

Ellen Once Again: PAO Productions Interview (follow up)

Back in 2012, I interviewed an up and coming, very talented singer/songwriter named Ellen Once Again. She had released her debut EP, Spreading the Love, after becoming a YouTube sensation in 2011, soon to be followed by her sophomore release, I'm Feeling Lucky, in 2013. Three years later, I caught up with Ellen again to find out about her growth as a musician and songwriter, an average "day in the life," and the many places her music has since been featured.

PAO Productions: Thanks for agreeing to speak with me.

Ellen Once Again: Always a pleasure (*laughs*).

PAO: So, what have you been up to the last three years, since we last talked?

EH: Oh my goodness. Um... a lot (*laughs*). I have a new EP, *Another Chance to Live*, and I've had some placements for my last EP, *I'm Feeling Lucky*, on a couple of television shows and online ads and... different things like that (*laughs*). So I actually do feel a little lucky (*laughs*).

PAO: You've been pretty busy since the last time we spoke.

EH: Been doing a lot of performing locally... the Deep Ellum Arts Festival, the RBC [*ed: The Medicine Man's Traveling Revival show at the RBC*], I did Raw Dallas and Sofar Dallas as well. I think that's Sofar DFW 'cause it encompasses Dallas and Fort Worth.

PAO: How does the new EP reflect your growth as a musician and songwriter?

EH: I'm still very much pop, very much pop soul, but I wanted to explore a little bit of jazz, a little bit of... just different styles. I wanted to stretch who I was musically a little bit more and I feel like I took a couple more risks on this EP from what I normally do. I think that's getting to where I'm going with my music, and I'm just gonna continue to take a little bit more risk and just see where it all falls (*laughs*).

PAO: Brightness and sunniness are definitely still there. This album definitely has a much more polished, refined sound compared to the previous two. The poppiness is still there but far more disciplined and polished.



EH: Well thank you so much. It's definitely a compliment (*laughs*).

PAO: Tell me a little bit about the songwriting process for *Another Chance to Live*.

EH: Believe it or not, *Another Chance to Live* was a song that is not new. I wrote that song... I would actually say about eight years ago, and it just sat on my computer, and I had a friend come over and they were like, "I really like this song," And when we got down to getting ready to perform a record, I... like, *here's some songs, let's see if we can narrow down the ones that we want on the EP*. And that one almost didn't make it. Most of the songs I've written have been really kind of happy, and not to say this song isn't happy, but I wanted to have something a little bit different on the EP instead of just, you know, everything just kind of being so happy, just to show a little bit of variety. You know, sometimes even though everything may be going good, sometimes things are hard and I wanted to just show a little bit of depth, saying like, yeah, you can be happy but you know there's also some times where you might need encouragement, you may need to hear another chance to live (*laughs*). It almost didn't make it, but I'm so glad it did (*laughs*). And just going off of that, this was the last song to get recorded. We had finished recording the three songs and it was going to be another three song EP, and at the last minute we were just talking and I'm like, *you know what, can we just squeeze this song on onto the EP?* (*laughs*) And it made it, but it was one of those decisions where it may not have made it and that's the title track (*laughs*).

PAO: You worked with some other musicians and performers on this album.

EH: Yes. Actually, on the last two albums I've worked with Bradley Prakope and Josh Goode. And on "I Do"... Madukwu Chinwah was also part of the production on that song as well.

PAO: What do you feel that the other musicians bring to the table as far as performance or songwriting, or just the overall style?

EH: Definitely production. Even when it comes to production, I always think you need another set of ears, because I think by having different people who may throw in in a sound here, may do this, it adds. You can do it all yourself - I probably could have done a lot of it in my home studio - but I chose to get production on these albums because I think that they definitely add to how the music sounds. They add to how it's produced, add to how it builds up the overall feel of it. It's just not me by myself, it's bringing in other musicians who play, and them putting a certain feel on top of the song as well. And it's just a big compilation of, *okay, I'm gonna add a guitar here and it's gonna sound like this, or I'm gonna add this sound and it builds it up*. So I think it definitely takes it not only from everything sounding the same or everything just sounding like *Oh, ok this is you*, but it kind of adds to the overall musicality of the EP.

PAO: Having listened to this, I definitely feel it show enormous growth in your sound, in musicianship, songwriting, singing...

EH: Thank you, thank you.

PAO: What's your overall feeling about this album relative to the two that came before it?

EH: I would agree with you. I do really like a lot of my second EP. I like "I'm Feeling Lucky," I like "I Do," and even "Call the Doctor," but I do feel like there were some different songs that were added onto this one that also show this side of who I am as well. And I've mentioned, you know, that it can be a little bit jazzy, it can even be a little bit more of the poppy and a little bit... with "Neon Lights," a little bit more poppy dance. With "Another Chance to Live"... there's some different styles that you may not have seen in the previous EPs (*laughs*).

PAO: On this album, you had the opportunity to work with Jeremy Lutito and Tony Lucido, who played on records by Ingrid Michaelson, Kelly Clarkson, and the Doobie Brothers.

EH: Yes.

PAO: Who was it who put you in touch?

EH: Bradley Prakope. He's currently in Nashville right now. He's in the Nashville scene and he's able to kind of meet a lot of other musicians that I may not have access to, just being where I am.

PAO: How was the introduction made?

EH: Actually, um it's weird. I didn't meet them. It was a lot of trust that goes into that (*laughs*). But with their reputation, you know that it's gonna be good. Anything that they do, whatever the end product, you know, you have faith in their musicianship because they have done so much. It was recorded in Nashville, so after we finished laying down the vocals and production and everything here, then Bradley - who also mixed the EP - he added the live instrumentation in Nashville. And then I got to hear the live instrumentation once they'd finished adding it, and I thought it sounded amazing.

PAO: You gave them free rein to improvise as they saw fit?

EH: Yes, as they saw fit (*laughs*).

PAO: What do you feel that having live instrumentation brings to the sound of pop/R&B/soul music?

EH: I think it gives it a lot of life. When you think about some of the older soul musicians, and... I always think about singing and just being in there with horn players - you've seen it as well - and that was the standard back then. They did it live a lot of times, which was amazing. They did "one takes" and they said, "Oh this has the feeling." When I listen to a lot of soul

music, one thing I take away is that it's not always about the perfection, but it's about the feeling. One thing I can say about it is you can feel it (*laughs*). I've heard some soul music and I can say "Oh, that wasn't the right note," but... it didn't matter, it was about the feeling that you got when you listened to it. When you put in a certain CD, like... oh, even if it's Etta James, you feel what she's saying (*laughs*). I definitely love how live instrumentation brings a certain feeling to the music (*laughs*).

PAO: You've just recently started playing with a live backing band, haven't you?

EH: Yes. Yes. It definitely adds. I love how, with the live instrumentation, that you can just break into a solo at any time, or you can say, "hey, play the solo right here," and it's just all about being in the moment and being in the feeling. And I'm just throwing out artists that I like. Um... I'm a fan of Bruno Mars. I'm sure you already knew that (*laughs*). But when I've seen him... I know he performed the last Super Bowl, and it was *amazing*. And it was like... you know, you saw the horn section up there, when he came out he was on the drums, and it just felt so... like...

PAO: Visceral?

EH: Yeah, you were right there in the moment, and I loved the way that felt. And that's one of the things I love about live instrumentation. One thing that I'm working on, um... I'm just throwing this out here because I've been playing with it. And I do it in some of my videos as well, and I'm working on doing it live because it's another thing I want to try. Have you ever seen the VoiceLive? It's a harmonizer (*laughs*). And it's really, really cool. It's a foot pedal, and I know some guitarists have foot pedals, but it's a foot pedal that you can press and I don't know how they do this technology, but when you're singing, you can add a third, you can add a fourth. I've done a lot of home videos with it, but that's one of the things that I'm working on in a live setup because especially now that I have live instrumentation, I would love to have some background vocals. It would be really cool to have a harmonizer. I think that would add a little bit more, even to a live performance.



PAO: Or you could... just invite people up on stage.

EH: True (*laughs*).

PAO: What would you say is the biggest influence to the sound of *Another Chance to Live*, the EP?

EH: Oh goodness, the greatest influence...

PAO: “I Do” definitely had a bit of a 70s vibe to it. And “Doctor” was a very exuberant, poppy joy ride.

EH: Right. Thank you (*laughs*). I can't say that there's just one biggest influence, because I think when I was writing I was just trying to channel a lot of my favorite artists, even... and this is just who I've been listening to, I wouldn't say she's jazz, but I've been listening to Lianne La Havas, who's just... her voice is amazing. I've been listening to Bruno, I've been listening to, um... I know a lot of people don't want to hear this, but I've been listening to the radio (*laughs*). There are some good songs that you're saying, “you know, wow, this is where music is right now.” So I can't really say that there's been one influence. I listen to a lot of my favorites, as well as even some songs I may not like, but I think the most important thing is I've been listening (*laughs*).

PAO: You played the Deep Ellum Arts Festival this year. How was that experience?

EH: I always love playing the Deep Ellum Arts Festival because of the energy of just being in Deep Ellum, and the festival, it's amazing. There are so many just amazing musicians in Deep Ellum in general. It's amazing. And it's hard to see everybody, but I know it's also hard to put on because it's three days. You just leave wishing it was a little bit longer (*laughs*). So again, I look forward to playing the Deep Ellum Arts Festival every year.

PAO: How many people were in the audience when you played?

EH: Oh goodness. They did not give an estimate, and when I play, a lot of times I do zone out a little bit (*laughs*). I do notice when people show up, but for the most part I'm playing. I had a lot of my friends show up that I invited this year. GlamTV was in the audience, and then some of the artists, like Karyna Micaela and Zach [Balch] were in the audience, and Bob of course was in the audience (*laughs*). But unfortunately I can't give you a number because I'm looking in the audience but I'm really just kind of, *it's all about the music* in that moment (*laughs*). It always... it feels great.

PAO: Exhilarating?

EH: It is! I wouldn't say frightening, because the people who are there are there to appreciate the music, and you're kind of feeding off their energy (*laughs*). So when they're getting into it then it just... you're feeding off of the energy of what's going on. And that's why I would say, yes you rehearse, but in that moment, you don't know if there's gonna be a solo that's gonna happen, you don't know what's gonna happen in the audience, so it's kind of like you're feeding off of what's going on. We may play a song a little bit longer if we know that people are really getting into it (*laughs*). Add a break here or there, because you're feeding off of the energy like that.

PAO: That's the beauty of a live performance.

EH: Yes, yes. Love live performances.

PAO: Do you have a pre-prepared set list when you go on?

EH: I do, I do. I usually have a set list or a set of songs that I know I'm gonna play, and then I always have three or four songs in my back pocket (*laughs*) that can be switched in depending on the energy of the crowd. Usually songs like "Neon Lights & Stardust," you know, it does really well live. I didn't play "Another Chance to Live" at the festival but this year I plan on playing "Another Chance to Love" (*laughs*). I do "Neon Lights & Stardust," "Call the Doctor"... those are three that I know for sure that I'm gonna play, just because of the energy and everybody getting into those. The rest I kind of just switch in and out depending on how the crowd is feeling.



PAO: You've definitely been busy with the live shows. You've played the Ghost of Blind Lemon's surprise party, Raw Glimpse, the Sofar Sounds, Medicine Man's Traveling Revival, Deep Ellum Arts Fest, and the Walk the Light festival.

EH: Yes (*laughs*). Some of those venues that I played this year were new places. I had never played the RBC before, I had never done Raw Glimpse, and all of these have just been great

experiences. I do love playing to familiar crowds and familiar faces, but I also like getting out and playing to new people like at the Sofar DFW. That was another amazing show, amazing. I think that was the... normally I'm not nervous but that was a little bit intimidating because everybody's just sitting there and they're looking at you and it's pin drop quiet (*laughs*).

PAO: I saw the picture from the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*.

EH: Yes (*laughs*). But it is such an awesome, awesome experience. And on that show I played with Taylor and the Wild Now from Austin, and Telegraph Canyon from Fort Worth.

PAO: Was there an official CD release show, or party for *Another Chance to Live*?

EH: We did a lot of the promotion for it online. We just did some quirky type pictures, you know that were... we just really tried to play it up a little bit more online that we were releasing an EP. I played that Sunday at the RBC, but I didn't call it an official release show. But I did

sell them at the show.

PAO: That was the first time they were for sale?

EH: That was the first time. But, um... some of the songs, like "I Do," a lot of... some people have covered it online. And so we kind of catered a little bit to some of our friends online, you know (*laughs*), who know the songs and different things like that. But we did sell them at the show - we just kind of did some online things to get ready for the release... like the week of every single day we had a different way to promote the music. I did a photo shoot purposely to do things to kind of promote the EP (*laughs*). So it was every day. Monday, we had *this*. Tuesday, we had *this*. Wednesday, we had *this*. And then Friday, it was just kind of like, okay, this is what we've been building up for: here's *Another Chance to Live*. And I'm hoping next EP that we'll even do a little bit more. I already have some things in mind even though I just released this one (*laughs*).

PAO: How has the new EP been received so far?

EH: So far, so good. I definitely feel like it's been a good release, and a lot of people are receptive and have told me they like the music. With the placements, a lot of people are being introduced to the music for the first time. It's funny because we're on "Another Chance to Live," and then somebody may come up and say "I just heard 'I Do' for the first time and I love it," or "I heard 'Call the Doctor' here." It's kind of gone back and forth because you're talking about the new EP, but they're just hearing this for the first time and they're associating it with a scene that they love.

PAO: You're a new discovery to them.

EH: Yeah, the new discovery. And a line... they used it for their commercial online for *Glee*. And a lot of people were saying, "Oh my goodness, I'm always gonna associate this song with the *Glee* scene."

PAO: "Glee" is an appropriate line for you.

EH: (*laughs*) So they're like, "I'm always gonna associate that," and so to them even though there's new music, this is where they are. We're promoting and we're playing, and even though I'm mentally at the new EP, I still go back to the old EP because this is where people are seeing the music for the first time. And I've been there too. I do the same thing with some artists. I'm like "Oh, I love this song, and I love your new stuff too, but this song really speaks to me." (*laughs*)

PAO: Apparently it speaks to a lot of people. I've found examples of people doing covers of your music on YouTube. How does it feel to see someone else's interpretation of a song that you wrote?

EH: I love it. I love it. It makes me want to create more songs. It just inspires me that people can really relate to the songs that I'm writing. It almost feels like, *okay, this is not really about you anymore*. When you hear people saying "I'm gonna play this song at my wedding," it's a different feeling and it's like... this is beyond me just making songs because I wanna make songs. These are people who have related to this song or who feel a certain way about this song, so it really makes me want to write more songs. When I'm writing, it makes me want to commit to the song a lot more. So a line that may have made it two years ago, or three years ago, I'm... it may not make it now (*laughs*). Because I want every line to be where it connects. I want the music to really connect, and that's really important to me.

PAO: It's close to 50 videos online now, right?

EH: Yes!

PAO: What was the one that you were just filming a music video for?

EH: "I'm Feeling Lucky," and it was a live lyric video, and... it's been received well. It was actually the one that we first kind of got our feet wet and shot outside of the home. And I love it. I love it.

PAO: How was that experience?

EH: It was great. Matt Thornberry - he shot "I'm Feeling Lucky," and I love it. I loved it. It was a great idea. Believe it or not, it wasn't the idea that we started with, but the way it all came together was really great. Even when we shoot the actual video - that's not a lyric video - for it, after they see that, I'll probably say [to] also watch the lyric video by Matt Thornberry because it was just such a great feel (*laughs*). I really loved the experience of shooting. That was the first one, actually shooting a video. It was a great experience.



PAO: Who's been responsible for the other videos that are up, for songs like "Change is Here," where it's all lyrics and animation?

EH: "Neon Lights?" Oh, that's definitely Dré's forté (*laughs*). Programmer by day, musician by night (*laughs*).

PAO: Quite literally.

EH: Yes, quite literally (*laughs*). I have to give him a lot of props, because a lot of that was

learning for the first time, like, *You know what? I can make a motion video*, and then reading manuals and spending two days just trapped in a room, putting it on the screen. I can't do that. That is not my strong suit, so I definitely (*laughs*) am very thankful that he is knowledgeable on that level of technology.

PAO: Your closest musical collaborator.

EH: Yes, yes. Closest musical collaborator (*laughs*). Yes, we are definitely a lot of *do it yourself* (*laughs*).

PAO: Just looking at the direction you've been going over the last three EPs, stylistically, musically - any thoughts on a full length release?

EH: I do want to do a full length release, but I'm gonna go back to that thing I was saying about do it yourself (*laughs*). We've been very fortunate to have some placements and different things like that, and very grateful to have some awesome fans and friends who've bought a lot of music and who've kind of helped us out. But when it comes to the making of music a lot of that... it's quite expensive to do a full length when you don't have a label or anything like that. So we're doing a lot of it ourselves... especially when you're adding live instrumentation. And I don't want to skimp on what I feel is the quality because of budget. So I'd rather do a couple of songs and still have the live instrumentation and still have the feel that I want, than to just do a full length and not really have that feel.

PAO: You have enough ideas for a full length already.

EH: I have **tons**, yes! (*laughs*) I've just released this, but I want to get more songs out. If I could do it, I would get more songs out before the end of the year, but, you know...

PAO: You still have time.

EH: Yes (*laughs*).

PAO: Three more months left.

EH: You never know what could happen in three months (*laughs*).

PAO: Well, a lot's happened this year. Not only all the shows, but your music's been featured online in a number of different places. There was the *Glee* that you mentioned, there was the *Hand of God* episode, the PopSugar advertisement, the *Dance Moms* placement on Lifetime...

EH: Yes.

PAO: How did your music come to be featured in any of those programs?



EH: The title of the second EP, *I'm Feeling Lucky*, that's what I just feel like. We didn't know the publisher, but it was just in a library, and it was chosen for that scene. And I'm so grateful, because it was just... I feel lucky that they chose these songs. It could have just been what they wanted for that scene. I don't know who those um supervisors were but I'm very grateful (*laughs*) that they chose the songs for the scenes they did.

PAO: How's the reaction been to those scenes?

EH: Um, the reaction has been amazing. Of course I'm just so excited every time I see it, you know (*laughs*). I know you're supposed to play it cool, but every time I see it, I'm like, really excited (*laughs*). And then... just people, when they say "hey, I came here from this show," it's amazing. And just to see other people cover it and take it in their own way, and, you know, sing "I Do," or sing a song that they related to, it's just amazing (*laughs*).

PAO: Where can people who can't make it to one of your shows obtain a copy of the new album?

EH: Well, now we have it at all the retailers, from iTunes, Spotify, Bandcamp, CD Baby... so we've tried to make sure that if you want it, it's available (*laughs*). The more people who can get it... if they'll support music, it's great because we're having a problem where people don't really have to support music.

PAO: Are you still active as a musical instructor?

EH: Privately. I'm not at the school this year, but I teach private piano and voice. I have a lot of younger students... a lot of the students that I had when I was teaching, and so they followed me to my private studio (*laughs*).

PAO: So, how would you describe an average day in the life of Ellen Once Again?

EH: Oh my goodness. I wake up - it's gonna be with a one year old trying to wake me up (*laughs*). Most of the day is spent keeping her very busy, and then when it gets to the afternoon, piano lessons, and then trying to squeeze in a little bit of songwriting, or a show, or I'm practicing. Trying to squeeze in practicing, and then putting her to bed, um... then start over (*laughs*). But when there's free time, which is very rare with a one year old, it is spent

trying to work on new songs. That is definitely my passion, writing and trying to get new music. So that's what I do most, whether it's performing, whether it's a show, even teaching to my students. A lot of them love music, and you just wanna foster their love for music. But it definitely starts with the one year old. She's kind of running the show (*laughs*). When I'm not with her I'm working on music, but when I'm with her it's definitely all about her (*laughs*).

PAO: Is she showing any early inclinations toward music?

EH: Oh yes, yes. She's even gone as far as... I can't work on music with her yet, because if she sees me get on the piano, she'll grab my hand, she'll lead me away from the piano, then she'll run and jump on the piano and start playing and start hitting keys (*laughs*). So she's like, *No, mommy, I wanna do it*. So she'll lead me away from the keyboard, and then when she figures I'm far enough away she'll run back on the keyboard and bang out a couple of notes and, you know, sing a little bit (*laughs*).

PAO: How much would you say your new experiences as a mother have found their way into your songwriting?

EH: A lot. I don't think I've mentioned this before, but I wrote a song on my new EP called "Anything," just pretty much saying that I would do anything, you know, and... it kind of sounds like a love song. It is a love song, but I wrote it for my daughter. So, that's a new fact that a lot of people didn't know. I wanted to phrase it like a love song, but it's actually a love song for my daughter (*laughs*). So she makes her way a lot into the music, and even when I do my rough drafts and... I used to record my little voice memos on my phone, and in every one of them you can hear her kind of screaming in the background (*laughs*).



PAO: You play most, if not all, of your shows in the DFW area. Where are some of the notable places that your music has been exposed to thanks to YouTube?

EH: It's hard to say... looking at people who are responding... Um, England. They're responding from overseas. They're responding from Japan. And so it's amazing because there's a lot of places that I haven't been that the music has been (*laughs*).

PAO: Any of those places you'd like to go visit?

EH: I would love to go visit... I don't [know] if it's gonna happen right away, but um, I would...

PAO: (knocks on table)

EH: Yes (*laughs*). Well, I definitely would love to go visit other countries, other places. Of course I'm in love with the idea of, you know, Paris and overseas and England. I've never been there - that's probably why I'm in love with the idea (*laughs*). But... I don't wanna put any limits on that. There's so many places that I could just name, but you know I just wanna, you know, experience it, the different cultures, different places. It's hard for me to put a limit on that because there are a lot of good places that I would love to experience and go with the music. I've been to L.A. (*laughs*). And I've been to Austin. But a lot of the places out of the country I haven't been. It's interesting and great to know that the music has been there, so maybe one day I'll get a chance to go as well. I'm getting to the point where I'm almost willing to tour, but it just has to be smart. Touring with a little one, you know, and trying to figure that out... like, how do we make this happen. I have to think a lot more about how to get things done (*laughs*).

PAO: Any comments you'd like to make about any particular songs on the EP?

EH: I think every song definitely has a little bit of meaning, from "Everything" to "Another Chance to Live" to even "Change Is Here." I know it's a little bit more jazzy and poppy, but there's a lot of things going on, so it gives a little bit of my take on... things are constantly changing, you know. Can't run from it (*laughs*).



PAO: Anything else you'd like to say?

EH: Just that I'm very grateful. I love what I'm doing. I'm loving that I'm getting the chance to really reach a larger audience. I know that's very generic, but you know it's kind of, it's...

PAO: No pressure, huh?

EH: No pressure! (*laughs*) But I do try to talk on Facebook and Twitter and different social media, and when people do say "hey I love this song," I try to really connect and talk with people because... it's just amazing that you're being able to really reach out and touch people who are in different places. Always

a fan of that, so if they ever hit me up I'm gonna probably respond and carry on a conversation (*laughs*).

PAO: Thanks again for speaking with me.

EH: Well, thank you for the interview and for speaking with me.

IHOP, 9/20/2015

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