sidney robertson (cowell), collector of twentieth-century traditional music, was a woman of numerous talents and passions. her complicated personal history includes many layered chapters, several love interests, and an array of personas, both accommodating and conflictual. her wide-ranging sphere of acquaintances, colleagues, and friends included commonly known personalities of the twentieth century such as john steinbeck, percy grainger, and margaret mead, to name a few. although it is tempting to try to trace all the near-byzantine threads of her remarkable life, this book will focus on the WPA California Folk Music Project, Robertson’s ambitious and multifaceted survey of musical culture that documented a diverse array of cultural groups in California between 1938 and 1940. it will also examine the distinctive ethnographic voice and approach she cultivated in her collecting ventures. Her methodology anticipated, in great measure, the role that collectors currently play in the documentation of traditional cultures, a concept that would mature fully during the second half of the twentieth century.

Robertson was an eloquent spokesperson for traditional music and its practitioners. Her determined personality, perceptive ethnographic skills, interest in capturing and documenting contextual detail, and distinctive and patterned narrative style gave her an idiosyncratic presence among New Deal collectors. She described her role as a folk music collector dramatically in a bio she wrote for her personal publicity file:

Sidney Robertson Cowell is a Californian whose adventures as “government song woman” in pursuit of folksong would fill several books. Before she married the composer Henry Cowell in 1941, she had worn out 3 automobiles,
travelling over 300,000 miles in 17 states, alone with her recording machine, her sleeping bag, and a companion once described in her hearing as “the lady-about-the-songs’ dog” . . . In 7 or 8 states, her recordings were the first ever made; in the others she was preceded only by John Lomax with his exploration of Negro song . . . Mrs. Cowell’s training as a musician conditioned her interest in the music and the singing styles that belong to traditional singing and playing, at a time when other folksong collectors in the US were for the most part more interested in gathering texts. (“Sidney Robertson Cowell is a Californian . . .,” pp. 1–2)

Sidney Robertson was born Sidney William Hawkins in 1903 at the Buena Vista Sanitarium in San Francisco to a prosperous family. As a child she was bright, articulate, and inquisitive. Her upbringing reflected an independent, rather unstructured, open-minded educational philosophy that was progressive in character, high-cultural and European-oriented in texture. She was given piano, violin, dancing, and elocution lessons from an early age. She had French tutors, lessons in riding, fencing, and polo, plus children’s cooking and sewing classes, among other activities, instigated by what she called her mother’s “educational ploys,” which included attendance at a plethora of theatrical, musical, and dance performances. Some of this was also encouraged by her placement in a study of notably gifted children led by Stanford University psychologist Lewis Madison Terman, who felt that such youngsters should be introduced to intellectually stimulating activities early in their lives. Henry Cowell, who became Sidney’s husband in 1941, was also a member of Terman’s study group as a child, though it is not clear that their paths crossed in that capacity. She was, however, taken to Cowell—six years her elder and already considered “a famous musician”—by her music teacher Elizabeth Bates when she was about fourteen, so that she could receive guidance from him on her piano playing. Several decades later, by the time Sidney married Henry, their paths had crossed numerous times, supplemented by a raft of common acquaintances and their California upbringing, though his was much less affluent and privileged than hers (“SRC Chronology I,” pp. 7, 19–22).

From the ages of seven to fourteen, Sidney accompanied Ms. Bates during four summers on “Cook’s Tours” of Europe and subsequently visited Vienna, Rome, and Paris with her parents. In her reminiscences, narrated late in life, she described being present at many memorable early-twentieth-century European cultural events, which she illustrated with amusing anecdotes recounting her frequent serendipitous intersections with royalty and famous
artists, authors, and musicians. She recalled attending “the famous premier of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*, with Nijinsky in scandal-creating garb, and Pierre Monteaux conducting,” in Paris in 1913. She wrote that she was in Rome at the outbreak of World War I in 1914, and in Paris when German troops moved into Belgium. Ever the storyteller, Robertson had a remarkable memory and savored recounting lengthy entertaining narratives about her various remarkable encounters and experiences throughout her life. She also reflected flamboyantly and exhaustively on her adventures in collecting traditional music, often displaying droll, self-effacing humor or poignant aspects of human nature.

When queried about her interest in folk music collecting, Robertson once claimed that “the first ingredient was an itching heel,” which she attributed partially to having accompanied her father as a child on long business trips throughout the West. He was the national sales manager for the White Sewing Machine Company (which he “turned’ into” the White Automobile Company), and while they traveled together he would leave her for long periods, during which she was free to go exploring. “He naturally felt a certain danger in the extreme gregariousness I had inherited from him, and so the stock warning for girls of that era became a daily ritual: Try not to lose your purse, Sidney, and NEVER talk to strangers. . . . The trouble was I never met a stranger” (Tape-recorded reminiscences made late in life). Recalling such trips, she explained that “Father drove a heavy car with which he several times pulled a car or a team that had got caught in the sand fording a stream, and he could repair most cars if absolutely necessary—He always felt responsible for rescuing the stranded and he convinced me that anybody in a powerful car owed roadside assistance” (“SRC Chronology I,” p. 8). Sidney would emulate in her own life, with curiosity and excitement, her father’s outgoing character and helpfulness to strangers. She also learned early how to patch and change tires.

In 1917, she enrolled briefly in a polytechnic high school because she “had decided she wanted to be an engineer.” Although she did not follow this line of study, it points to her interest in creative problem solving and savvy for grasping the mechanics of machinery, which would serve her well in mastering the idiosyncrasies of instantaneous recording devices and tape recorders as a folk music collector. She was admitted to Stanford within the quota set for women, and spent her sophomore year (1922–23) studying “on a French government scholarship at the Lycée at Tours” (“HC [Henry Cowell] and SRC [Sidney Robertson Cowell],” p. 2). She chose to major in “Romantic
Languages” at Stanford, where, because she was already proficient in French, Latin, and Italian and had few credits remaining to complete her major, she pursued philosophy classes, fascinated by questions related to aesthetics. In 1923, a year before graduation, she was accepted by the Stanford English Club, where she became a friend of John Steinbeck and his first wife, Carol, and of others who were to become published novelists. There, she was also introduced to a Stanford University philosophy student, Kenneth Gregg Robertson, who was also elected to the club. She married him the following year on June 19, and several days thereafter, skipping commencement, they left for “New York and Paris, making the Atlantic crossing on one of the single class steamers of the French line long familiar to me” (“SRC Chronology I,” pp. 49–51).

In Paris, Robertson participated in piano master classes with famed pianist and conductor Alfred Cortot at the École Normale de Musique, took solfège classes, and, with other Parisian students, sang in a choir at the impressive state funeral of composer Gabriel Fauré in 1924. Kenneth began taking classes in psychiatry at the Sorbonne, but life became stressful for Sidney, as she pursued her own music studies while also serving as Kenneth’s interpreter in his classes. In 1925, the couple moved on to Zurich so that Kenneth could attend Jung’s seminars on analytic psychology. Robertson once again accompanied him as interpreter, and they both followed the noted psychoanalyst to Swanage, on the southern coast of England, for a summer seminar on “Dream Psychology.” Jung, presumably taken with her quick mind and perceptive intuition, urged her to take part in the sessions, even encouraging her to become a lay analyst under his supervision, though she never accepted the offer (“SRC Chronology I,” pp. 63–64).

When the couple returned to California shortly thereafter, they lived in Palo Alto. Robertson continued her musical education at the San Francisco Conservatory, studying with, among others, composer and music theorist Ernest Bloch and pianist Harold Bauer. She also spent two summers on the East Coast focusing on the study of English folk music and dance. She attributed her first introduction to folk music, aside from familiarity with a few family tunes, to Bloch—who, she noted, introduced her “to the exciting modal and rhythmic variety of purely melodic music. . . . Mr. Bloch showed us French collections of folk melodies that were at once simple and skillfully wrought and I explored their asymmetric details and fine formal balance for a long time with curiosity and pleasure.” During this period, she also renewed her tangential acquaintance with Henry Cowell, attending
some of his house concerts. By this time, she had become intrigued with his ideas about the music of non-European cultures and with his interest in attending local California performances of Chinese, Japanese, Tahitian, and Filipino music. Robertson made an effort to attend Cowell’s lectures at the San Francisco Conservatory during this period, and later, in Carmel,
his series of presentations on “Music of the World’s Peoples” (“HC and SRC,” p. 4).

At the same time, Robertson took a job teaching music at the Peninsula School for Creative Education in Menlo Park, soon becoming the head of its music department. The progressive, experimental nature of the school led her to introduce her students to folk dancing and to local Spanish and cowboy music that she had collected informally, as well as to the modal Irish and English songs that she had discovered in the publications of English folk music collector Cecil James Sharp. Following the couple’s return to California, the marriage became ever more stressful and Robertson resumed a more independent existence.

Following the 1929 stock market crash, the Great Depression brought hard times for Robertson’s family of origin and she lost her job at the Peninsula School in 1932 due to the floundering economy. She eventually separated from Kenneth, and they divorced amicably in 1934, at her request. During this time, she supported herself by working as a governess, teaching piano lessons, and penning book reviews and newspaper pieces about local musical performances, while living in an artist’s colony in Carmel, “alone with my piano, a cocker and 2 cats” (“HC and SRC,” p. 2). By 1935, however, she increasingly felt that her life spent among a group of bohemian artists and intellectuals on the coast was too “ivory-towered,” especially as she learned more about the ravages of the Depression across the country.

Looking for a change that would be more in keeping with the times, Robertson wrote to Helen Hall, director of the Henry Street Settlement on the Lower East Side in New York City to ask if there were any open positions available, having heard that they were using music in innovative ways to smooth frictions and facilitate communication in local neighborhoods. Her letter to Miss Hall communicated her sentiment that “you are doing just the work I should like to do, and I hope very much eventually to be able to contribute to it in some way, however slight” (Letter to Helen Hall, n.d.). She received a response, soon thereafter, that there was an immediate opening for someone to organize “social music” in the community. Robertson—with her characteristic pluck, though having little in the way of funds—drove promptly, within months, cross-country to New York City with a friend. At the time, Henry Street was providing social, cultural, and educational services to poor immigrants on New York’s Lower East Side. After her arrival in July 1935, Robertson threw herself into working with elderly Jewish immigrants. Among other jobs, she gathered Yiddish songs that were used in creat-
ing programs to facilitate group singing sessions in the community. Though she stayed for only eight months, Robertson’s work at Henry Street proved to be a new direction for her and began to set the stage for her later work in the collection of American folk music. To begin with, it marked a significant pivot from a Eurocentric focus on musical traditions she had experienced in her early life to an increasing awareness of the role of music making in an American urban setting. Cowell had moved to New York by this time, and, on the faculty of the New School, offered his series of lectures on world music—which Robertson was drawn to once again, with renewed interest. Not only had she become more involved in the collection of traditional song to be used for social purposes at Henry Street, but she also found herself increasingly attracted to exploring the inheritance, complexity, and range of the dynamic performance of traditional music making, specifically in the United States, whether among recent immigrants or with those who had arrived much earlier from areas around the world, Anglo or otherwise.7

Robertson recalled, in the 1980s, that

I had for some time been worrying the question of folk song, like a dog with a bone, and particularly I was curious about American folk song: what was American about it? I knew only the Lomax Cowboy Songs and a few tunes from my parents, but I had been so struck by the wild enthusiasm and persistence engendered among the youngsters at the Peninsula School by Home on the Range that I was convinced there was some special affinity between the character of this song and the youngsters who went after it so hard. (“SRC Chronology II,” p. 3)

Early in 1936, while visiting friends in Washington, D.C., Robertson went to the Archive of American Folk-Song (currently the American Folklife Center),8 in the Library of Congress’s Music Division, to ask this very question, inquiring “whether someone there could make clear to me what distinguished American folk song, from Spanish, Jewish, or English, for instance.” She also visited the office of Charles Seeger, who had recently been hired by the newly created Resettlement Administration (RA) to develop a “folk song program,” one of the many experimental New Deal programs and projects initiated by President Franklin Roosevelt to address the social and economic needs of Americans during the Depression. In remembering her first meeting with Seeger, Robertson recounted: “To my surprise, he was extremely impressed with my anecdotes of collecting traditional song in order to spread them more widely among their natural inheritors, in school in California
and at Henry Street, and he immediately offered me a job.” Although she initially turned down the position, the offer piqued her interest (“SRC Chronology II,” p. 4).

Before moving from academic teaching in New York to Washington, D.C., to assume his new position, musicologist and composer Seeger had worn many musical hats. He had been a composer of avant-garde music from 1912 to 1916, teaching at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley). In 1933, after moving to New York, he helped establish the short-lived Society of Comparative Musicology with anthropologist and ethnomusicologist George Herzog and pioneer collector of Native America music Helen Heffron Roberts. At the time, however, he expressed the view that American folk music hardly existed and was unworthy of any attention. Like many early-twentieth-century scholars of world music, he was focused much more intently on music considered “exotic” or “primitive”—including that of African American and Native peoples—than on the folk music of Anglo-Americans or immigrants.  

In New York City during the mid-1930s, as the social and economic upheaval of the nation deepened, Seeger became radicalized by his involvement with the Marxist Composers’ Collective, no longer able to ignore the musical culture and the realities of everyday Americans. Later, he acknowledged in an interview with David Dunaway, “I began to see the point: people make the music they want to make. . . . [T]hey will make their own kinds of music, even against all kinds of odds. I didn’t see this at once, it was very gradual.” When asked to join the New Deal effort, Seeger was ready to pursue the ideological and activist aims of Roosevelt’s message, especially as they pertained to the realm of music. The trajectory of Seeger’s development in becoming an active advocate for the dynamic role of folk music in American life, including its documentation, was certainly not lost on Robertson. Indeed, it fascinated her.

Later that summer, Seeger asked Robertson to come by his office, hoping again to coax her to become his assistant at the RA. She later recalled that he asked me just to sit in for him in his office, to answer questions, since I was the only person he [had] ever met who understood what he was talking about and what his plans were. This seemed harmless, so I agreed. Of course I got hooked on the work, and the wonderful hopeful and dedicated New Deal, so that when he came back, I didn’t resist too much when urged to stay on. (“I have been asked to explain . . . .” p. 4)