

ELLEN ALLIEN

Loving the Allien

Interview by Yan Céh — Photos by Heinz Peter Kneis

Ellen Allien, born Ellen Fraatz, September 16, 1975, is one of the most productive musicians of Berlin's electronic music scene. After an extended stay in London, around 1993, she dj'd in Berlin clubs like Fischlabor and Tresor, and at parties, using the name Bpitch Control, starting a label with the same name in 1997. Since then, she's become one of the hottest producers in the industry. Constantly traveling the globe, her label has issued more than a hundred albums, including her own full-length *Stadtkind* (2001), *Berlinette* (2003) and recently *Thrills* (2005). Her label is also home of techno artists Kiki, Modeselektor, Paul Kalkbrenner, Sascha Funke, Smash TV, and Feadz, to name a few. Ellen Allien is now working on a clothing line, called EAE.

YAN CÉH — *What did you want to do when you were a teen?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — Once, while walking down the street, I saw a girl driving a big double bus. It was so incredible to me, I wanted to do it myself. For years that was my dream, to become a bus driver.

YAN CÉH — *Can you talk about your childhood? You often speak about your mother, but rarely about your father.*

ELLEN ALLIEN — My father left when I was two. For years, he took care of me on Saturdays. Every weekend I went to his place, but I got tired of it when I got older, because I wanted to play with my friends on weekends. So we began to see each other once a month. He was an architect, but also into music—he had a piano, and he gave me my first guitar. Later he moved outside of Berlin. And since then, I haven't seen a lot of him. Some time ago he left a message on my birthday, but I didn't call back. Now I have a new family, the Bpitch family. And you know, my mother and my sister understand what I'm doing.

YAN CÉH — *What had you been listening to?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I think it was David Bowie and Nina Hagen. My parents listened to them, actually.

YAN CÉH — *You were lucky. My family liked Supertramp and Dire Straits. While I was into Michael Jackson.*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I had lot of singles,

because people from my family distributed records for jukeboxes. They would give me the ones they replaced. So I got all the hit singles all the time. I got Bowie's records because a cousin lost her passion for him when she discovered Boney M. [laughs]

YAN CÉH — *But how did you actually get into music?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — There was an organ in my mother's house, which I played by myself. My sister was never home, and being bored and lonely I began to play the organ. When you're a kid, it's fun to find things by yourself, without teachers. Playing the organ was a way to find myself. I was six. But when I got to secondary school, I stopped playing music. Years later I went to clubs with my older sister. I was really too young, about 11 or 12, but I danced for hours in clubs. Then I left my mom's house to live in a squat, a clean, cool squat, with my boyfriend, who played in a band that did African music. I painted, did creative stuff, and was getting away from my parents. My grandmother said I should get a boyfriend with a car. And because my boyfriend was black, she wondered if I wasn't afraid of him. With our history, I was ashamed to hear her say that.

YAN CÉH — *Do you talk about history with your grandmother?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — She never talks to me about the past. She just says she wasn't into it when it happened.

YAN CÉH — *Do you think she was aware of what really went on?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I think so. Because everybody was required to read Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*, and everything he was about was written in that book. So I can't believe it when older Germans say they were not informed, or that they did not know about what was happening.

YAN CÉH — *What do you think of the German rock group Rammstein using images by Leni Riefensthal for the Third Reich in their music video?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — They're not about fascism. I think Leni Riefensthal can't only be labeled the photographer of the Third Reich. She did so much other stuff.

YAN CÉH — *Yes, but for their music video, Rammstein took the images of the Third Reich...*

ELLEN ALLIEN — It was a mistake... I hope. YAN CÉH — *Yes, and maybe they're playing with fire. It's like Marilyn Manson plays with fascist imagery while saying he's against fascism. But eighty percent of his public are 14-year-old-kids, and I don't think they really understand the difference. They're into the imagery.*

ELLEN ALLIEN — Yeah. Of course it's dangerous. I also hate how military clothes, and the trend attached to them, have ruled fashion for years now.

YAN CÉH — *But Bob Marley always wore German military jackets—more as a provocation or to make fun of them. Gainsbourg did that too.*

ELLEN ALLIEN — But I don't like it anyway. Of course Bob Marley or Gainsbourg were special cases. But usually there's no provocation or fun in wearing a military jacket, military pants. People choose that because they're bored of brands.

YAN CÉH — *What are your influences?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I think the biggest was the fall of the Wall in Berlin, in 1989. As a political and social movement, it was maybe my only true influence. Nobody, not a movie, not a song can give me this feeling... I missed the Pink Floyd concert at the time. Because of that event I became a DJ and created this music label. Before that, it was very strange to live in a city cut in half, with people being oppressed, forbidden to read the magazines or watch Western television. East Germany had to watch, read and listen to East German media. I think when the Wall fell down we felt like people did in 1968, or in the seventies with the sexual and social revolution.

YAN CÉH — *Which bands inspired you?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I really liked the Neue Deutsche Welle, The New German Wave, and Kraftwerk, Andreas Dorau, Einstürzende Neubauten, Trio—they changed my way of thinking about music.

YAN CÉH — *And Can?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I was too young for Can. But I liked the minimal side of those bands. I also liked Depeche Mode.

YAN CÉH — *And movies?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I like them but I'm not so much into them. I liked the first *Alien*.

YAN CÉH — *Is that where you got your name?*





ELLEN ALLIEN — No. Somebody gave me that name because I used to do music and noises that sounded like soundtracks for movies like *Grease*, the musical.

YAN CÉH — *If you had to define your label, Bpitch Control, in four words, what would they be?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — 1.) Movement 2.) Modern 3.) Island 4.) Inspiration.

YAN CÉH — *You and your music are very representative of a Berlin spirit. Is Berlin so important? Because other artists in electronic music tend to avoid their roots like Daft Punk for example: they never tried or wanted to represent Paris, or France. They don't care about where they're from.*

ELLEN ALLIEN — For me, Berlin was and is a reflection of myself. It's a very strong sign for me. And of course, there is Internet. With the web, you are connected to the world. Before the Internet, we did not know how big the world was. But at the same time, it's important for me to know where I'm coming from and what I stand for. Berlin is the city I live in and love. There's so many things going on in Berlin. It has the biggest art and electronic scene in the world. I won't say it's the best. But it's one of the most interesting. And Berlin is an easy city to get into, to meet people. It's a kind of freedom city, and one of the cheapest in Europe.

YAN CÉH — *Is Bpitch Control political?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — Of course. I'm really involved in what's going on in Germany. I support Gerhard Schröder. His political party, the SPD, is the best we could have, even if I would like it to be more Green—I like the Green Party!

YAN CÉH — *Are you interested in fashion? I read on the Bpitch website that you put a list of fashion shops you like in Berlin, like a style guide, with Comme des Garçons, A.P.C...*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I like fashion, and I like some brands, but right now I'm working like a dog on my own brand, EAE, which will be available soon, I think. It's going to be like a logical derivative of the music.

YAN CÉH — *What would you be doing today if you were not a musician?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I don't know... Animal poen? [laughs]

YAN CÉH — *Are there other places in the world you love?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — Like everybody I know, I like Paris. I also like Barcelona, Tokyo, London and Montpellier!

YAN CÉH — *In your music, what's interesting is*

the way you put your own voice in the background and how the lyrics work inside the songs.

ELLEN ALLIEN — I always try to make room for the listener. I think it's important to let people put what they want into the music, to let them dream.

YAN CÉH — *Besides electronic music, what records have you been listening to?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — I've been listening to the last Coldplay, the Maximo Park album, the P.O.D. One e.p and m.i.a, a surprising English urban singer.

YAN CÉH — *You were joking about pornography before, but more seriously, what do you think of it?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — Porno is not bad when you're alone in a hotel room. [laughs]

YAN CÉH — *Do you think you'll do techno/electronic music all your life, or will you one day do something else?*

ELLEN ALLIEN — Something always brings me back to electronic music. So I don't see what other kind of music I would do.

