

# Discovery Theater

*presents*



# Stories from Coyote

*by Barbara Croall*

*with  
Barbara Croall  
Jeff Legacy  
and members  
of the  
Contemporary  
Music Forum*



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## What is it about *Coyote*?

Coyote always seems to be in a jam – **caught in some sort of problem that he takes upon himself**, that he needs to figure out and solve. Why? Because Coyote gets bored. And when he gets bored, he decides to **play tricks** on others to prove how smart he is. Often, he recruits others to help him make things, then tries to take all of the credit. However, when Coyote boasts too much (as he often does), his tricks backfire and he **ends up getting tricked himself**.

Most people are **embarrassed** when they outsmart themselves. **Not Coyote!** Not for long, anyway. That's because he often doesn't realize just how silly others think he is. (If only he knew!)

No matter the situation, Coyote always tries to be the optimist. Sometimes he might sulk and mope around in self-pity. He might feel lonely or that others don't appreciate how clever he is. But those moods never last. You might hear him at night, howling his eerie, mournful cry. By morning, though, you can be sure he will stop crying and be on his way... looking for **something else to get into!**

*Have YOU ever gotten into a jam because you were bored?  
When? How did you feel?*



## About Sound and Music

Ever wondered why birds sing? Ever noticed how, when it's really hot out in the summer, the crickets and other bugs make all sorts of neat sounds? Sometimes they sound like they are **buzzing, humming, and singing** together in a chorus ... or even like the rhythm section of a band, making a groove with their shakers. "Ch-ch, ch-ch." Ever noticed how, no matter where you are, there is never ever complete silence? Even when it is really quiet, we can still hear things – very softly, **if we listen carefully**. Try it now! What do you hear?

Try this when you're hanging out with your friends. **Start talking in a whisper** (even if it seems strange or silly at first). Soon you'll notice that everyone around you starts to talk more quietly – or even starts to whisper, too – until everyone around you is whispering. Next, start whispering so quietly that even YOU can't hear yourself – until you realize that you are actually **just moving your lips**, pretending to whisper and not making a sound. Soon everyone else will get really quiet – doing the same thing and trying to hear what you and each other is saying. Then see who is the first person who gets the joke and starts laughing. (It might just be you!) Keep on and see who the last person left is, who didn't laugh. (Not easy. Everyone does eventually!)

## About the Performers

**Jeff Legacy**, a Mushkegowuk Cree/Ojibwe from Attawapiskat First Nation, is a recent Third Year graduate of the Centre for Indigenous Theatre in Toronto, Canada, as well as a qualified Native Abuse Counselor specializing in solvent and substance abuse and in dealing with high risk youth. Jeff started acting early in high school, going on to community theatre. He now lives in Toronto, pursuing his acting and writing career.

## **The Contemporary Music Forum ([www.contemporarymusicforum.org](http://www.contemporarymusicforum.org)),**

Washington, DC's longest-running contemporary music ensemble, was founded in 1973 by professional performers and composers to support and encourage the composition, performance, education, and enjoyment of new music, especially American music and collaborative works involving art and technology. In 2003, CMF became the ensemble-in-residence at the Corcoran. A crucial forum for the development of new music in DC, the Forum has performed pieces by more than 500 contemporary composers at embassies, the Kennedy Center, the Organization of American States, the Library of Congress, and other venues.

**Barbara Croall** (Odawa) has composed inventive musical works that have been performed and broadcast in Europe, Britain, the United States, and Canada. Apart from playing on and composing for traditional Native flutes and singing in traditional ceremonies, Barbara is also trained classically. She is a graduate of the Musikhochschule in Munich, Germany, and also holds a Bachelor of Music Degree in Composition from the University of Toronto, where she was the recipient of the Glenn Gould Award in Composition (1989). From 1989 to 2000 Barbara was a Resident Composer with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. She founded ERGO in 1999 to promote performance of contemporary music in Canada and abroad.

## **Creating Stories From Coyote**

by Barbara Croall

*Stories From Coyote* is a musical storytelling work for audiences of all ages. In 1999, I was invited to create music for stories by Shuswap Elder John Jules. These stories, passed down, created and told in the oral tradition, are about a character named Coyote – 'Sk'elep' as he is known to the Shuswap people of British Columbia. Many different tribes and First Nations of North America have stories about Coyote (and their own name for him) and the lessons in life that he teaches – especially to laugh at ourselves and to realize our own limitations. In some stories, Coyote is involved in the creation of things (of which he is often boastful) and he is also a trickster – of a kind who in the end only tricks himself, showing an important example of how we too can set ourselves up for a fall when we become consumed with pride, self-importance, greed and vanity (among other things). Coyote is clever in a self-conscious way, which is why he continues to make mistakes that we can laugh at and learn from – and recognize the Coyote in ourselves.

Why choose an animal, like a coyote, for this? Well, there are other trickster stories involving other different kinds of creatures – like raven, crow, rabbit, spider for example – all of which relate to their observed behaviour and way of survival. This stems from an indigenous world view about how people – human beings – are part of nature, and not above it, controlling it and dominating it. We as people learned to survive by observing how the winged ones, the crawlers, the four-legged ones and water creatures all lived in harmony with one another and their environment. Likewise, the characters in our stories are often not human (or fully human). Instead, our stories are about different creatures who at times demonstrate human-like behaviours. A coyote, for one, is a funny-looking animal with strange and peculiar antics. And when a coyote cries at night, it sounds to our ears almost like a mournful, self-pitying cry - at other times like yelping, yipping and laughing: vocalizations that seem part animal and part human. It is no wonder, then, why Coyote came to be an exaggerated example of humanness and how stories continue to be created about him and his interaction with the world around him.

One interesting thing to note is how the effects of global warming have altered Coyote's journey on this earth. Known foremost as a southern habitat animal, coyotes have been increasingly venturing northward for survival (as attested in the opening of one of John Jules



stories, when Coyote finds himself waking up in a strange place and says, “What am I doing so far up North at this time of year?”) Many coyotes are coming closer to cities and towns (so-called human habitats). It seems to be Coyote’s destiny to be constantly struggling with circumstances that he thinks he can overcome and control. Unfortunately, human fear of coyotes (as well as many other forms of wildlife and aspects of nature) rather than an understanding and empathy for their plight (a situation created by humans) has resulted in unnecessary extermination efforts as a quick and short-term solution.

From my experience of work in outdoor education rooted in traditional Anishinaabe teachings – an ongoing part of my life - I do not make separate distinctions about what ‘sound’ and ‘music’ are. Sound and music are synonymous – the same thing. In our language, the word particles for sound and medicine are interconnected. In our creation story, the birds are the ones who taught us how to sing. When the wind blows, it isn’t just making sounds – it is singing. Even the trees, bending, swaying and cracking their limbs in the wind, speak and sing in their own way, too. In this sense, a song isn’t just what people make with their voices. A song comes from many different things, and we can hear this if we really listen carefully. Much of what I compose involves experimenting with the sounds that musical instruments really make and what these can suggest or mean. Without imposed conventions or restrictions, the spirit of a musical instrument and its more complex and multifaceted character can really and truly speak, and of course, sing.

*Stories From Coyote* began as a work for orchestra and storyteller (telling the story and acting as Coyote), out of which a version for string quartet, percussionist and storyteller was developed for the purpose of being able to travel to remote communities. When I began creating the music, John Jules provided me with a CD recording of the stories that he made (they are not written down) as he tells them. This was important, because the way a story is told is part of its meaning and message. And since the story is set on Shuswap land in Kamloops, the music reflects the many different influences and sounds of nature in Sk’elep’s world – certain kinds of birds, the insects, other animals and creatures, the winds whispering and speaking through the grasses and trees... as well as Coyote’s own personality and spirit, in the way he talks, walks (struts) and dances.

One thing to also remember is how Coyote transforms things (or himself transforms), proving that he is in fact powerful, but only to the extent that he is bound to make a mistake somehow in the process of it all so that others benefit from it. Coyote teaches as that we all make mistakes – some are painful, some embarrassing, and often many are glorious and fruitful in the outcome of things from a long-term perspective on life. And we will continue to make mistakes throughout life, just as Coyote does. Coyote is always subverting hierarchical notions of order and structure when he does this, ‘tossing up’ (as he does when flinging the stars into the sky) life’s questions and decisions to a game of intention versus chance. Who or what controls the outcome? Who knows? At least Coyote thinks he has all the answers to these questions.

## Barbara Croall Recommends...

- ***Keepers of the Animals: Native Stories and Wildlife Activities for Children (1991)*** by Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac. This book is one in a series of other books by Caduto and Bruchac – all of which connect traditional teachings of Native American storytelling to science and environmentalism.
- ***Bird Songs: 250 North American Birds in Song (2006)*** by Les Beletsky. This book includes a handy and easy-to-use audio player for kids to listen to and learn to identify different kinds of bird calls.
- ***Wisdom of the Elders*** by David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson offers helpful insights for teachers.
- **[www.davidsuzuki.org](http://www.davidsuzuki.org)** – the David Suzuki Foundation website. See the list of books on ecology and conservation by Dr. Suzuki – great for teachers and students of all ages.

**DISCOVERY THEATER ([www.DiscoveryTheater.org](http://www.DiscoveryTheater.org)), the Smithsonian Institution’s theater for children**, is dedicated to offering the best in live educational performing arts for young people. Each year, more than 50,000 children and their adults visit Discovery Theater on the National Mall to explore American history and cultures, folk tales from around the world, and exciting, accessible science and math programs. Discovery Theater performances unite ideologies, enact themes that reflect the diversity of its audiences, open avenues of self-reflection, and offer an enjoyable means for parents and teachers to demonstrate life's lessons. DT often collaborates to create original productions with distinguished partners such as the Library of Congress, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Lemelson Center for Study of Invention and Innovation, and America’s Jazz Heritage, A Partnership of the Lila Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund and the Smithsonian Institution.

Discovery Theater’s new specially-designed performance space is located next to the Smithsonian Castle, in the S. Dillon Ripley Center—the Smithsonian’s underground learning center with classrooms, lecture halls, artists’ studios and more. Favorite DT programs also tour schools and museums, while our partnership with Round House Theater in Silver Spring, MD means that DT’s special brand of educational entertainment for kids is more widely available than ever before. For details, call 202-633-8700 or see [www.DiscoveryTheater.org](http://www.DiscoveryTheater.org).

