

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

February 13, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about possible military alliances with Chinese Nationalist forces. In the interview segment, ER's guest is entertainer Burl Ives.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Burl Ives

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother, today we have a letter from a lady in St. Louis, Mrs. Ben Cohen, who saw one of your television programs, and she has written in and asked the following question: "I would like to ask you why now, when the US sees exactly what communist China is intending and doing, does she not accept the proffered help of the nationalist Chinese forces based on Formosa. The army in Korea is a UN force, and as far as I know nationalist China is a member of the UN, so why cannot they help in the struggle?"

[ER:] Well, it has uh been felt by a great many people uh and is still I think felt that uh while reforms have been carried out on Formosa, uh that nevertheless the nationalist government which is still a member of the United Nations uh might not, truly, be representative of what the people of China wanted. So when we went into Korea, uh Formosa was neutralized. It was not allowed to be attacked from the mainland, and it was not allowed to attack the mainland. That was to protect the supply lines going to Korea. Now once a ceasefire is arranged and uh there is a-a real chance to sit down around a table and discuss the future, then this question of Formosa uh will come up, and the question of nationalist Chinese forces uh will, of course, uh be left, I hope, to the Chinese themselves to talk out. Because, after all, this uh division in China started between north and south China uh before World War I and it has been going on steadily. And each person that comes to power uh the Chinese people hope will bring about some of the reforms -- a clean government primarily, which has never existed in China and uh yet it goes on and on.

Now, uh naturally I feel that uh while they may be forcing some reforms uh under the Chinese communists, there will come a day when the Chinese people will realize that along with the reforms go some pretty tough and terrible uh-uh police state uh controls. And uh they won't like that any better than they have uh the lack of reform in the past. Now, they're a very long-suffering people, but quite evidently they turned to the communists because they felt they were not getting the reforms uh that they had hoped for. Uh and you have to remember that they did drive the nationalists out had--they had to go to Formosa. Now, it certainly isn't up to us to force anyone on them or to force them uh to go to war together if they uh don't want to go to war. Uh and I think it's a much wiser policy to let China settle its own difficulties. A hundred years from their point of view is uh as a day to us [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.], and uh I personally think that it's very much better if we get a ceasefire uh-uh to let the people of Asia, who are primarily interested, settle these questions in the way that they think correct, and not uh for us to interfere (4:18)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, that raises a point to me. Supposing uh, for instance, you had, say, a body of uh Asiatic nations within the UN uh who sat around to discuss the final decision as to what should be done in Korea. And uh then uh one group, say led by India and some of the south--southern Asiatic countries, uh felt that uh Russia was imposing uh her will on all of Asia and trying to take over, uh and the southern Asiatic countries wanted to have military assistance. Would you feel that we should then uh give to uh those who are opposed to the communist doctrine?

[ER:] I think then uh we would have to uh consider very carefully a uh who were the people, if they were free people, if they wanted to uh not attack but live at freedom in their own countries, uh I think yes, then they would be entitled to ask but let them ask. Don't let us force it upon them [Elliott Roosevelt: No.]. Let them ask for help.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, in other words, uh when uh the South Koreans asked for aid from the UN uh--[ER: They asked for aid from the UN.] I know. I know they did. Uh now uh, it seems to me that we are in a very clear position because we didn't act until after the UN had asked us to provide the forces which were closest. (6:07)

[ER:] Well as, as a matter of fact, we were in uh Korea, uh and we uh did immediately. You see, the UN had divided Korea and given us the supervision of South Korea to set up a free government and given Russia the supervision of North Korea to set up a free government supposedly. [Elliott Roosevelt: Well, wasn't it supposed to be a joint government?] And then we were both supposed to get out, and they were to be together as-as one government. And uh we had already begun to withdraw some of our troops, but some of our troops were in South Korea, and we did immediately help the South Koreans to repel the attack of the North Koreans and then put the question that very day before the UN. And-and then it was the joint UN decision that uh one should repel an aggressor, do you see? And that was uh the beginning uh of coming out into the open. We all knew that the USSR uh was uh trying to communize North Korea and trying to set up a strong regime because it wouldn't allow intercourse, and it wouldn't allow uh-uh joint activities uh when we would suggest that that should be the case beforehand.

But it never said anything or openly said that it was trying to stir up uh military difficulties, though it went uh on arming the North Koreans instead of withdrawing as we were doing. Uh and of course that is the interesting thing about the whole of the USSR's activities. They talk peace to us all the time but illegally they continue to arm. But they don't ever say so, uh so when we, who are much more honest, say uh we are now obliged to re-arm, uh what we're doing is only keeping pace with them. But as they have never acknowledged that they have done this, and have always talked as though we were the warmongers and they were the peace people who were getting ready for peace and not for war, uh-uh everybody thinks that -- uh in spite of the fact that you publish statistics as to their army, you publish the fact they have the atom bomb, you publish the fact that they have increased their uh submarines and their air force--but somehow or other, their propaganda keeps making people think that they've been behaving perfectly within their charter promises, and uh that what we are doing is stir up their uh- uh [ER coughs] resentment and fear. As a matter of fact, we're only meeting what they have done undercover [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah.], uh and that's uh of course what they did in Korea. And that is the whole uh trouble uh in Korea, but it's very clear that our position has been a perfectly legal position right straight along under the UN. (9:27)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now, supposing uh in Formosa, which is--seems to be about the next hot spot--supposing that, I'll put two very quick questions 'cause we're running out of time for this section of the program. The communist uh Chinese attack the nationalists on Formosa uh or vice-versa, supposing uh the nationalist Chinese invade the mainland, as is now advocated with uh by General [Claire Lee] Chennault, uh would you be against the US uh participating if Chiang [Kai-shek] appealed for our aid, or would you be against our lending them arms and support?

[ER:] Well, I personally hope that there will not be uh active war once we get a ceasefire, that there will be sufficient pressure from the other Asiatic peoples [ER coughs] to bring about all these settlements uh peacefully around a table [ER coughs]. If, however, war develops, uh I s--would hope that we would not take any active part, uh but that we would uh--and also that we would not force upon the Chinese people as their future leader any one individual or any one uh government [Elliott Roosevelt: Uh huh]. We would leave that to them. But if uh [ER coughs] there was, I suppose, uh-uh a need for arms, uh I suppose whatever arms were asked by the uh government or by the Formosans -- [Elliott Roosevelt: Anti-communist forces.] anti-communist forces we would probably provide arms for.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm. Well, thank you very much. I'm sorry that we have to move on in the program to our next part with the interview, uh but I have s-several more questions, and I'll be back on our next broadcast and probably ask you to amplify a little bit on this one.

(Break 11:42-11:50)

[ER:] America's very fine musical heritage is often lost in the music world's pursuit of other classics, but it is a heritage rich in musical beauty. With me in my living room today is probably the greatest exponent of this heritage, a voice familiar to all of you. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Mr. Burl Ives.

[Burl Ives:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt. It's very nice to be here. Hello, everybody.

[ER:] The one thing, Mr. Ives, that I'm very sorry about is that you came here today without your guitar, but perhaps it's just as well, as I know you have many interesting things to tell us. I understand that you have very recently returned from a one-man tour of the Military Air Transport service abroad. Where did this tour take you?

[Burl Ives:] Well, I went as far as uh Arabia, and then I started back singing. They took me to Arabia, and then I sang my way back you might say. [Burl Ives and ER laugh] Uh I went to uh Bahrain and then came back uh through Arabia and Africa and then to the Azores and then up in Greenland and the Northern Command.

[ER:] Good gracious, you have seen quite a few. Uh y-you didn't happen to go out into the Pacific, did you, while you were doing your trip?

[Burl Ives:] No. As a matter of fact, I was slated to go to-to the Pacific but uh-uh it seems that there is quite a lot of traffic in and out there, and uh-uh [ER: Decidedly.] so I didn't get there.

[ER:] Yes, I see. I should think it would have been very interesting going to our people in uh Arabia and thereabouts because those must be rather, well, rather cut off the people in those areas, aren't they in-in the camps there?

[Burl Ives:] Yes, as a matter of fact, that's one of the reasons they uh invited me to go there, is because they don't have uh very elaborate facilities for entertainment because there are few people there, and uh so they need uh-uh somebody who has very little equipment, and as you know, all I need is my guitar and myself. [ER and Burl Ives laugh]

[ER:] That is perfectly wonderful. Tell me, what were your observations on the morale of the men in lonely places like that?

[Burl Ives:] As a matter of fact, Mrs. Roosevelt, I have never seen the morale of an American soldier that uh wasn't good and uh such was the case. Uh the boys who were out uh in these isolated places they uh do surprising things to entertain themselves. For instance, they've created some folklore themselves. Up in Iceland one of the most dangerous things that they have to encounter up there is the ice worms [ER: The ice worms.]. Ice worms, yes. These ice worms are uh are very thick in the young ice. For instance, the old ice that is four million years old from the glacier there are no ice worms; [ER laughs] however, in the ice that is only two million years old, one must be very careful using this ice because it's infested with the ice worm, and, as you know, all worms are apt to turn. [ER laughs]

[ER:] That would be highly--what do you do then if you use that ice? You mean if they use it in-in uh melting it down for water [Burl Ives: Yes, water, yes.] and that sort of thing? And they have to--do you boil worms out, or what do you do?

[Burl Ives:] Well, as a matter of fact, the worms uh-uh-uh-uh they have, of course, very, very fine water up there and the ice uh up there is used from the uh conventional purposes that ice uh [ER: Would be used for.] is used for. Yes, indeed. [Burl Ives laughs]. And in that regard they have to be very careful of the ice worms. Another interesting thing up there, they have what they call the singing rocks. Singing rocks. You will see some--a soldier looking at-a at-a rock, an old rock, and they claim you can hear music. As a matter of fact, one uh one G.I. has a uh a pair of earphones, and he goes out and plugs in to the various rocks and he maintains that he can hear old music. (16:06)

[ER:] Did you try?

[Burl Ives:] Yes, I heard some.

[ER:] Did you hear some? [Burl Ives: Yes.] Actually heard some?

[Burl Ives:] Actually heard some.

[ER:] Well now, what does it sound like?

[Burl Ives:] Well, it's very strange. It's uh--it's very ancient and unemotional music. It's a little cold, but uh it's very nice.

[ER:] But I think that's very interesting. Uh what w-how do they explain it? Do they have any scientific explanation or is that just a phenomenon?

[Burl Ives:] Well, things like this, uh they're very hard to explain.

[ER:] They just don't explain.

[Burl Ives:] No.

[ER:] That's an extraordinarily interesting thing. Well, uh to come back to your own particular trip. Did you find that people besides our own men came to hear you sing and enjoyed the American folk music?

[Burl Ives:] Yes. As a matter of fact, in Arabia there were quite a number Arabs who came and listened to the program, and they seemed to enjoy it. Also, there were quite a few Italians there, and they especially, I think, uh were appreciative of what I did.

[ER:] Well now, that's interesting. I wonder what it would mean to an Arab or an Italian. Now, what did you find? That because so much--as I would think of it--of our American folk music is almost like telling a story.

[Burl Ives:] Well, as a matter of fact, most of these uh men, I believe, understood uh English [ER: They did?], and uh, even if they didn't, I think perhaps the rhythm and the sounds of the words have uh some meaning. For instance, I think, the folk song--uh children are very fond of ballads [ER: Yes.] and folk songs and sometimes--[ER: And they don't know what the story--] yes, and sometimes it's a little too complicated for them, so they get the words. The words uh are for the children and the meaning for the grownups.

[ER:] I see. [ER laughs] That's really very interesting. Well now, I'd like to have you tell our listeners about the album you've recently completed for the Encyclopedia Britannica. I understand you've done a remarkable collection. (18:08)

[Burl Ives:] That was a very interest project. I had a great deal of pleasure doing it and of course a lot of hard work, but I-I enjoyed doing it very much. And it is uh it is a course of study actually uh recorded to uh correlate the teaching of American history uh with-with these ballads. Because if you sing a song about a certain period or have a song played and uh the child or the student learns this song--hears this song--it brings uh meaning to that particular period in history or to an incident, and so it makes the whole thing alive. Otherwise, it's uh it's uh study, you know. [ER: Yes, I see.] It brings some color, some life, into it.

[ER:] This is really a way uh to teach arts and tie them into history.

[Burl Ives:] That's true. And uh I-I did six albums for them with about a hundred and twenty songs. First album is colonial songs, and uh then revolutionary songs, War of 1812, uh Civil War, westward expansion, and then an album of sea songs.

[ER:] Oh, you did an album of sea songs? Oh, my husband would have loved that. Old chanties? Or what period of chanties?

[Burl Ives:] Uh, from the uh from the clipper era and also some whaling songs and uh and also some battle songs. There's some--

[ER:] Of course, the old uh sailing ships had the most interesting, it always seemed to me, because it accompanied the work that the men did.

[Burl Ives:] Yes, yes, there were those. Then there were also narrative, uh those are work songs, which a sea chanty is, and then there are narrative ballads about the various happenings. For instance, there's one wonderful song in there about John Paul Jones.

[ER:] Oh, is there? That would have been of special interest to my husband because he always collected everything about John Paul Jones. Now, what uh what kind of a of a song is that? Telling about his exploits and--

[Burl Ives:] Yes. It is, I believe, one of the most poetic of all sea songs that I have heard. And it uh tells about John Paul. It doesn't tell who this uh this uh skipper is until the very last line in-in the ballad, and it tells of uh very--it speaks very poetically of the ship and the skipper and about how they uh come into contact with the enemy and then how he is very clever and, by courage and belief in his ship, by putting on more sail and more sail, he is able to uh outmaneuver them.

[ER:] Uh that's interesting. Now, I wonder if you have ever or if anyone--it's quite possible that somebody else has done it--have ever taken some of the poems that were written about uh other--other navies, for instance, the British Navy? Do you remember "The Revenge," I think that's a [Alfred] Tennyson poem? "The little Revenge ran on"--it was a battle with the Spaniards and uh she fought all alone with the all the Spanish galleons, and it's beautifully rhythmic in-in writing. I wonder if it's ever been put to a song. It would be lovely. [Burl Ives: I don't know.] Then [Robert] Browning has one or two uh about the uh-uh coast--the Bretton Coast uh sailors that uh I-I would like--I should think that would be interesting to look up and see [Burl Ives: Yes, yes, it sounds very interesting.]. What of the poems of other nation, would uh would sort of come about at the same time but be descriptions of what had happened [Burl Ives: Yes.] in other countries?

[Burl Ives:] Well, as a matter of fact, I have one ballad in this uh--which is an English ballad--but I really believe it was written by an American because it's about Sir Peter Parker [ER: Oh, really?] and his-his very disastrous uh attempt to take Sullivan's Isle. But it's written in first person as if uh Sir Peter Parker was uh telling the story himself. But it uh--I'm sure it was written by an American because it ridicules him.

[ER:] That's-that's-that's interesting too. Well now, we have to pause just for a minute and then come back again.

(Break from 22:20-22:29)

[ER:] Mr. Ives, I think both of us agree that American folk music has almost as much story to it as it has music, and uh-uh I wonder where you found the greatest part of your collection of old folk songs. Are many of them just handed down from generation to generation without being actually put down on paper at all?

[Burl Ives:] Well, Mrs. Roosevelt, I'm proud to say that I inherited a great number of the ballads that I sing from my grandmother and from my mother and father. They were singers, not professional singers, but it was our tradition, and--

[ER:] Well, it isn't the professional singers that really have saved most of this heritage.

[Burl Ives:] No, not at all. No, certainly not. And uh I got many of the songs that I sing now from my grandmother and my mother and my father, so it's something that I have always done.

[ER:] Well now, they never wrote them down, did they? [Burl Ives: Oh, no.] They just heard them and-and remembered them.

[Burl Ives:] Yes, they were oral. The oral tradition.

[ER:] The oral tradition. Well now, I remember going to a festival, a folk festival at uh Whitetop, which is near Abingdon, Virginia, once and uh hearing them uh, I think, sing some songs that had just come down in their families and uh weren't uh weren't particularly well-known songs. But they were real old-fashioned ballad stories [Burl Ives: Oh, yes.] of things that had happened in the area.

[Burl Ives:] Yes, they're uh they're all over the country. And it isn't just one part of the country. You'll find these songs [ER: Anywhere.] uh-uh in practically any place. Because, for instance, I come from southern Illinois--southeastern part of the state--and uh people uh think of folk songs coming from the hills. Well, th-there's not a hill in a hundred miles [ER: No, of course there isn't.] of where I live. It's flat prairie.

[ER:] Beautiful farming country in southern Illinois. [Burl Ives: Indeed.] I've been there, so I know. Uh but I'm uh--I-I don't know why I think of it as being uh frequently in the hills. Perhaps because uh when you go through the Virginia hills and into Tennessee and Kentucky, you are apt to hear quite a good deal of the uh of the ballad singing.

[Burl Ives:] I think that was true up until the time that the uh the radio and the-the jukebox had penetrated, and I think it p-penetrated a little later there than in other places. [ER and Burl Ives laugh]

[ER:] You think that it's just because it came late that they kept on? [Burl Ives: Yes, I ex-] Because you think the heritage is-is really equally uh here wherever you go through the country.

[Burl Ives:] Yes, I have a feeling that uh that these songs you will find--because I have found them uh from uh every place. As a matter of fact, I've collected some quite wonderful songs here in New York City.

[ER:] Have you really? [Burl Ives: Yes.] What kind? What songs?

[Burl Ives:] Well, I learned uh-uh two wonderful Scotch songs here in here in New York City, and uh I've collected quite a-quite a few songs from-from people--not from collectors. Uh I have also, of course, gotten uh quite a number songs from the various collectors uh-uh like our wonderful Mr. Carl Sandburg and uh Alan Lomax and so on and so forth. (25:51)

[ER:] Yes, I-I remember the--I've seen, of course, the uh publication of the Lomaxes' [John and Alan] when they [Burl Ives: Yes.] got out theirs too. But uh they are the-the--Carl Sandburg and the Lomaxes and yourself -- are the three people one thinks of as having kept alive the tradition, of course, in a way that uh you just don't hear. I remember going to a-a luncheon--I think it was only last year--in uh I think it was Rochester, New York, where Carl Sandburg came to speak. It was Lincoln's birthday. And he made his little speech, and it was an interesting speech as he would be on Lincoln. Then he took to his guitar and he sang. And everyone was simply enchanted because he-he just drew on this wonderful background of his.

[Burl Ives:] Yes, he has a wonderful background, and I think he's a wonderful singer and a wonderful, wonderful man.

[ER:] He sent me a uh a book the other day the last-the last collection of-of poems [Burl Ives: Oh, yes.], and I was so pleased. I was perfectly delighted to have his--have him think of doing it, because I have a great admiration for him. I just think he's a grand person, Mr. Sandburg. [ER laughs]

[Burl Ives:] I think most people think--believe that.

[ER:] Well now, I uh I understand--here we are talking, and I've been told that uh you don't think much of people who talk.

[Burl Ives:] I don't think much of people who talk?

[ER:] You think we talk too much sometimes.

[Burl Ives:] Well, I wouldn't say so. As a matter of fact, I think the fine art of conversation is disappearing, and I think people should do more talking than instead of uh listening so much. I think--

[ER:] That's funny. I said that just the other day [Burl Ives laughs]. But you mean you-you think they talk very often on unimportant things?

[Burl Ives:] Well, uh I don't know. Talk is-is-is nonsense if you don't say something, if you don't have an idea. But I do think that uh-uh talk is a wonderful thing, and I-I don't think we talk

enough, and I don't think we uh-uh spend enough time talking to our friends and-and to people that we could learn from, and I think uh we do much listening. As a matter of fact, we do too much uh-uh too much uh-uh watching the other fellow do what he does, and we should be doing more ourselves. For instance, we-we should be playing m-more baseball than listening and watching baseball, [ER: Oh, I agree with you there.] and we should be singing more folk songs than listening to somebody sing folk songs. And uh I think that in other words, I think we are getting too much from the outside in, and not enough from the inside out.

[ER:] But don't you find that when you sing folk songs, uh if it's not too large a gathering and a formal one--but before long in the choruses everybody joins you?

[Burl Ives:] Yes, quite often they do sing, and I think it's a natural thing, especially if the song is catchy and uh-uh appeals to people, as many of them do. However, uh to sing a ballad, you know, [ER: Well, you can't--] it's quite a difficult trick because you have to learn it, [ER: Yes, that's true.] and some of them are quite long and uh and uh it's necessary do a little work.

[ER:] Yes, I suppose there you'd really have to get in with people who-who had learned the ballad [ER laughs] [Burl Ives: Yes.]. But perhaps they will learn. Perhaps more and more people will-learn the songs and sing.

[Burl Ives:] Well they are. They are now. As a matter of fact, I sing at quite a number of universities, and there are ballad societies in-in many of the universities. And I remember the first year I went to the University of Colorado. They suggested uh starting a club and they did. And the next year when I went there to sing, after the performance, they said, "Will you come to the ballad club?" and I said, "I'd be delighted." And I went there, and there were about forty people who had gotten guitars and banjos, and they entertained me. It was wonderful. (29:57)

[ER:] I think that was wonderful, and they sang for you. Well now, I imagine our audience uh has read your book that you wrote and published, *Wayfaring Stranger*. And I wonder if you'd like to tell us a little about how you came to write it and what happened to you as you wrote it. [ER laughs]

[Burl Ives:] Oh well uh, as a matter of fact, when I--when I got married uh six years ago, I used to tell my uh bride about where I come from and all the many stories uh from my little town. It was less than a hundred population, and that was in the days before there were uh-uh hard roads, and we were practically isolated there. So it was a-is-a-was a uh very small little community, and many things happened there, so I used to tell her these stories. So she suggested one day that-that I write them down, and uh, oh, I didn't want to. But then one day I started, and I got fascinated with the task, and I had a wonderful time.

[ER:] Did you write stories--you did, of course, I know -- write stories about some of those very people.

[Burl Ives:] Oh, yes, indeed. Mhm.

[ER:] And uh-uh I've always loved, wherever I lived in the country, the very picturesque way in which, in places where you are cut off, people have special ways of expressing itself.

[Burl Ives:] Oh, yes. [Burl Ives laughs] I remember one time, uh oh about seven or eight years ago, I called my father on the telephone, and he answered. And I said, "Hello dad." I said, "This is Burl. How are you all down there?" And he answered, "Well, we're all in table condition." [ER laughs]

[ER:] But that is just what I mean. I mean that is characteristic of uh sort of uh living-a living far distant uh [Burl Ives: Yes.] and thinking for yourself. That was very descriptive. You were able to sit up and eat, [Burl Ives: Yes, yes.] and that was the important thing. [Burl Ives laughs] I think that's very interesting. Well now, uh I'd like to ask you one question before you close. Is the background that led you into collecting and singing folk songs and ballads of America just this background of having the ability to sing and living in a small place where you began to hear them, or is it uh that as you grew older you felt the need to really use this as history?

[Burl Ives:] Uh you see, it was not a thing that I ever decided to do. I'd been doing it ever since I was a small child. I can't remember when I didn't sing ballads, so it's a thing that I have always done, and I did it naturally. Even the collecting of songs was not conscious. I just collected and heard these songs and liked them. And it wasn't until in about 1935 here in New York City that I realized that I had something already in my head and a technique that I could do, and uh then I decided to make a career out of singing ballads. But up until that time I was going to be an actor.

[ER:] You were going to be an actor?

[Burl Ives:] Oh, yes.

[ER:] [laughs] Oh well, that's wonderful. Well, did you really go on the stage?

[Burl Ives:] Oh yes. As a matter of fact, I was in three plays in New York City before I ever got a job singing.

[ER:] Oh, I think that's most interesting. Well, aren't we fortunate [Burl Ives laughs] that you were saved for uh this sort of background of culture for our own country, which is the most important thing, I think, that we have as a contribution to uh the cultures of other parts of the world.

[Burl Ives:] Well, thank you. They are very, very beautiful songs, and I do think that they are uh a very important part of us, and I think they--uh if he who knows these songs and loves them knows more about his country.

[ER:] I quite agree with you. Now, I want to thank you for being with me this afternoon.

[Burl Ives:] It was my pleasure, Mrs. Roosevelt. Believe me.

[ER:] Thank you.

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