

Rick Berlin's stuff has a lot of stories to tell

The musician's second book, 'The Big Balloon (A Love Story),' is inspired by the things in his home and the memories and feelings they evoke

By Marc Hirsh Globe correspondent, Updated November 29, 2021, 5:55 p.m.



Rick Berlin, shown in 2017 at Papercuts JP. He'll be doing a reading of "The Big Balloon (A Love Story)" at the Jamaica Plain bookstore on Dec. 9. ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Rick Berlin has been a key figure in Boston music for nearly 50 years, stretching back to his time in Orchestra Luna in the early 1970s and carrying through subsequent acts such as Berlin Airlift, the Shelley Winters Project, the Nickel & Dime Band, and his own solo work. That's not what his second book,

“The Big Balloon (A Love Story),” is about, not really. To hear Berlin tell it, that’s by design.

“I love having all these bands. I love making all these records. But that’s not the stuff that fascinates me,” says Berlin. “It’s really my friends, and my family, and the people that have been in my life, that matter to me a lot more. And from them, that instigates songs. But I’m more interested in who they are and how they behave and my skewed portraits of them.”

If “The Big Balloon” (available at Jamaica Plain bookstores Papercuts and Tres Gatos, as well as online booksellers including bookshop.org) is any indication, the stuff that fascinates Berlin isn’t just people, it’s also, well, stuff. The book is a catalog, both metaphorical and literal, of the possessions adorning the author’s house, divided into rooms (“Hallway,” “Back Porch,” “Kitchen,” etc.) and with each chapter devoted to a single item and the Proustian reverie it sparks: how it was acquired, who it reminds him of, what feelings it triggers and so forth. Despite being well over 600 pages — “It’s a long damn book,” he says of the work he’s nicknamed “the Beast” — it’s quick reading nonetheless, thanks to short entries that move fast thanks both to the format and the gregarious candor of Berlin’s writing

After 2016’s “The Paragraphs,” Berlin had no intention of writing another book. But then came a case of “Joni Mitchell Syndrome,” which he describes as needing to be in love to fuel creativity. “I met this guy Mike, who was fascinated by my life in a way that was startling to me. And he asked questions that surprised me and challenged me because I’m really tired of my own autobiography,” says Berlin.

Eight weeks later, the two separated as the COVID lockdown began. “It was a great, exultant kind of time,” Berlin says of their relationship. “And then I thought, [expletive], you know what, I would pick three objects a day and I would write about each one. And each time, I would go further and further into parts of my life that get stimulated by just looking at them.”

The result is Berlin literally taking stock of a long, full life. “I’m 76 years old,” he says. “I never got HIV. I’ve had the booster and the other two shots. The worst thing that ever happened to me was a tonsillectomy and a hernia operation.” He laughs. “No, all is well. I’m strangely active and healthy. I think the advantage of getting older is that you edit your life so you waste less and less time doing useless things.”

Adds Berlin, “I’m sane. I mean, whatever that means. I have a lot of friends who are suffering from depression. And I’ve had a lot of friends who’ve died from AIDS, and younger than me. I’ve outlived too many people already. My friend Jane Friedman — I knew her in New York, she worked with me for a while when I was doing solo stuff — she said, ‘You know, Rick, I don’t have anybody in my life anymore that knows me since I was a little girl up to now. They’re all dead.’ And that’s a startling observation, I think.

“But no, I’m kind of a ridiculously happy individual most of the time. I mean, I empathize with the dark, but it doesn’t have me by the throat.”

Rick Berlin will do a reading from “The Big Balloon (A Love Story)” at Papercuts J.P., 60 South St., Jamaica Plain, on Dec. 9 at 6 p.m.