



Bio information: **SKULLCAP**
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***SKULLCAP's Cellist, JANEL LEPPIN, Guitarist,
ANTHONY PIROG and Percussionist, MIKE KUHL
Promise a Joyful and Emotional Escape
Just When We Need It Most!***

Snakes of Albuquerque is the debut recording from the rock and jazz, free improvising, classically informed, adventurously rhythmic, and memorably tuneful power cello trio **Skullcap**. Just as the bands' namesake is defined by indigenous medicine, Skullcap is an herb used to ease depression and anxiety. A kind of road movie soundtrack it twists through wild emotions, and as the album artwork shows, the music navigates wildly different terrain from Tennessee to Monterey.

"We have something to fight for. We can't abandon this place or the people living here for all of its conflicts and challenges." Leppin says as she reflects on the music being a voyage across the troubled United States. "This record is a way to step into our power as we meet this serious moment full on. We'll need to access joy and courage moving forward and the music speaks to that."

As Americans find themselves under incredible stress, music can certainly be a way to navigate uncertain times. As *Snakes of Albuquerque* fully indicates this is not a band that is easy to pigeonhole. The song titles offer a kind of road map through its unpredictable terrain. 'Journey to the Sunset', 'Snakes of Albuquerque': these suggest Gothic darkness, jumper cable skronk, and an internationalist mindset, all qualities apparent in Skullcap's sound.

But tying those attributes to a single genre? Not going to happen.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot help you with that at all," says Pirog, laughing. "I mean, when we're writing, someone will initiate an idea and the piece would come together. We're not trying to fit into any description or genre. We have this pool of influences and inspirations that we draw from, and it's not limited by how we want to be seen. We're just writing music that we want to play".

The way the band writes holds a major key to figuring out Skullcap. Mike Kuhl says "Our writing process is as old as the hills. There are no lead sheets or scores. We write together, bringing in basic ideas - not much information is given. I bring in some sort of groove or vibe, and then I let Anthony and Janel do what they do. All of our material is composed together - there is 100% trust within this group." Janel Leppin and Anthony Pirog, a married couple who have been playing together for over two decades, consider themselves to be somewhat telepathic while writing and when onstage. "Being in bands with your life partner is special. We trust each other enough to write parts for one another. Anthony wrote my bass line and I wrote his melody for "Route 40" for example." The trio primarily write in Leppin/Pirog's basement rehearsal studio just North of D.C..

Janel and Anthony met Mike while working in the DMV around fifteen years ago and have been working together in different contexts ever since. In 2013 Anthony's sextet, which included Leppin and Kuhl, opened for a Capital Bop event presenting Peter Brotzmann and Joe McPhee at Union Arts. The three first met while being a part of Adam Hopkins' Out of Your Head Collective in 2010 where he put together random ensembles at monthly concerts in Baltimore. OOH Collective included the likes of Susan Alcorn and Jaimie Branch. This is the environment where the three first became aware of one another's skills as improvisers. Leppin recalls, "We always wanted to work with a drummer and thought of Mike as a powerhouse on drums. In fact, I've called him Mike "Hurricane" Kuhl for years. His style is so technically fluid and powerful. We were elated when he said he'd like to work with us."

The speed with which they compose and learn the pieces together shows a band working on all five cylinders. Each player is at the top of their game technically and creatively. They mention an intuition that is undeniable in their improvisation and while writing. They also discuss a willingness to connect with all aspects of their musical knowledge; and could be a reason Skullcap's music is so hard to categorize.

'Snakes of Albuquerque' happened from "pure instinct coming from decades of playing. We're not afraid to come full circle" Mike says, "It could've been one of the first beats I learned but it was just right." The drummer reflects that he didn't feel the need to make the beat more complicated for the sake of showing off. Mike continues "We trust each other so much. It could almost sound happy go lucky but we're not messin' around when we play something. It's from the heart."

A key instrument that sets the band apart as a trio is the inclusion of the cello. Leppin brings a solid foundation nimbly interweaving with Kuhl's intricate drum work. The cello is rarely used like a bass and in this case she draws references to the music of Julius Hemphill and Dirty Three as inspiration. Leppin says "I almost always look to bass, guitar or saxophone players for inspiration. I am careful not to sound like other players of my instrument. I have a distinct voice and that is what is needed in this world: new sounds! I'm just doing my thing."

The music tells a powerful and diverse story. Moving from the doom-laden cello feature 'Snakes of Albuquerque'—into the calming and decidedly jazzy 'Orange Sky' is not, for instance, an obvious segue. "It doesn't make any sense to me conceptually," the guitarist concurs. "But when you know the arc of the record, it does, because it takes you through a series of feelings or moods or vibes."

Some of those moods are abstract, like the clanging, mysterious '700 miles', in which Leppin bows almost singing in the highest end of her instrument, Pirog's behind-the-bridge guitar fuses seamlessly with Kuhl's bazaar-find percussion. "That one happened solely in the studio," the drummer says. "It's improvised, and I used a 150-year-old strand of sleigh bells, combined with some camel bells. I was in Cairo one time and I went to this one little bazaar there and they had all this touristy stuff in the front, and I went up to the guy and was like 'Where do you keep the good stuff?' He looked at me, and then he took me in the back where I checked out all these incredible camel bells and all this stuff I'd never seen before. So it's a big mass of all of these really old bells."

Whether inspired by Leppin and Pirog's cross-country zag or Kuhl's global search for cool sounds, much of the music on *Snakes of Albuquerque* is linked by Skullcap's penchant for forward and upward momentum, both sonically and on an emotional level. The group's three members make music to please themselves, but they're just as determined to offer their listeners relief and inspiration.

Opening with a whistle and funky groove, Kuhl kicks off 'Journey to the Sunset'. It feels like a wild dance party for a time that feels like the end of the world. Pirog plays a noisy, skronky guitar solo shifting to accompaniment while Leppin bows a chromatic staccato melody.

Leppin's doomy cello progression on title track 'Snakes of Albuquerque' moves into a heavily melodic lead recalling her affiliation with her time recording and working with various artists in Seattle's doom and experimental world. Anthony's fuzz pedal helps fill out the progression while Mike lays a heavy groove that leans into the floor tom and with driving eighth notes on the cymbals.

Janel has an affinity for flipping the beat back in a subtle way and citing a Jeff Parker record she was particularly inspired by, the band listened to it and Mike recalled some of his Venezuelan merengue studies to help inform 'Orange Sky'. The rhythm section vibed on the groove and came up with a unique sound which audiences barely perceive but are meant to feel a slight shift throughout the piece to help drive it forward.

Snakes of Albuquerque is in a world all its own. The thing holding it all together is the trust each player has for each other's abilities and creativity. "We believe in each other's ideas, interests and visions. This is a supportive environment," says Leppin. The band hopes to take this same trip defined on the album artwork as a tour across the states in 2025-2026. "That would really complete our vision for this adventure of a record."