



**Slowly Melting**

**Pluto In Aquarius**



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Bio information: **JANEL LEPPIN / ENSEMBLE VOLCANIC ASH**

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Title: ***PLUTO IN AQUARIUS*** (Cuneiform Rune 558)

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***Cellist-Composer Janel Leppin Presents Two Stunning  
New Projects That Reflect Her Expansive Vision —  
Out March 27th, 2026 on Cuneiform Records.  
Fuzztone and melody collide on the solo release *Slowly Melting*,  
while *Pluto in Aquarius*, by her long-running avant-jazz unit  
Ensemble Volcanic Ash, speaks to this precarious political moment.***

Over the past two decades, the cellist and multi-instrumentalist **Janel Leppin** has worked steadily to become one of the most compelling composers and improvisers of her generation. With her beloved Washington, D.C. scene as her home base, she has earned renown among fans of new and experimental music worldwide. Her astonishing range of projects includes Janel and Anthony, the duo she shares with her spouse, Messthetics guitarist **Anthony Pirog**; the extraordinary pop-tinged singer-songwriter music she makes as Mellow Diamond; and music with Marissa Nadler, PRIESTS, Rose Windows and many others.

Now at the peak of her powers as both a bandleader and a solo performer, she's released two new projects of staggering beauty as well as vast personal and political insight. ***Pluto in Aquarius*** features her longstanding avant-jazz chamber unit, **Ensemble Volcanic Ash**, with a lineup of her most trusted collaborators including Pirog, bassist **Luke Stewart**, saxophonist **Brian Settles** and drummer **Larry Ferguson**. ***Slowly Melting*** is a riveting solo program that puts Leppin's fuzz-saturated cello at the fore. She also contributes her accompaniment, crafting expansive soundscapes through guitar, bass, piano and Prophet-5 synthesizer.

Taken together, these Cuneiform Records releases highlight the duality at the core of her life as an artist, and as a person. In Ensemble Volcanic Ash, she's once again an orchestra kid, relishing the camaraderie of making music with her friends. As a solo performer, especially onstage, she continues to marvel at how affecting the sound of her cello can be — how her centuries-old instrument, when thoughtfully filtered through analog technology, can bring a contemporary audience to tears.

These two albums also represent a triumph over adversity for Leppin, namely the physical hurdles she's battled since college, when she severely injured her upper body and had to refrain from playing her instrument for more than a year. In the decades that followed, both setbacks and progress ensued, in addition to plenty of physical therapy.



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Along the way, she learned to fulfill her musical passions by discovering new traditions, learning additional instruments that wouldn't cause her pain, and delving into composition and arranging. As *Pluto in Aquarius* and *Slowly Melting* attest, today she's a far more interesting musical personality than she would've become by staying put in a practice room. "Physically I cannot practice the way that classical cellists practice," she explains. "So I knew I needed to expand. If I was going to stay in music, I needed to expand. And that's what I've done."

Moreover, both albums underscore Leppin's vision as a composer — an aesthetic that balances her great gift for moving, ear-catching melody with a penchant for fearless improvisation. It's a concept that comes into crystalline focus whenever Leppin discusses her favorite musicians, from the stalwarts of free jazz to a colleague Eyvind Kang to Dungen. "Tchaikovsky is another favorite," she says, "he writes so many gorgeous melodies especially for the cello. I think that's what I like about pop music; you have to write something strong that will resonate with an audience."

Gorgeous melodies, and equally gorgeous improvisations spun out from those melodies, define *Slowly Melting*. But alongside those lyrical themes, the project's major breakthrough is sonic and textural. Or, as Leppin puts it, "This is my love letter to fuzz." That's fuzz as in fuzzbox, the compact analog devices that Keith Richards, Jimi Hendrix, Kevin Parker and other voyagers have used to innovate the sound of rock 'n' roll. "Adding fuzz really changes everything on my instrument, in terms of its capabilities, the sustain, the richness of certain notes," Leppin says. "There's a lot of surprising moments that happen that you could never plan for — and I love that, especially live. I've been playing with electronics for 20-plus years, but I'd never really gone down that rabbit hole — and it is a rabbit hole."

Today, Leppin explains, "There's a whole culture around fuzz, in terms of people who make and design the pedals, and the people who collect them." Like any self-respecting fuzzhead, Leppin is cagey about the DIY builders she works with to fill out her pedalboard. But *Slowly Melting* is in part a testament to their circuitry prowess, and fuzz devotees will recognize totems of their culture in the track titles: "Zonk," "Dizzy," "Mk1," "Germanium."

Other tracks reference Leppin's life in music. "Kaffa House," an unaccompanied, fuzz-free solo piece, pays homage to the now-defunct D.C. venue where Leppin checked out punk and hardcore shows in high school. Another sans-fuzz performance, "L.A. Land," reflects on a particularly inspired bill Leppin appeared on at Zebulon, with Pirog and harpist Mary Lattimore. "The Brink Is Home" celebrates engineer/producer Mike Reina and his Virginia studio, the Brink. Reina's in-studio guidance, both technical and creative, has been invaluable to Leppin throughout her career. (Leppin's previous solo album, which reveled more in the pure, unaffected timbre of the cello, was titled simply *The Brink*.)

Alongside "The Brink Is Home," another of the album's boldest performances is "Slowly Melting," which Leppin performed as her nightly closer when she opened for the brilliant West African guitarist Mdou Moctar on tour. In concert, as on record, the track filled the room with robust overtones that underscored the poignant melody and created a physical, tangible presence. "Slowly Melting," like most of the album it names, has the interpretive appeal of summer clouds: You'll hear a lot of your favorite music in its oozing, morphing sonics — searing free jazz, My Bloody Valentine, Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Sonny Sharrock, the list goes on. "Everyone was asking about this piece after the sets, asking me where they could buy it," she recalls. Now they have a document to return to, and Leppin has a thrilling new solo concept to tour. "I can't wait to perform this music for people," she says. "I was completely amazed by how much the cello connected with people on that Mdou tour."



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*Pluto in Aquarius*, from Leppin’s long-running avant-chamber-jazz unit Ensemble Volcanic Ash, finds the cellist further exploring new sonic terrain, in a program of 13 relatively compact tracks ranging from collective free improvisation to rocking, tightly composed earworms. While *Pluto in Aquarius* is, like all of Leppin’s music, a deeply personal work, it’s also intensely political. Leppin wrote about half of the music in the months leading up to the 2024 presidential election, and the remaining half after the inauguration that followed.

“So you’ll hear a lot of hopefulness here,” Leppin says, “as well as, of course, a lot of tension.” The album title signifies a momentous astrological transition, believed to bring radical change by reshaping power dynamics, technology, inequality and more. The music amplifies this inspiring message of optimistic struggle and resolve, and celebrates artists who’ve lived that fight.

Shot through with Herrmann-esque anxiety, “We See Dark Money” is an appreciation for the transparency we’ve gained in our era of media omnipresence. “When politicians offer a word salad and can’t answer a question, it’s because they got a bunch of money from somebody,” Leppin says — and we’re all able to witness the chicanery in real time. It also nods to Shostakovich, a favorite composer of Leppin’s whose boundary-breaking art made him a constant target of the Russian secret police.

Equally sweet and aching, “Susan Was a Warrior” is named for the pedal-steel visionary Susan Alcorn, who died in January 2025. She was a dear friend, mentor and collaborator to Leppin, who arranged Alcorn’s music at album length for the 2020 release *The Heart Sutra*. “It’s a mournful piece,” Leppin says, “because I’m still processing this loss.” The post-punk-tinged “Jazz Is Resistance” borrows its title from a phrase associated with the D.C.-based arts non-profit CapitalBop. “Cruel Motherfuckers” is a noisy free-improv offensive against ICE. “Deerhoof Is God,” built around a bristly, hard-angled riff that evokes the art-punk institution, is a paean to a band Leppin calls “one of the most fearless in the world.”

“I just really respect them,” she adds. “I love that they say what they mean, in both politics and music.”

Throughout *Pluto in Aquarius*, the group’s language and interplay might seem leaner, meaner and grittier to veteran Ensemble Volcanic Ash fans. Longtime EVA saxophonist Sarah Hughes is absent here, simply because she relocated during the album’s writing and production. But in that absence Leppin found a new pared-back feel for the ensemble — often less like a midsize chamber ensemble and more like a scrappy, skronky free-jazz combo. “It’s a really raw sound and I love that,” Leppin says. “We had played some shows in this format and it was like, ‘Wow, this is a whole other thing now.’”

Hughes last appeared with Ensemble Volcanic Ash on *To March Is to Love*, a protest-themed work released just a few months before the ’24 election. Unfortunately, the thematic mission of that project is even more urgent today. “The most important thing then was that people were marching and making their voices heard,” Leppin says. “And now this is the follow-up, the marathon. That’s why one of the tracks is called ‘Hope Marathon.’ *This is it*. This is where we listen to each other. This is where we start forgiving each other because we need each other. This is where we remember our humanity.”