



Bio information: **JANEL LEPPIN**

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***Virtuoso Cellist and Composer JANEL LEPPIN Finds Joy and Fellowship
with Her ENSEMBLE VOLCANIC ASH, an Extraordinary Group that
Combines Highly Detailed Composition and Improvisation***

Out of the ashes, something strange and beautiful is born. Emanating from the capacious imagination of **Janel Leppin**, Ensemble Volcanic Ash materialized after years of incubation on Washington D.C.'s verdant new music, jazz and improvised music scenes. The group's eponymous Cuneiform album captures Leppin's highly personal vision, a stylistically polymorphous sound that the Washington Post aptly describes as "embodying all the complexity and grace of human cooperation — that intuitive, empathetic, semi-telepathic teamwork thing that helps set us apart as a species."

A composer and cellist who's honed a singular synthesis of composition, orchestration and improvisation, Leppin is best known as half of the experimental duo Janel and Anthony, which she co-leads with her husband **guitarist Anthony Pirog**. With the chamber-jazz Ensemble Volcanic Ash she steps forward as a bandleader in her own right, delivering a gorgeous debut brimming with singular musicians. The seven-piece group melds an illustrious array of D.C. talent into a glimmering expressive organism that surges, expands, ebbs and dances in multiple directions at once.

The powerhouse cast gets plenty of opportunities to shine, but it's Leppin's compositions that define the group in radiant, Technicolor splendor. Elegant and raw, persuasively logical and thrumming with emotion, her lapidary themes take shape with exquisite detail. Like with jazz's most consequent composers, Leppin's writing flows from the idiosyncratic voices in her ensemble, players who imbue every passage with their irrepressible personalities. As an instrumental voice she's the first among equals, laying down expansive emotional parameters with each striking solo and cello-forward passage.

On an instrument with only a handful of defining improvisers Leppin makes a forceful case for herself as one of jazz's most original cellists. Which isn't to say she dominates the proceedings. She creates alluring lines for Pirog, **tenor saxophonist Brian Settles**, **alto saxophonist Sarah Hughes**, **harpist Kim Sator**, and the commanding rhythm section tandem of **bassist Luke Stewart** and drummer **Larry Ferguson**, who all shape the music profoundly and often erase the distinction between soloist and accompanist.

"This work is a braiding together of over 32 years of classical and jazz study on the cello with more than 20 years performing in Washington D.C.," Leppin says. "It is a distinct place to learn and try new things. I've worked with some of these musicians for well over a decade and I think it shows in the music."

Describing Ensemble Volcanic Ash's music as cinematic is accurate, but also misleading as it's rare indeed to find a film these days marked by such unbridled creativity and incandescent characterizations. The brief, through-composed opening track "Children of the Water" sets the scene, with its portentous theme packing tremendous emotion and drama into a minute and a half. On "Woven Forest," Leppin's burly cello seizes the foreground, propelled by an insistent groove. As the horns step forward, counter melodies churn behind them until the ensemble reaches a clearing, opening up space for Pirog's guitar solo.

Many of Leppin's tunes unfurl in two or three movements, like the mini-suite "She Had Synesthesia," which inspires some of Leppin's most earthy, physically imposing cello work on an extended exchange with Pirog. "I Pose," the only track on the album with keyboards, features two main sections that suggest very different spectral encounters. The tune opens with a spaciouly celestial section and builds to an incantatory cello-driven climax evoking mystery and transcendence.

In much the same way that Leppin effectively deploys contrasting passages, the album's sequencing flows with its own internal logic. The concise, through composed "Her Hand is His Score" feels like a moment of calm before plunging into the insistent introspection of "Silvia's Path." The punning title refers to the renowned poet Sylvia Plath, and the piece opens and closes with incantatory lines of minimalism. The album's centerpiece is the nine-minute "Volcano's Song," a sinuous melody that rides on Stewart's bass line. Solos by Settles and Pirog quietly torque the tension while maintaining the same tempo and hushed dynamic. Like the ensemble itself, the title comes from Leppin's experience on a plane flight diverted during the 2010 eruption of Iceland's

Eyjafjallajokull volcano after a long European tour, but the piece was inspired by her love of John Zorn's Masada. "I play those beautiful pieces to this day," she says.

She pays direct tribute to another source of inspiration, Alice Coltrane, with "A Palace for Alice," a piece suspended on Sator's harp ostinato (beautifully doubled by Pirog's guitar). It's a gossamer melody carried by Hughes' cottony alto that feels like a dispatch from Coltrane's *Journey in Satchidananda*. Leppin closes the album with the first song she ever composed, "Leaving the Woods," which she first recorded on the 2012 album *Where is Home*. Once again, Stewart's bass takes the lead, maintaining a centered emotional presence as the cello and Hughes' alto sax spiral around each other. Unsentimental but full of ache, it's a backward glance of a tune with a melancholic melody.

If "Leaving the Woods" makes the transplantation process sound wrenching it's partly because she's so deeply rooted. Leppin hails from the D.C. metropolitan area where she earned a degree in cello performance from George Mason University (with minors in world music and dance). While studying the Western classical tradition, she plunged into DC's thriving punk and hardcore scene in the 1990s. Later in college she began composing and improvising with Pirog. The pair have played hundreds of shows together worldwide and recorded several critically hailed albums as Janel and Anthony. She's also collaborated extensively in recent years with composer and renegade pedal steel guitarist Susan Alcorn, including curating, arranging and playing on 2020's *The Heart Sutra* (Editions Mego Ideologic Organ).

In many ways, Ensemble Volcanic Ash's expanded sonic palette and vast textural resources unleashed Leppin as both a composer and a player. "It freed me up," she said. "Having Luke Stewart in the band gave me the chance to step out more comping-wise. I could be in the midrange a bit more and solo more often. With that kind of support I found I could play more assertively like my favorite cellists, Abdul Wadud and Pablo Casals. It was a big evolution to let go of playing the role of bassist in the group."

Leppin is also a celebrated textile artist who transforms her onstage outfits into chromatically extravagant woven creations (the album includes Leppin's woven portraits of each Volcanic Ash musician as well as her shimmering cover art). Comet Ping Pong, the Black Cat, and the 9:30 Club have presented solo exhibitions of her weavings. She created album covers for Des Demonas's *Cure for Love*, Anthony Pirog's *Pocket Poem*, and Susan Alcorn's *The Heart Sutra*. In form, content and spirit, there are many parallels between her fabric art and her music. Just listen and take a look.

For more information on Janel Leppin

www.janelleppin.com - www.instagram.com/janelleppin - www.facebook.com/janel.leppin - www.twitter.com/janelleppin

PROMOTIONAL PHOTOS

Digital [High-Resolution] versions of these images are available on the **Janel Leppin** artist page @ cuneiformrecords.com

