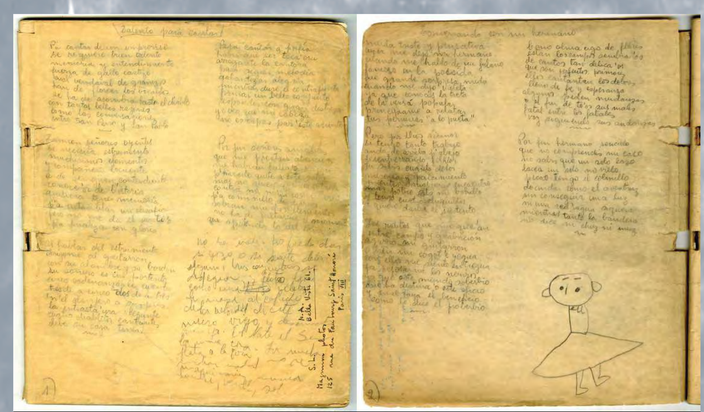
Violeta with Don Antonio Suárez, singer of songs both human and divine, at Fundo Tocornal (1959)

A versatile artist



Manuscript of the poem that Pablo Neruda wrote to Violeta and which features on the back cover of her album Tonadas. The folklore of Chile, Vol. IV (Odeón, 1957)

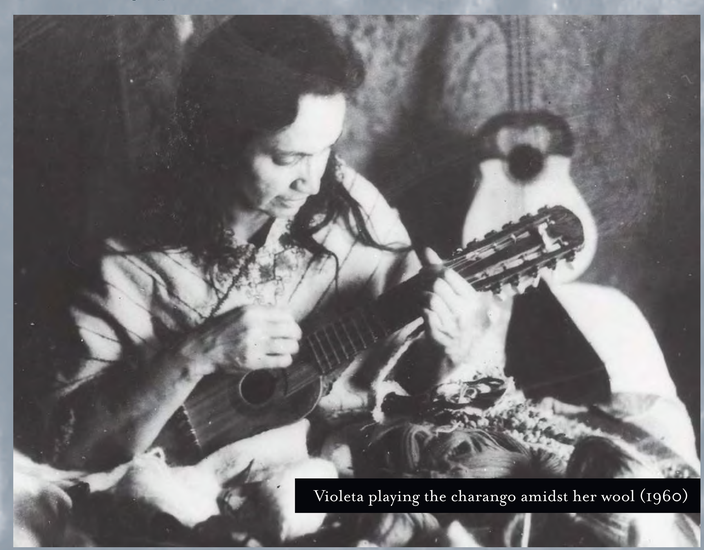
Violeta explores countless artistic disciplines, always proposing her own language. Deeply respectful of popular tradition, she is both avant-garde and experimental. Hand in hand with her constant search for folklore to salvage, she develops her skills as a composer, singer, writer, poet, painter, embroidering of *arpilleras*, ceramist and sculptor. She uses everything within her reach: wool, oils, paper, wire, cardboard, clay… Musically she draws on both the rural and the urban, venturing into classical music through the composition of a ballet and documentary scores. A reflection of herself, her writing is always poetic, whether a verse, a song, a letter, a captured conversation, or the story of her life. The result is an original and honest work that has earned widespread acclaim.



Manuscript excerpt from her Décimas Autobiográficas (1959)

In art I dare to do everything: to converse through a needle, a guitar, a brush or papier mâché. You have to try everything—you must have the courage to search for every language.

(Interview with Violeta Parra for Swiss newspaper Feuille d'Avis de Lausanne, 1964)



Violeta playing the charango amidst her wool (1960)

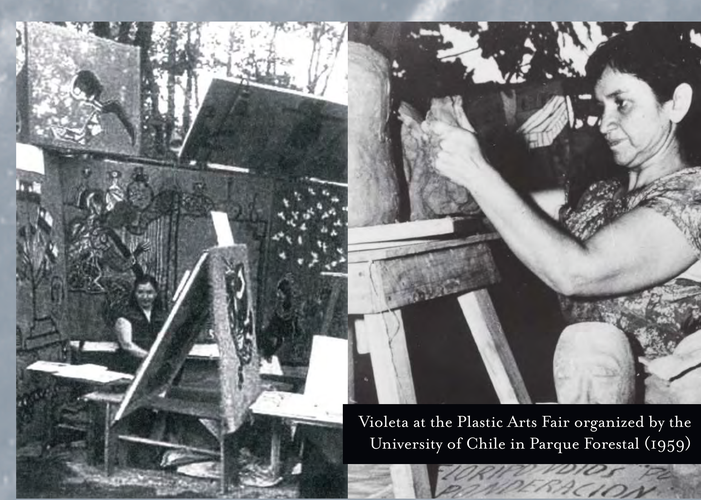
Violeta Parra, instinctive and willful, appropriates the world, turning it into her work. She brings life to everything she touches with precision and originality: words, sounds, shapes and colors. She is a full artist, musician, painter, sculptor, poet, just like her brother Nicanor Parra and her friend Pablo Neruda.

(Ivonne Brunhammer in the exhibition catalog at the Louvre Museum of Decorative Arts, 1964)

Violeta with Gilbert Favre, her children Ángel and Carmen Luisa and her granddaughter Tita at a concert at the Theater de la Cour Saint-Pierre in Geneva, Switzerland, with costumes designed by her (1962)

Sometimes, while I'm making an arpillera, a melody suddenly comes to my mind. So, I stop, I pick up the guitar, and the melody comes forth as easily as… as if I were making soup!

(Interview with Violeta Parra for Swiss Radio-Tv Je Vois Tout)



Violeta at the Plastic Arts Fair organized by the University of Chile in Parque Forestal (1959)

Poetry
painting
agriculture
You do everything wonderfully
Without the slightest effort
Like someone drinking a glass of wine.

(Nicanor Parra, poem "Defense of Violeta Parra")

The importance of reaching out

Violeta teaching a folklore course at the School of Fine Arts, University of Concepción (1957)

Tirelessly following her vocation, Violeta revives popular culture through her creations, spreading it far and wide and thus bequeathing an enormous record of her work. She gives many interviews and appears on radio and television programs. She releases 16 albums and records 118 songs, in addition to her countless live performances. She exhibits her visual work at fairs, galleries and in the theaters where she performs. She founds the Museum of Popular and Folk Art in Concepción, where she also gives classes and talks. She writes her autobiography in *décimas* in honor of the song of the poet, and captures a large part of her folkloric compilation in two books: Cantos folklóricos chilenos and Poésie populaire des Andes. Only Mapuche ritual songs does she decline to reproduce, arguing that, in order to ensure due respect, it should be done by a representative of the Mapuche people.

Exhibition of visual work in Berlin, Germany (1962)

Press conference at the Peña de los Parra, with José Miguel Varas and other journalists (1965)

People frustrate me and I struggle to move forward, because not even a tenth of Chileans know their folklore, so I have to go knocking door to door and window to window. It's still very hard; it's like I'm just starting out.

(Interview with Violeta Parra on the University of Concepción radio station, 1960)

Violeta on Minería Radio (1954)

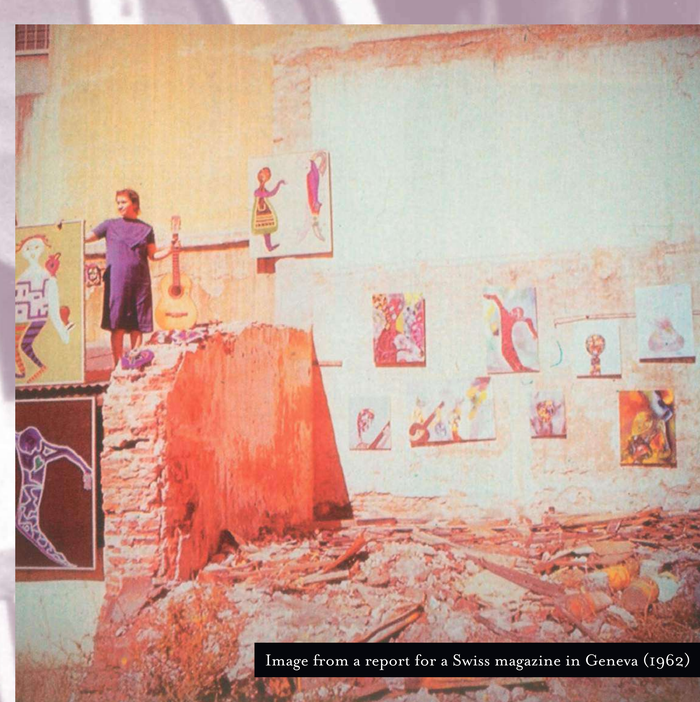
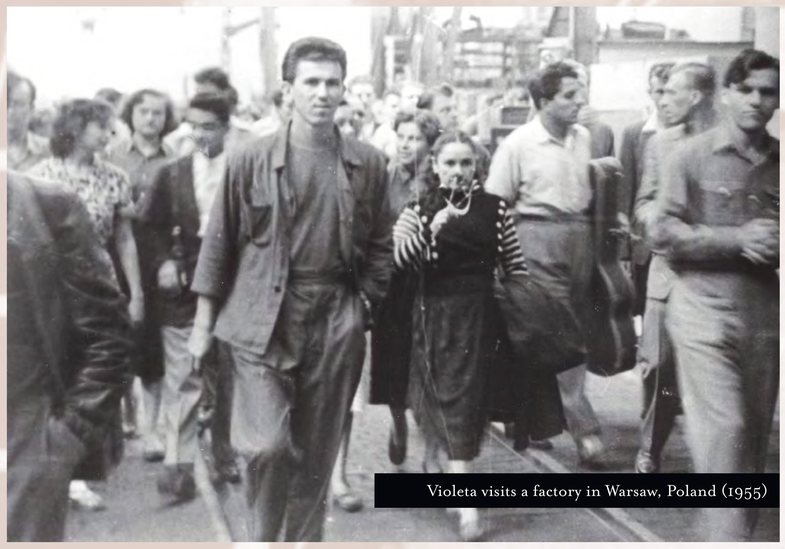


Image from a report for a Swiss magazine in Geneva (1962)

Some critics have pointed out that, following Violeta's death, there remains a kind of "guilt complex" among many of those who came into contact with her in Chile, embroidering, composing and singing, because they did not fully appreciate what it meant [...] The wonderful and instructive thing is to see, from today and from here, is her response: to seek and use effective and direct ways to reach her audience, her people.

(Víctor Casaus, in El libro mayor de Violeta Parra)

Travel

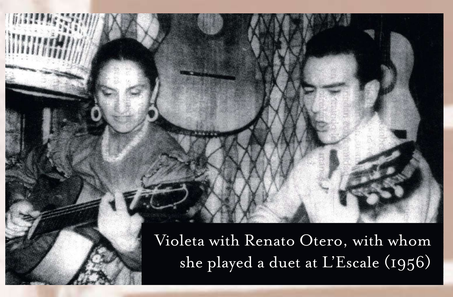


Violeta visits a factory in Warsaw, Poland (1955)

Traveling is knowing, learning and growing, and for Violeta it is also an opportunity to make her work known to the world. An invitation to attend the Warsaw Youth and Student Festival sees her embark upon her first trip to Europe (1955-1956), where she visits Poland, the former USSR, Italy, France and England. She sings at L'Escale, a Latin American music space in Paris, gives recitals and makes musical recordings, appears as a guest on television programs and gives interviews.
Upon her return to Chile, she records more albums and lives for a while in the Argentine pampas, from where she takes her second trip to Europe (1962-1965) with her children and granddaughter. She tours Eastern Europe, Germany, Finland, Switzerland and France, taking up residence in Paris and Geneva, where she films a documentary for Swiss television. She is the first Latin American to exhibit individually at the Louvre Museum of Decorative Arts and critics applaud the amazing poetry of her visual work. By the end of the trip she is firmly established—Violeta now belongs to the world.

I went out on stage alone and felt a murmur, almost of disapproval. All the other delegations were made up of multiple people and filled the stage—I felt scared and very small. The guitar rang out and there was immediate silence. I had to sing seven times, getting thunderous applause.

((Violeta Parra speaking about the Warsaw Youth and Student Festival in 1954, in an interview for Revista Musical Chilena, 1958)

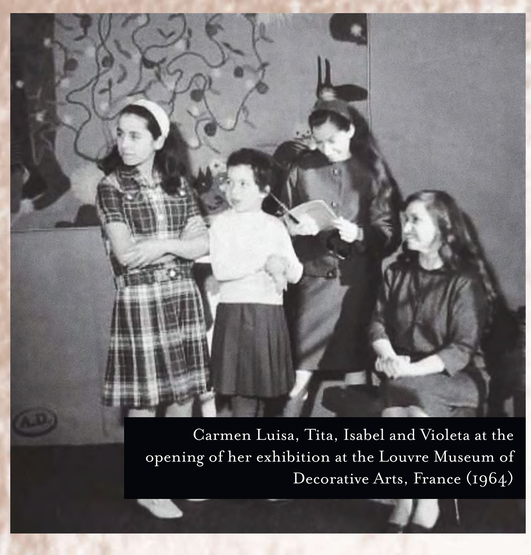


Violeta with Renato Otero, with whom she played a duet at L'Escale (1956)

Peace march in Argentina (1961)

We are entering Warsaw,
I am the happy Cinderella
who is realizing
that I am like a bride,
hydrophobia is left behind.
Seeing my delegation,
showing their heart
in uniform beats,
because they feel satisfied
with this bond of union.

(Violeta Parra in the book Décimas autobiográficas)



Carmen Luisa, Tita, Isabel and Violeta at the opening of her exhibition at the Louvre Museum of Decorative Arts, France (1964)

Poster for Violeta's recital at the Theater de la Cour Saint-Pierre in Geneva, Switzerland, where she also exhibited arpilleras, paintings and masks at the Galerie Connaître (1962)

Arpillera made by Violeta for the exhibition at the Louvre Museum of Decorative Arts, France (1964)

Very few in Chile said, "this is an artist of great worth"; they didn't even realize. She had to go all the way to Europe to achieve recognition. As soon as they heard her there, they embraced her.

(Lalo Parra in the documentary Viola Chilensis)

Final projects

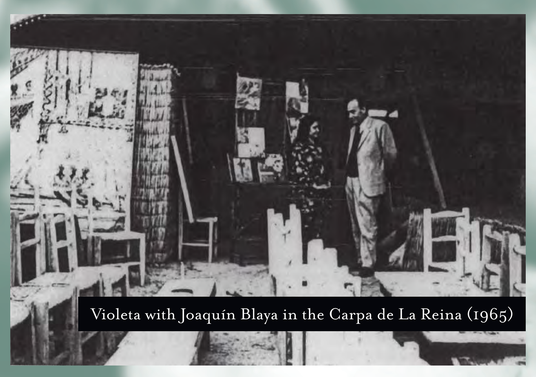
Violeta playing at La Peña de los Parra (1965)

Upon her return to Chile, Violeta lives and sings at La Peña de los Parra, located at number 340, Carmen street in Santiago. Following a failed plan to create a peña folclórica , she is given a large tent as financial compensation, and with it she settles at a site in La Reina donated to her by the local Mayor, Fernando Castillo Velasco. She believes in the meeting between artists and the public and the experience of living culture, so her new project, Carpa de La Reina, not only includes a large stage, but also a folklore education space offering music, dance and plastic arts classes. However, the site is difficult to reach due to its distance from downtown Santiago, and although this hinders the success she hopes for, her conviction and determination remain intact. The last period of her life is lived in the Tent, reaffirming her essential choice to remain in contact with the earth.

Ángel Parra, Rolando Alarcón, Isabel Parra and Víctor Jara on Corporación radio (1965)

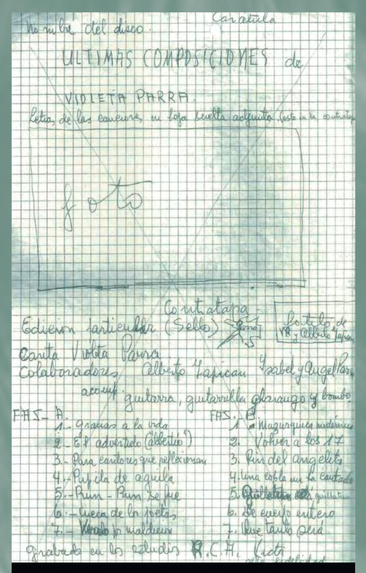
I believe that every artist should aspire to cast their work in direct contact with the people. I am very happy to have reached a point in my work where I no longer even want to do tapestry, painting or poetry on my own. I am happy to have been able to put up the Tent and to work, this time round, with living elements, with the public close by me.

(Interview with Violeta Parra for Chile Ríe y Canta magazine, 1967)


Violeta with Joaquín Blaya in the Carpa de La Reina (1965)

The New Chilean Song began in 1965 or 1966, when a movement called neofolclor was in vogue in Chile… In the creation of songs of this type, the presence of Violeta Parra is like a star that will never go out.

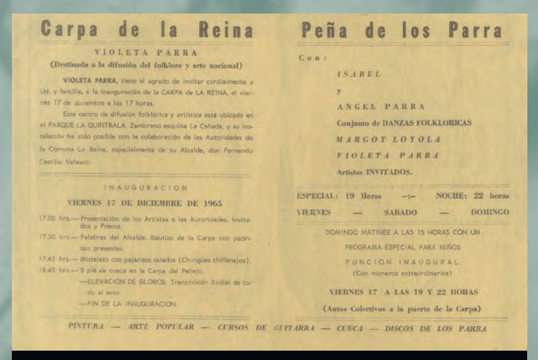
(Interview with Víctor Jara in Havana, 1972)



Handwritten design by Violeta Parra for the album The Last Compositions (1966)

I like to sit on the ground because I know I am steady and can feel nature in me. Feel it with my hands and feel close enough to it that I can smell it. For me there is nothing more beautiful than rustic things; I want to use everything that nature gives and use it as it comes from it.

(Interview with Violeta Parra for El Mercurio newspaper, 1966)


Carpa de la Reina

VIOLETA PARRA

(Destinada a la difusión del folklore y arte nacional)

VIOLETA PARRA, tiene el agrado de invitar cordialmente a Ud. y familia, a la inauguración de la CARPA de LA REINA, el viernes 17 de diciembre a las 17 horas.

Este centro de difusión folklórica y artística está ubicado en el PARQUE LA QUINTRALA, Zambrano esquina La Cañada, y su instalación ha sido posible con la colaboración de las Autoridades de la Comuna La Reina, especialmente de su Alcalde, don Fernando Castillo Velasco.

INAUGURACION

VIERNES 17 DE DICIEMBRE DE 1965

17:00 hrs.—Presentación de los Artistas a las Autoridades, Invitados y Prensa.

17:30 hrs.—Palabras del Alcalde. Bautizo de la Carpa con padrinos presentes.

17:45 hrs.—Mistelato con pajaritos salados (Churipios chillanejos).

18:45 hrs.—3 pié de cueca en la Carpa del Pellejo.

—ELEVACION DE GLOBOS. Transmisión Radial de todo el acto.

—FIN DE LA INAUGURACION.

Peña de los Parra

Con:

ISABEL

?

ANGEL PARRA

Conjunto de DANZAS FOLKLORICAS

MARGOT LOYOLA

VIOLETA PARRA

Artistas INVITADOS.

ESPECIAL: 19 Horas —y— NOCHE: 22 horas

VIERNES — SABADO — DOMINGO

DOMINGO MATINEE A LAS 15 HORAS CON UN PROGRAMA ESPECIAL PARA NIÑOS

FUNCION INAUGURAL

(Con números extraordinarios)

VIERNES 17 A LAS 19 Y 22 HORAS

(Autos Colectivos a la puerta de la Carpa)

PINTURA — ARTE POPULAR — CURSOS DE GUITARRA — CUECA — DISCOS DE LOS PARRA

Invitation to the inauguration of the Carpa de La Reina (1965)

Margot Loyola and Violeta Parra (1965)