

Bio information: **JANEL AND ANTHONY / JANEL LEPPIN : ENSEMBLE VOLCANIC ASH**
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Guitar Hero ANTHONY PIROG (The Messthetics) and iconoclastic cellist-vocalist JANEL LEPPIN (Priests) reunite as a duo, and on Ensemble Volcanic Ash. JANEL AND ANTHONY Return With *New Moon in the Evil Age*, First New Release in 12 Years. Long-awaited double album is out June 28 from Cuneiform Records, features full-length instrumental and vocal LPs. Janel Leppin’s transcendent chamber-jazz unit, Ensemble Volcanic Ash, also returns with *To March Is to Love*, out June 28.

Independently, the musician-composers who make up Janel and Anthony — that’s cellist and vocalist **Janel Leppin** and guitarist **Anthony Pirog** — have led deeply fascinating creative lives.

Leppin has been a pillar of the Washington D.C. music scene as an acclaimed cellist for over twenty years. She composes at the helm of her widely celebrated **Ensemble Volcanic Ash**, recorded a solo cello album *The Brink* in 2023 and released riveting singer-songwriter records as Mellow Diamond. As a collaborator and multi-instrumentalist, she has contributed to an impossibly wide swath of internationally-known experimental and indie sounds, from the inquisitive new-music of **Eyvind Kang** and **Oren Ambarchi** to the haunting folksong of **Marissa Nadler**, to the dynamic psych-rock of **Rose Windows** and art-punk of **PRIESTS**. One of the finest guitarists of his generation, Anthony Pirog is a member of Impulse! and Dischord recording artists **the Messthetics**, featuring the rhythm section of post-hardcore legends Fugazi, as well as an acclaimed jazz and avant-garde improviser and an important torch-carrier for the legacy of D.C. guitar god Danny Gatton.

Together, however, these partners in life and music have reached rare heights of sonic invention and personal expression — creating original music with a clairvoyance that their other projects cannot approach. It’s an intimacy that goes back decades, to when they first encountered each other in high school, as “grunge-kid musicians,” per Anthony. The relationship deepened through their college years and into their careers as full-time professionals on the richly diverse D.C. scene. “When we write,” Janel says, “we’re pretty telepathic at this point, as many years as we’ve been playing and improvising together.” Adds Anthony, “We are on the same mission, 100% of the time, in all aspects of life.”

Their 2012 Cuneiform Records debut, *Where Is Home*, earned critical plaudits for its inviting beyond-genre explorations, a seamless blend of composition and improvisation, otherworldly electronics and masterful technique. *DownBeat* said the album holds “a marvelous surprise at every turn.”

Now, at long last, Janel and Anthony have returned to the record bin after more than a decade, with an ambitious double album, *New Moon in the Evil Age*, that reconciles two facets of their lifelong obsessions in art and music. The first half is a stunning **10-track instrumental disc of inventively produced duets**; the second, an evocative **nine-track vocal album**, reflects the pair’s enduring love of rock, pop and alternative songcraft.

On the former half, “**Pacific Grove Monarch**” lays Janel’s poignant cello melody atop Anthony’s Fahey-esque arpeggios, anticipating a chilling outro suffused with ambient sound design that rewards a focused listen.

“**Boom Boom**” finds Janel and Anthony combining the sonorities and scales of the Japanese koto; Anthony with country guitar chops, before Janel explores the range of her instrument with ease and virtuosity. There are additional delights in the details, with Janel contributing swirling filigree on koto and Mellotron.

The second disc showcases the duo as synth-savvy multi-instrumentalists and, as Anthony put it, lovers of popular music who happily “take part in band worship.” The gorgeous, Portisheady crawl of “**Fly Over Iceland**” paints a mountainous landscape using Janel's powerful vocal range while conveying the yearning she felt on tour, away from her partner. “**Evil Age**” touts a commanding chorus and foreshadows the era of Trump and Covid; “**Surf the Dead**” finds common ground between Broadcast, Sonic Youth and Yeah Yeah Yeahs. In collaboration with the revered producer and engineer **Mike Reina**, the duo pushed their production boundaries. “We used lots of weird techniques,” Anthony says. “I took a track I recorded at home and then ran it through a reel to reel, putting our fingers on the reel to slow it down. You can hear the tape flutter on **Hearts Hearth**.” (**Dev Hoff**, a go-to collaborator for Nels Cline, Julia Holter, Sharon Van Etten and many others, contributed bass.)

“We had fun making it,” Janel adds. “But it’s also an intimate record for us.”

What’s more, a new album by Janel’s **Ensemble Volcanic Ash** (a.k.a. EVA), titled *To March Is to Love*, underscores yet another angle of her compositional abilities. A follow-up to EVA’s self-titled debut from 2022, *To March* features compositions that were workshopped and explored in front of packed houses during a 2023 residency at the D.C. DIY venue Rhizome — where, Janel says an audience member remarked, “it felt like the whole building was going to come off of its foundation.” To wit, Bandcamp Daily declared “There’s no end to the melodic intensity of *Ensemble Volcanic Ash*. Even at its lushest and most approachable, Janel Leppin delivers the music with a resolute force of will.” Their debut was included in JazzTimes Critics Poll Top 50 New Releases of 2022.

The fiery lineup includes Janel on cello and piano, Anthony on guitar, **Sarah Hughes** and **Brian Settles** (Jason Moran, Chad Taylor) on saxophones, **Larry Ferguson** on drums, and **Luke Stewart** (Irreversible Entanglements, David Murray) on bass. The album was recorded live at Mike Reina's studio in Richmond, VA. The music is progressive chamber jazz with the steely avant-garde that descends from Julius Hemphill’s 1972 LP *Dogon A.D.* “**As Wide as All Outdoors**” is from a quote by Hemphill, “Jazz is as wide as all outdoors,” which inspired Janel to write a raucous introduction and take a far reaching and dynamic cello solo.

That landmark recording featured Janel’s lodestar, the late **Abdul Wadud**, a pioneering cellist who cleared the path she traverses today. On the first track, Wadud is one of Janel’s honorees (“**Ode to Abdul Wadud**”). The album is bookended with her *other* greatest influence on the cello, **Pablo Casals** (“**Casals’ Rainbow**”). Wadud and Casals, Janel points out, were musical revolutionaries — in the case of Casals, he was a political firebrand, as well — so their presence is welcome on an album that is “very political. This is the moment where people are going to have to step up. We’ve done this before and we can do it again. It’s a very D.C. message, but a very important message.”

The couple met in high school in Northern Virginia — she was in orchestra, he was in jazz band — and later connected as college kids, jamming late into the night at bonfires that Janel hosted. Over the past two decades and counting, each has made the other’s career possible. Having studied jazz at Berklee and NYU, Anthony enabled Janel immeasurably in her pursuits as an improviser, helping her to loosen herself from the strictures of classical orthodoxy. He also compelled her to write and record her own music, rather than continue to get swept up in the neverending calendar of a touring sideperson. “I’d be playing amazing festivals all over the world,” Janel recalls, “and he’s like, ‘That’s great, but you *need* to be doing *your* music because it’s good!’”

For her part, Janel, who has a degree in Cello Performance and World Music, greatly broadened Anthony's stylistic purview, constantly introducing him to new scales, techniques and artists. She remains his most crucial editor: No matter what he's working on, be it solo music, like his star-packed ambient project *The Nepenthe Series Vol. 1*, or Messthetics songs, she offers sage advice; Anthony describes his spouse as a kind of live-in producer. "We really trust each other's opinions," Janel adds, "It goes both ways."

New Moon in the Evil Age and *To March Is to Love* add up to the most profound document of this mutual faith thus far — captivating music by two artists whose radiance, together and apart, only seems to expand. "It's taken time for us to learn how to work like this," Janel says.

"But in the end," Anthony adds, "it's an extremely valuable feeling to be working with someone who's your family." Before he can finish his sentence, Janel adds, "Because we're so telepathic now."