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Catching up with Ellen Allien

The Berlin DJ dishes on her sound, Detroit, and where she got her name

By Luanne Lim



Photo by Michael Mann

Berliner Ellen Allien is beloved internationally for her work as a DJ, producer, label owner, and fashion designer. She famously cut her teeth working at clubs in Berlin's nascent techno scene of the 1990s. She ended the decade by forming BPitch Control, an indisputably killer label that boasts a roll call of boundary-pushing, international producers such as Telefon Tel Aviv, Apparat, Fuckpony, and Modeselektor.

Since 2001, she's released eight full-lengths and dozens of 12-inches of her own hard-to-classify breed of techno, ranging from cold, mechanical glitches to moments of lush dance floor dreaminess. She's designed her own clothing line, as well. Allien truly helped put her hometown on the map for electronic music, and is constantly inspiring other DJs and producers. We spoke with her via email in advance of her set at Movement this year.

Metro Times: What's the story behind your stage surname, "Allien"?

Ellen Allien: Back in the day, there was a bar called Fischlabor in Berlin, where I started to DJ. A friend of mine who was a barkeeper there always told me that my music sounded like it was from outer space, like in the very first *Alien* movie. So he just started to call me Ellen Allien — Ellen from outer space. The promoters then just took this name for the first show I did at E-Werk. I thought it was such a nice and natural way to find a DJ name, when a friend calls you this because of the sounds you play.

MT: How do you yourself describe your sound?

Allien: The sound in my DJ sets I would describe as freaky, dirty, analogue, Berlin acid techno. My productions have different concepts for each album. The EPs are based on the sound I'm playing in clubs.

MT: When did you start making your own music?

Allien: When I was a kid, I played the organ at home, and I had a turntable to listen to the singles my family gave me. Music always helped me express myself, put nice clothes on, and start dancing around to the records I played. I loved my mum when she danced and felt happy. Later I started to spend time with a lot of different artists. We lived together in a squat, and we made music together, playing different instruments ... jam sessions.

Later, I bought records, and then I started to play with an 808. In the first years I played at E-Werk Berlin and Tresor's house floor Globus. Most of my gigs were in Germany and around Germany. Then, after my first album *Stadtkind* came out in 2001, I started playing worldwide. My label BPitch Control was founded in 1999.

MT: You've recently re-released *LISm* on vinyl and you're going to release *Turn Off Your Mind* as an LP, as well. What do you think of the vinyl resurgence?

Allien: *LISm* is a 45-minute soundtrack. I thought that some people might be happy to have it on vinyl. I love vinyl, I collect vinyl, and, if I have the chance, I play as much vinyl as possible in the club. To me, the special sound of vinyl is magical. I love to have vinyl at home, to see the artwork, to hold it in my hands, and put it on the decks. I do that. I want to spend time with the music that I love. It's kind of a celebration, and it reminds me of my childhood, when I had my own rituals. For example, I often opened my windows while I played music because I wanted my neighbors to hear it too.

MT: What brought you into the fashion industry?

Allien: I am just producing streetwear, nothing more. I do wear T-shirts a lot, and I am driven to create a really perfect shirt with the right material, design, and cut. T-shirts are also something I collect, along with sneakers and records. But the music will always have first place. It just has the biggest impact on me.

MT: Will you be selling your products at Movement this year?

Allien: Ahhh, I have never thought about that! Great idea. You can find the tees on our web shop (and) in shops in London, Paris, and Berlin.

MT: Movement is obviously a Detroit-based festival, and I've read that Detroit has influenced some of your work. What about the Motor City sparks your interest and your own creativity?

Allien: Yes. The U.K. sound and Detroit sound had a lot of influence on me. As a kid, I started DJing at Tresor on the Globus floor, mostly house. I've seen a lot of DJs from Detroit, and at Planet, another floor, a lot of U.K. DJs. The music always had a familiar feeling to it. There was a connection for me between the feelings that the music transported and the feelings we all had when the wall came down. There was a connection between the U.K., Detroit, and Berlin. The instruments let us play the music the way we felt it — the pain, the happiness, and the melancholy within all the changes both we and the city went through.

In Germany, the structure of the beats was always straighter. In the U.S., the beats were groovier, with more melodies and words. But the ideas and the creative and emotional impact the music had were really the same, which also results from using the same instruments and technique. There is a big revival of '90s music right now, in fashion and music. The music is still made on mostly the same gear as in the '90s. It's the computers that are faster.

The next musical revolution will emerge when there is a completely new tool for making music, but until then, I will celebrate my classics and all of the great new music. I am really happy to play Movement. It is such a great opportunity for Detroit: bringing people back into the city where so much great and influential music has been made, (such as) the Motown sounds, the blues, and jazz.

Black dance music just kicks my body. It is so physical. When Derrick May is onstage playing, I can just stand still and the music is just taking me with him.

MT: Who are your favorite artists from the Detroit music scene?

Allien: Diana Ross and Aretha Franklin. Both have had an enormous impact on all of us. Juan Atkins, B12, Cybotron, Underground Resistance, Aux88, Derrick May, Robert Hood, Jeff Mills, Aaliyah, Carl Craig, Kero, Kevin Saunderson, Elvin Jones, Delano Smith — this is all music I adore. All of this has had a huge impact on me, and it is a great emotional journey.

*Ellen Allien performs at the Movement Electronic Festival at 9 p.m. on Sunday, May 29 at the Made in Detroit stage presented by Thump; 1 Hart Plaza, Detroit; **movement.us**; general admission tickets for the weekend are \$175; general admission for one day is \$85; VIP weekend tickets are \$300.*

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