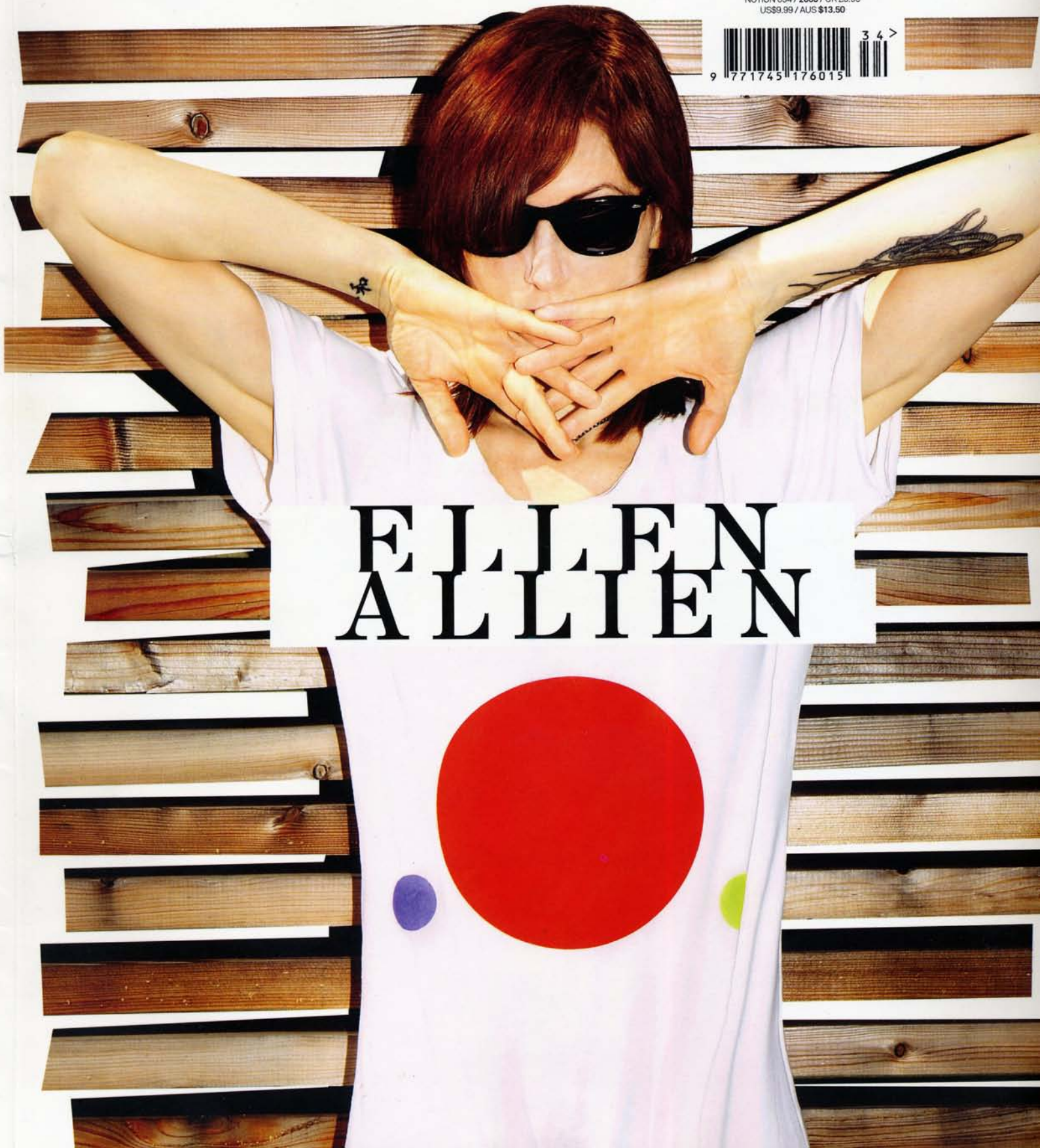


# notion

Music . Lifestyle . Fashion

[www.planetnotion.com](http://www.planetnotion.com)

NOTION 034 / 2008 / UK £3.95  
US\$9.99 / AUS \$13.50



# ELLEN ALLIEN





---

---

# A NEW FRONTIER

---

---

*A space shuttle awaits you. Juddering, whirring and flecked with galactic dust, this ship is destined for a dreamland. Get rocketed right inside a very private parallel universe via strange sonic portals - propulsive beats and far-out effects are your ticket outta this hell-hole. Your captain on this mission will be Ellen Alien, the Bpitch controller. Keep your ears, eyes and souls open. Escape, expansion and epiphany are all parts of our quest. Beware the unidentified monster, 'It,' and please ensure that your brain is engaged at all times. We will be travelling through many time zones and encountering many different life-forms; just be sure to remember that where there is darkness, there is also light...*

WORDS: LUCY WILSON

/ ELLEN ALLIEN /

PHOTOGRAPHY: TANAUSU HERRERA

---





*'It's a radical thing that I have in my blood...'*

**Music for Ellen, the artist, the producer, the DJ and the Bpitch controller, has always been about forging gateways from disparate elements. Music is a bridge to overcome the gulf between two islands; an invisible thread to tie together strangers; a vehicle to surge through vast distances; a spirit to fill an empty room. Not a note, not a beat is superfluous: the arrangement of these parts ensures the smooth functioning of the machine. That is, the production of music built to fulfil a purpose. Tunes are feats of engineering, utilitarian compositions that reflect the requirements of their maker. This time, for Ms Allien's fourth solo artist album, the onus to carve out an alternative arena in sound is explored and accomplished. 'Sool' is the name of this place; the destination that gives this record a title.**

Exhilarated, dishevelled and still protected by her Rayban Wayfarer shades, Ellen whips up the three flights of spiralled stairs and launches herself into Bpitch HQ, Berlin. Suddenly she is here: a human tornado of gesturing limbs, half-finished exclamations and yet-to-be-uttered ideas. As Ellen navigates her chaotic way about the Bpitch office, from accounts to bookings to marketing to management, I might be forgiven for thinking that here is a woman who has just arrived back in reality, after some dazzling adventure. Ellen's sunglasses are a classic design but their shape takes on something unusual, flanking her face; her outfit clashes climates and cultures, winter tights tucked into tasselled Red Indian boots under denim hot pants; the gargoyle-like alien, tattooed on the inside of her right arm, twitches with her fidgety energy.

'It's a radical thing that I have in my blood,' Ellen Allien insists, fixing me with wild-eyed intensity. 'When I was a young girl I was living in a squat in Berlin, I was living as an artist from the age of sixteen, and I've always been surrounded by different artists. I always try to do what I really feel, and not what the capitalist world will maybe accept, and this is not easy if you make art!' So our intergalactic guide, Ellen, cushions herself, us, her listeners/passengers, and her music from the critical eye of convention, by making excursions in the realms of the purely abstract. Here, a new frontier is uncovered in electronica; weird soundscapes are a passport to places your imagination never fathomed before.

But unless anyone has any starry-eyed notions of being spirited away, cruising along the wing of a unicorn – despite the fact that Ellen imagines 'Sool' would be 'half-bird, half-fish,' were it any kind of knowable creature – it is vital to note that this is still very much an album rooted in our modern, industrial reality. 'I think this comes from city life,' Ellen offers, 'industrial sounds talking to my soul. If I was to put the sea in, it would be luxurious; unnatural.' Sharp metal blades tear together; cogs grind and turn; a not-too-distant motor purrs; someone's footsteps scatter past; key-chains jangle; doors creak open and slam shut; the clang of an object falling; the din, drill, stamp and snap of some machine; the surprise of snatched voices in a void... Vaguely recognisable sounds accrete, collide and pattern to assemble somewhere strange and new: 'Sool,' Ellen's sonic sanctuary, a planet where she invites us to ponder, but also to play...

'It is a planet I would love on, one that everyone dreams about, actually, after a hard day or when you wake up in the morning... a place where there is beauty, peace, blah, blah; my piece of my planet that I would like to live on, and share with people...' As we chat, sat surrounded by promo CDs, scribbled notes and old magazines at her desk in the Bpitch office, Ellen seizes my Holiday Inn pen. She twiddles it about in the air above her head, presumably conjuring the inscrutable, magic, cosmic forces required to give her a glimpse into this other world. (Never in the hotel chain's wildest fantasies would its complimentary biro ever have

become a tool required to tap into such an exclusive wonderland; not even the ones with blue ink you find on the M40). Ellen's eyes, too, are sporadically skyward, her pupils bulging with anticipation as she describes her promised land, the blue-grey irises flashing silver as meteors flood by.

'I was thinking to call my album 'Sun,' because I am a very light person, I try to make everything positive. But that was not abstract enough for my abstract music, and a lot of people would also say the music is very dark.' Gothic, sparse and unyielding, 'Sool' is certainly well acquainted with the darkside, but Ellen is right: light and shadow flirt, fuse and filter apart within the music, leaving a strange, dappled tapestry, inky shapes like the ones psychoanalysts present to patients, as they try to crawl inside their minds. Appropriately enough, Ellen suggests that if 'Sool' sound-tracked a film, the story would be about someone 'trying to find the way, as a freak in normal life.' Again, this is music as a means of transportation, the grand 'motor' Ellen claims steers and shapes her own life.

While 'sol' means 'sun' in Spanish, Ellen explains how 'on the other side of the world, 'Sol' is the local name for a little part of Africa, Somalia, one of the poorest places. On one side, you think you have such a shit life, but on the other side, they suffer, because you have this good life.' Thus relativity and proportion are not only integral to her art, but also to her world-view. Travels to countless countries and a long-standing dissatisfaction with the unequal, global capitalist order, have led Ellen to hunt for 'balance, not to be too happy, or too fucked-up!' Just as the buoyant, high-octane IDM, breakbeat and techno sets Ellen first played at parties after the fall of the wall in Berlin not only tore down boundaries between genres, but also united revellers from the east and the west of the city, the utopian universe, Sool, is governed by a concept of equality. In stark contrast to Earth, Sool is a planet where light can match dark; where hierarchy is absent; where a whisper can overpower a shout; where myriad influences and impulses easily make themselves felt. 'In life, and between everything we do, there is always the black and the white side,' she concludes with a smile and her goofy laugh.

Imagine a stupendous, futuristic set of scales – Willy Wonka might have his Oompa Loompas operating similar equipment in his chocolate factory – gently swinging somewhere up in the ether. The scales are a kind of sun that governs Ellen's planet, Sool, determining its light and shadow, directing its energies. Not one element – not an impulse; a flash; a sound – registers within the atmosphere of the record, before it has first been measured by the scales. Sool the planet is thus kept in a relative state of equilibrium, while the music of 'Sool' remains minimal. Notes, beats and effects upkeep that essential 'balance,' an idea Ellen's label, Bpitch Control, also revolves around. And so 'Sool' is a dynamic hub, jostling with the electric currents generated by exact opposites: opulence and simplicity; fear and innocence; violence and tenderness...

Controlled energies get converted into a palette of sounds that is also governed by strict parameters. Vocal snatches, rhythmical patterns, melodies and individual notes or beats recur both within singular tunes, and throughout 'Sool,' manipulated ever so slightly. 'I didn't want to write big songs, like I was hearing in the clubs. It was really clear to keep the melodies coming like an echo, as you say it. Every (melody) also has its reflection in the next, like in a mirror.' So warm, deep strings and their tremulous, higher-pitched counterparts in the intro, 'Einsteigen,' fully develop in the down-tempo ode to 'Frieda.'

This is the minimalist ethic, the economy of Ellen's work, and her way of fleshing out a philosophy in a tangible, aural collage. Abstract music is here a study in



*'This is not moving forward in the normal shape. I really try to let them jump on the train with me; if they want to come, they go for it! If it's not poppy enough or something, they can jump out; it's a new place for people.'*



synaesthesia, registering right across the listener's senses. As we hear a sound returning, a reflected image is conjured in the mind's eye. High abstraction, coupled with this pincer-attack on our senses, yields a cinematic album. While the ear is pricked, perplexed, terrorised and pleased by turns, the eye is unblinking, keenly witnessing 'Sool's rare landscapes and odd visions. As Ellen's planet spins to deliver series upon series of images, the record is a hyper-active magic lantern – again, we encounter the interplay of 'the black and the white.'

'Sool's proliferation of echoes and reflections also posit sounds as shadows, or doppelgangers, the central idea of a track called 'Bim.' Chain reactions between eye and ear are part of 'Sool's substance and Ellen's production style. 'I write the loop and see the pictures,' she explains with flamboyant gestures. 'First you see things, and then you hear; the eye is faster. When I hear, it's exactly how I was thinking to have it.' 'Bim' is inspired by Ellen's midnight strolls about the haunted streets and lurky alleyways of Bordeaux. When the mind conjures ghosts, the slightest sound makes us see a shadow, while flickering figures along vision's periphery attach themselves to the audible. And so 'Bim' is a plosive, tricky pattern of cut-up vocals and thriller effects – the soundtrack that whirs along the edge of sanity.

While sounds are explored for their fluctuating, echoic meanings, music's answer to language's homonyms, it is the sum of these parts and their overall effect that matters, more than their molecular qualities. To Ellen, each sound is as insignificant as a brick of Lego. 'I was not counting, "one to eight, and now the hi-hat starts," or, "one to four, and now the bass drum must stop." It is more like playing with Lego, like, "I take this... ah! Now we start!" Or, "I bring this... now I hear!" 'Sool' manages to sound haphazard and rigidly structured at once, appearing to the ear as a colossal frame of scaffolding, about objects are falling and amassing at random intervals. Remember the high-pitched, scatter-gun sound of a Tetris puzzle collapsing? You'll be hearing that a fair amount. Ellen's Lego analogy relates back to the minimal (/ communist) way, constantly striving for economy and equality. Just as individual sounds only matter as cogs in the machine of each track, the tracks only attract meaning when they are heard collectively as an album.

For 'Sool' is a voyage and an experiment: a mission to an undiscovered planet, 'more to open your ears, but not to let you sing,' says the controller. 'Freida' aside, the tracks might be called 'movements' before 'tunes,' highlighting Ellen's obsession with motion, music as the 'motor.' Stiff, stilted, repetitive, robotic motion much of the time, but always an abundance of kinetic energy; 'This is not moving forward in the normal shape. I really try to let them jump on the train with me; if they want to come, they go for it! If it's not poppy enough or something, they can jump out; it's a new place for people.' Still, the new place takes root in Berlin, the city with a stranglehold over Ellen's imagination: 'Stadtkind' and 'Berlinette' were her debut and sophomore albums, now 'Sool' uncovers portals amid the industrial city. Ellen guides us through loop-holes into outer space, heading for her planet.

What we hear, then, is the sonic equivalent of the mental techniques Ellen uses to launch herself from Earth to Sool. Rather than shunning reality, she reimagines her surroundings so that they serve fantasy; 'Sool' is a series of digital daydreams. The dreamer, (wo)man, must synchronise with the real world, the machine, which, happily, Ellen already excels at as an electronic artist. That pivotal 'balance' is struck between the natural and the manufactured; the abstract and the concrete. 'Caress' pits fragile, sibilant vocals – 'You are...'

– against computerised beats, two odd dialects striking a queer understanding. Man is in sync with machine, in time for 'Bim,' next, where Ellen's studied 'Bam! Boom!' vocal keeps pace with production-line or pocket-watch percussion. All springs, gears and rotating mechanisms. Thus Ellen appropriates concrete materials, to engineer abstraction.

Some sci-fi half-human-heart-and-half-turbo-engine powers 'Sool,' while human emotion is automatically cooled, so as not to unsettle its delicate atmosphere. Slightest traces of human life are warped and subsumed; in the quest for balance and equality, egos have to be killed off. Ellen processes her own vocals and refrains from 'screaming something out, like my deepness or my happiness or my hate that on artists!' Instead, we hear Lemming-like, alien exclamations ('Elph' and the disquieting snafflings and scratchings of extra-terrestrial creatures ('Its'). Man, beast, machine and everything and everyone else enjoy equal proportions. Transcendence of the familiar, belligerent, capitalist world is complete.

A whistling intergalactic breeze layered beneath the tracks, a sonic glue holding the wayward beats together, is how Ellen reminds us that we are voyagers somewhere in space. Our distance from Earth is exaggerated by her experiments with reverb and delay. Sounds have varying and staggered proximity, like many wooden blocks falling at different distances from a microphone in some new-fangled art gallery; particles feeling the pull of gravity. 'Space,' in both astrological and physical senses, is another Allien obsession. A typical 'Sool' track, in fact, is where negative space – the rests and silences between fractured sounds – abounds; blank moments that are nevertheless pregnant with meaning if we are only prepared to supply it ourselves.

'I like tracks that give me space to put some of my own reality, music keeping busy in my own brain,' Ellen gushes. Her childhood growing up inside the Berlin Wall, her movements dictated and confined to strict parameters, must go some way in explaining this characteristic. Further, Ellen's acute awareness of global imbalance, the rifts between economies and cultures, coupled with her dissatisfaction for the capitalist order, are also inextricable from 'Sool.' 'Sometimes I want more. I want more – money; sex; food; better car; bigger TV – then I say, "Ellen, stop. Now you are like the others!"' Ellen's lifestyle is an extension of her minimalist approach to music: she crusades against hysteria; noise; mess; excess...

'I make the music that I am missing,' Ellen affirms. In an age where the abstract art, music, is a fully-fledged, concrete commodity, where tunes are churned out gratuitously, rapidly and passively digested, and then just as quickly disposed of; where the balance has been irrevocably lost, Ellen takes stock of her repertoire, writing lists only of the tunes her DJ sets are lacking. Far from being a mean, clinical philosophy, Ellen's minimal methods – in music, and in life – actually foster enrichment. We are making the best of what we have, and acquiring what we are missing.

It is a non-indulgent, realist approach; a science before it is an art. While it salutes Africa's 'Sol,' Somalia, via reverb-heavy bongo drumming and submergent tribal chants, these elements are balanced by the comparatively sinister, metallic sounds of the western world. 'Sool' is the magical planet where such balance is actually possible – and Ellen is more than ready to take you with her. A 'piece of my planet' is all she requires, so there's plenty of s-p-a-c-e for everyone...w

