

DEFEND YOURSELF (ARTS ISSUE EDITION): RICK BERLIN

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Longtime JP music and creative mainstay serves up another memoir (of sorts)

Whether you're talking about his past playing with Orchestra Luna and alongside any number of great Boston musicians, or his current endeavors with the Nickel & Dime Band and as a co-organizer of the Jamaica Plain Music Festival, Rick Berlin has entertained the Hub for decades, including as a server at the now-shuttered and sorely missed Doyle's Cafe. He's also an author with a lifetime of stories to tell; we asked Rick about his latest omnibus platter to pop, *The Big Balloon (A Love Story)*.

In throwing your name and book around the office when it first arrived, I believe one person—trusty photog Derek Kouyoumjian if I recall correctly—offered the descriptor “ultimate scenester.” In a good way, of course. Is that a decent description? And what else would you add to musician, band leader, and now author?

I never remotely thought of myself as a “scenester.” Mos def not an ultimate anything. Nor am I hip. (Check out how Orchestra Luna looked on stage at CBGB.) I do get work started and finished (for good or ill) in art land. I'm lucky to keep writing words and songs and making music videos on an iPhone. Whatever money comes in goes back into the studio for the next record plus a bit of promo when that makes sense (a rarity). I have a website attic crammed with music and art—berlinrick.com. Likely more than anyone would want to comb through. But that's where the dough goes.

Safe to say, as the co-producer with Shamus Moynihan (and many others) of the Jamaica Plain Music Festival, I'd add ringmaster to my artsy resume/identity. JPMF is a mom and pop, corner store, highly local event with all original, multi-genre bands. We're about to celebrate our 10th anniversary Sept 10 at Pinebank above Jamaica Pond. A phenomenal afternoon. Twenty-two bands, two stages, dogs, kids, food trucks, and a pile of porta potties. Nothing like it.

Before we get to the author piece, though, can you just tell our younger readers one thing that they ought to know about Boston music and arts and the scenes that spawned the scenes that spawned the scenes that they are now creating in?

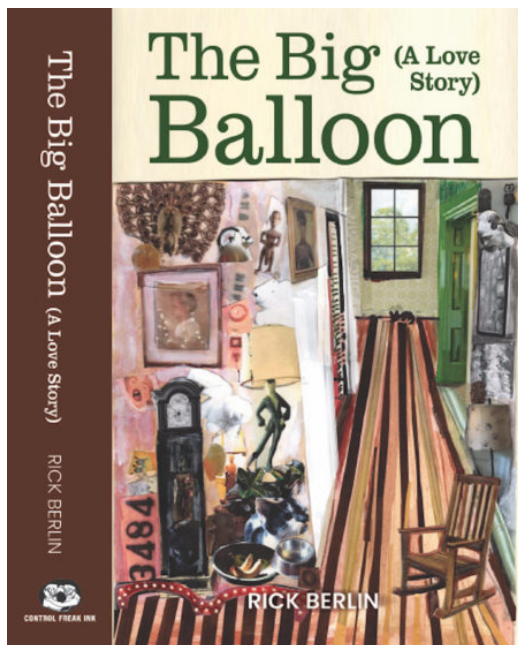
Watch the GBH documentary about 'BCN back in the day when they were the youngest, the weirdest, most revolutionary FM station on any block in the country. As a result, as a new band you played to a full house. The crowd knew your songs ('BCN played demo cassettes of local bands in drive time). The Rat and CBGB were cousin clubs. New York and Boston supported each other. Won't drop names, but a lotta of the now famous looked after us and we them.

Today, honestly, there are as many fine musicians, bands, and artists in town as ever, but with a tougher road to navigate. Primetime corporate radio no longer gives a leg up. COVID emptied out or killed great clubs. The good news: with home gear, bands can make super high-quality recordings without spending a fortune in a major studio (as much fun as that can be).

You've said that your first book, 2016's *The Paragraphs*, just kind of came out of nowhere. But certainly it came from you having tons of stories in you from a life filled with countless creative endeavors. Is that the same kind of push that resulted in *The Big Balloon*?

They're not unrelated, those two books. More like distant cousins. But the source for *The Big Balloon (A Love Story)* was not as random as *The Paragraphs*. It was inspired by a new friend of mine, Michael, who, visiting my apartment, would notice all the stuff lying around and ask challenging, in-depth questions. As if I was being interviewed by someone who knows my heart. Someone truly interested.

I took 150 photos of objects in my house. Each triggered flashbacks and details long forgotten. The chapters are just rooms in my house: foyer, hallway, bathroom, kitchen, etc. With a double dedication. One to Mike, the other to friends and family. Memoir and portraiture. Kinda Andy Rooney gets in bed with Marcel Proust. I guess it's safe (presumptuous?) to say I was struggling (unsuccessfully) to figure out what the fuck love has been in my life of 76-plus years. I've stumbled around too many blocks to count. On a good day it might add up to simple wisdom. Pretentious? Probably.



Your writing is engaging, yet also full of unexpected turns plus memoir, fantasy, and you name it. Would you say that is pretty similar to your songwriting style?

The Paragraphs was written partly to keep a hand in as a lyricist. Practicing words, images, hoped-for truths, etc. But yeah, I'm all over the place as a songwriter. None of my bands have ever had an identifiable "sound." Jazz, rock, pop, alternative, Americana, art rock, cabaret, Broadway... all found a home in my writing.

For my band, the Nickel & Dime Band, I imagine the guys playing. I hear drums, distorted guitars, bass, backup singing. I'm not a totalitarian band leader. The guys (and Jane Mangini, who plays all keyboards on our records and who made *The Cha Cha Club* record with me) just always play, naturally, great stuff. They come up with what seems right to them musically. The songs get transformed from my initial crap demos. It never seemed wise to ask a musician to play something that isn't innate. If you try to bend an artist into someone they're not, they shouldn't be in your band. I've been lucky to have had great players and great people in all my bands over my endless career.

How has the hustle been as an independent publisher? How have local bookstores like Papercuts helped out?

Self-publishing a book is an even harder slog than getting a record listened to. Papercuts J.P. and the books/record store at Tres Gatos (also in JP) have been terrific. People in the hood and elsewhere love these stores. Tres Gatos helped out a lot by sponsoring an event for 20 of my friends (many of whom have a 'moment' in *The Big Balloon*) read chosen excerpts from the book last fall. A moving, hilarious, awesome afternoon.

I make a buck off a book that sells for \$18. But money is never the point, right? Those who actually read the thing seem to get a bang out of it. A laugh. A cry. Couldn't ask for more.

As a local mayor of sorts of Jamaica Plain, how do you find that neck of Boston in particular to be these days in how much the community supports arts and artists?

Ain't no mayor. More of a street walker. About JP: at this point there's only one for real music club in the hood, the Midway Café. Seven nights of music a week and two afternoons. It's the new Rat.

Regarding the festival ... a ton of local businesses kick in serious sponsorship cash every year. Add in John Casey's Bar Wars (at the Midway), when many of the bars in the hood (dead or still standing) throw a band together for one night only. The rule: each band must include patrons of that bar. The winner plays the festival. It's my favorite night of the year. A shit show of insane proportion. (*Ed. note: The next one is on June 7*). Imagine a car herd of barflies and musicians organizing themselves for something like this.

Also tell us how much you miss Doyle's. We sure do. Without Doyle's around, where can people find you most of the time?

Doyle's is an irreplaceable loss. My friend, Jill Petruzzello wrote about this more elegantly than I ever could—I included her essay in *Balloon*. Doyle's took up a major chunk of my life for 31 years. It supported my art and music and the friends I made there with my co-workers and regulars will never be out of my mind or heart.

My manager there, Mickey O'Connell Sholes, got me part time shifts at the Halfway Café in Dedham. Great people, great staff, great kitchen. It isn't Doyle's. Nothing ever could be, but I'm grateful for the gig as an old fart trying to remember how to use the computer and not mis-hear with my horrible ears ('creative listening') what a customer is ordering.

What are you up to on the music front these days? Is the Nickel & Dime band playing shows?

We've been lucky to play at least 10 shows (more in the pipeline) during the lockdown. First gig was on the roof at Papercuts. Another outdoors on Perkins St Several in Lowell. Nothing too far afield. Mask up until onstage. None of the guys have caught the virus, thank god. We hope to be recording our seventh EP midsummer and are working up a major event in the fall.