

The Big Balloon by Rick Berlin: No Instructions Necessary

by Edward Morneau

Rick Berlin's *The Big Balloon* is an oddly engaging book. However narratively disjointed, he admits, it is evocative of its title, shuttling from sphere to sphere, inflating with hope and deflating with deeper suspicions about a life lived with little instruction, but in totality, extrapolating "one's own echo, wisdom, embarrassment and laughter." He also admits that he keeps "a lot of these beyond the pale truths in my back pocket as proof against *reality*."

Written with self-effacing humor, there is mostly a bounce in his voice, welcoming and disarming, and sometimes a thud, urgent with doubt—both effective in drawing this reader to assemble Berlin's remembrances and his artistic and emotionally provocative puzzle of a life. Often borrowing from his own diary ("Kami-kaze"), he becomes the archivist, ruminating about his secrets, his sexuality, and his effort to navigate the subterranean essence of places, artifacts, music, but especially people—the latter his main compass for seeking truth. There is refreshing modesty to how he is predisposed to take a general observation from others to craft a specific distinction:

He would talk about the difficulty of living 'rightly'. That it was the tragedy of the world that most people had no sense of the refinements of life, especially the arts. They chose to purchase the flimsy byproduct: a smarmy greeting card, a cheap Van Gogh reproduction, a gaslighted biography; impotent cousins to the truly meaningful. The 'shallow ones' had cowardly values and a voracious acquisitiveness.

Throughout *Balloon*, there are dashes of stylistic brilliance, consistently evocative, especially the sudden detour to a disembodied section from his unfinished novel, *Armchair General—A Fictional Biography of Dick & Jane*—a chapter devoted to his mother, Janie, and his extended lineage. At times, his own narrative shift to hers reminds me of the celestial prose of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*—relocating the reader to that era, with its surface appetites constantly being starved for essence. The bounce of his rhetoric turns to a rich formalism, necessary for his sense of Gatsby and a Fitzgerald-like fascination with the higher artifacts of pointless wealth. For Berlin, these are startling moments of learned clarity, keenly disambiguating any confusion he may have felt about his own life.

Winslow would have been uncomfortable at the cocktail parties that were de rigueur over the summer months. His world boiled over with the dark greens and blues of an unforgiving sea. Prout's vacationers kept to warm fireplaces and manicured lawns. They knew not the impartial ferocity of nature.

It's an odd stylistic detour for a biography and for a narrative about pursuing various muses having to do with defining the escalating intensities of his musical career, while searching for love and intimacy (though, despite Fitzgerald's effort, I never rooted for Gatsby, but I do root for Berlin). It's the writing that compels me to sing *Balloon's* praises, writing that gives color, lift and weight to his various experiences in the music industry, to his complex relationships with

people, neighbors and lovers, and to the artifacts that decorate his life and those places that give harbor to that life.

I knew very little about Rick Berlin—his birth name Richard Kinscherf. I first heard of him many years ago from his fabulous Christmas song—“I Hate Christmas”—a one-off, Spectorish pop confessional from a Christmas compilation of local artists released on cassette by Boston’s legendary FM radio station, WBCN. I saw his band Orchestra Luna at the Paradise (though I can’t remember when or who they opened for, which says something/anything). I first met him through some of my suburban Boston friends at Doyle’s fabulous restaurant—once a local mecca for its bohemian and regular clientele, now Covid shuttered, a painful story Berlin can barely tell without honorable lamentations. There, the only conversation I had with him was this: Berlin: “Burger, medium?”; Me: “That’s me. Thanks!” Alas, it would have been something to follow his career and have better conversations, but my life was knee deep in teaching; it wasn’t going to happen. His music was not on my radar, which was too bad for me at the time because his pop-torch-jazzy incarnations deserved to be considered in the realm of my favorite artists—Kinks, XTC, Bowie, Lou Reed, Talking Heads, Tubes— if not just for its lyrical sensibilities and theatrical audacity, but for the intricate musical and melodic attention he and his collaborators paid to pop ministry’s more progressive indulgences. But I digress. Back to the *Balloon*.

It takes a certain amount of courage to explore the evidence of a life provocatively lived. And to do it with a specific depth of humility, measuring it against well-earned bravado and burlesque, and, again, to write so eloquently and poetically—this makes Rick Berlin’s effort the rare autobiography that is deliberately scatter-shot, but an honest appraisal of a life lived without instruction. “If there’s anything I hate, anything I refuse to follow, it’s instructions.” It’s a diary-story that if rendered unto film and cut up into pieces and thrown up into the air and reassembled according to the random chaos of a film bin, this is what you’d get.

Berlin is a much admired Boston-based singer-songwriter, fronting such bands as Orchestra Luna (I & II), Berlin Airlift, Rick Berlin: The Movie, The Shelly Winters Project, Nickel and Dime Band and others. He is also a quasi-theatrical/experimental multi-media maven, a good neighbor and friend to a cavalcade of interesting and arresting people, a true and generous collaborator, a local waiter with a self-described cubist gait, a proud gay man, and a restless and ambitious artist who could never satisfy just one muse. Thankfully, his story is not some ghost-edited, foggy drug-informed, tell-all odyssey of the rigors of the road, the betrayals of the music industry, or the epiphanies of the suffering artist. It is a search for meaning, love and beauty. Sounds glib when I say it, but when it comes to actualizing ambitions, talents, and virtues, he’s ridiculously dynamic and prolific. His is a persistence of self and a search for other in what he calls a “mirrored reflection, clear or dull, good or ill, real or imagined, true or false”—a summoning of “Love, the great mystery.” This is the fundamental essence of *The Big Balloon*.

Berlin’s *Library of Consciousness*: “Artifacts are objects intentionally made to serve a given purpose; natural objects come into being without human intervention. Without artifacts, there would be no recognizable human life” (Wiki). The personal museum of artifacts that surround Berlin are the ornaments of an unusual story of object affection and inform his way of

storytelling itself, which is a pretty reliable device within reach for anybody who needs a model to tell his or her own story.

It could be inferred that Berlin's artifacts may be more than objects: "I want artwork from my friends. I want their stuff on my walls. I don't have the bread to pay for it, so I charm it out of them, one guilt tripping manipulative drop at a time.... For me it's personal."

Treasures to some, junk to others—it doesn't matter. What he surrounds himself with defines a long sustained humility, specifically in terms of what he does have: "I feel like a rich person, like we have a maid. Looking online at ads for apartments the tag line 'washer and dryer included' was astonishing to read. And to lose something is like waking up from a dream gone wrong," he confesses. He "anthropomorphizes inanimate objects...[he] talks to them out loud."

As a musician and composer, Berlin affixes a utilitarian rationale to his instrument of choice—the piano, usually the stand-up kind:

Part of me doesn't like to see these two, piano and stand, glaring at me, waiting to be used. Waiting for a new song. Blank page pieces of musical furniture. They're sociopaths. They don't care how I feel or if I'm inspired or not. They want to be activated and love/hate me like the conniving human robots in 'Westworld.'

Berlin is student of Rimbaud, and, like the poet, he exorcizes the unbearable pull of what's before, of going back, of not so much reflecting on artifacts as objects, but on how they impart remembrances upon the younger heart, re-birthed by a childlike cognizance of requited, almost maternal love. A friend opines: "I'm only going to say this once. Spend as much time as you can with your Mother. If you don't, you'll regret it for the rest of your life." His evocation of his mother is relative to an early philosophy bookmarking tender and sobering reflections, without drifting into the womb of *smotherhood*. A believer that "children need ... non-parental bandwidth" and the "silent wisdom and good will," Berlin seeks in all things natural and real, in people and in artifacts—the emotional tethers that propel him forward.

After his father died, the effort to reconcile mortal and emotional dualities was the effort to find this emotional justice for the effort's sake. He could see his mother repair herself by simply being there for her children. She was naturally inclined to seek and imbue happiness in them. "That, and our moral compass—which I both respected and resented. Someone's got to be that for us, right? That she loved us unequivocally is undeniable. That she expected us to be fair, honest and good to each other and to our friends was non-negotiable."

Hardly sentimental (as evidenced by the hard truths of his songwriting), the everyday countenance family has for him reveals an unyielding emotional gravitational pull: "I am this family, ... Mama is me, ... My brother Karl. I am Karl, ...Dad—I am Papa." In looking back over his friendships, he sometimes cannot reconcile the strangers who remained friends and the friends who became strangers, eventually realizing that his was an extended search for family. The dichotomy of surrounding oneself with artifacts while contemplating how their respective meanings are deliberated through other people are acts of poetry. But friends are not artifacts. Few of us are ready for friendship until we understand ourselves outside of our artifacts and the

remnants we hold onto and the ones that fade from our lives. Stage props almost always distract from meaningful drama.

Appropriately, theatre informs much of Berlin's work, psychologically positioning himself for pulling the essential dramas from within. One obvious muse is David Bowie. His various performing personas invoke his song structures and vocal dynamics, and, like Bowie, Berlin pursues what Peter Brook called Holy Theatre—the multiplying agencies of experience that dominate our lives, colluding with the dramatic persona to become more than a cast name, but an identity authentic and indistinguishable from artifice: the personification of *self* at the expense of one's *other*.

Berlin caught the stage bug in high school as the cowpoke lead, Curly McClain, in Rodgers & Hammerstein's Oklahoma. He felt the internal baptismal of Holy Theatre early: "In some ways, like all theater, our ensemble was a play within a play. It was also the drama bug that bit and ultimately encouraged me to apply and be accepted to the Yale Drama School." It was in New Haven where Berlin was tossed into the bohemian fringes of artistic perception, where he "first felt the ravages, the beauty, the power and the heart invention that is True Love." Falling in love for the first time sets up the emotional blueprint that lays out the endless reconstruction of the heart. For the creative, love and artistry are lost and found at the crossroads of time and place.

Dualities run amok in *Balloon*. An extrovert in public, and introvert in matters of the heart, calibrating this heart and preparing it for love are too often nearly irreconcilable surprises to him. Married to both artistic certainty and creative doubt—Berlin's musings are chakras illuminating a catechism of creative codes by which to move forward and pull from the past some future-conceived redefinition. His changeling nature informs a slew of bands and explores a myriad of musical forms and personifications—all mirrored reflections.

But this tug of war between love and music is exercised by both and, always, one has to give. For Berlin the music balloon called for the helium of dreams first. Ironically, in the beginning he was simply content to write songs, play his upright and find day-to-day work that spoke to setting the 'moral compass' in the general direction of his generous humanity. He was, in his own way, following the mother muse, something he respected and resented. The latter would grow in proportion to his early apprenticeship in the music business. Because Berlin is an amalgamation of his family, there are separate gravitational pulls dividing him up into different weights and measures, from a free-floating ambitions and romantic arcs to half burying him with regrets and uncertainties. The business of music was something to endure, but he did so with rare optimism simply because, in spite of the business, he pursued the art.

He arrives innocently at these crossroads with a certain infatuation: The simple innocence of unadulterated sound was the first muse before which he knelt... the path right in front of his eyes. "There is an inexpressible waking dream in just sound. With no add-on song structure, lyric or goal line to aim for or score a musical touchdown. That simple innocence is the field I plowed for years." He admits that he was "a charlatan piano man who straddles the big red and pries songs out of god knows where. I play adequately, but not well. No piano, no songs. No sublimation, no legacy. I am what I've invented."

As for his voice, he is unafraid to draw upon experiences as a choral soprano, an alto, and ultimately the baritone that has decorated most of his songs. Anything uplifting, no matter what religious denomination, was instructive to his choices in pitch and volume.

I was unfamiliar with too much of Berlin's music to sensibly comment on it, but his liturgical fealty to music itself and his narrative honesty turned my ear to do a deep dive. If there is any “religious” figure who literally looks over his shoulder, it is John Lennon:

Where I scooped up the Lennon portrait I have no idea, but John and his frame have been in every house I've lived in since, staring down at me as if to warn: Don't stray from the truth, Berlin. Write real. Do not concern yourself with success or shallow adversaries. Keep it up with humor and a doe-eyed, disturbing romantic heart.

Even though Berlin continues to live in the margins of the mainstream, the greater limelight, once sought, was not one lost with regret. His local and regional successes are legendary and an inspiration to many. A true working class hero:

I make records I'm proud of. That's where I spend my money. The studio, the hard copies, the legacy. Bandcamp streams my catalogue. The weirdo demos, Nickel & Dime, Berlin Airlift, The Shelly Winters Project, Luna, Rome Is Burning, The Kingdom, LIVE@ JACQUES, solo projects and music going all the way back to Orchestra Luna I and II. Therein lies the legacy.

Regarding the compression of his successes, he waxes a remarkably succinct overview shared by countless bands and soloists who work hard, long, and deserve more:

Each musician, like each garage artifact, seems to appropriately fit, to belong both as person and player. The records are proof. In the jagged little pill that is the deteriorating music industry, we found no home but live well on the street, lucky to have scored countless shows and fans. We've been fortunate to know each other in the rush job that is the high-speed honeymoon all bands face when they “marry.” Somehow, with the amicable divorces of former players, we continue to bloom.

At times, it seems to me that Berlin blames himself and his excesses as a performing artist—his “shrieking... strap-on neophyte” gayness (his terms), his high functioning decadence, and his inclinations towards excess and absurdity as reasons for not having a wider appeal. In the age of Bowie, Marc Bolan, Kiss, Alice Cooper, etc, methinks he is way too tough on himself:

Dance that decadent dance, Berlin, one more time... If you're going to embarrass yourself, this is the way to go. Classic Jane. Classic Berlin. Of these stories there are many to count... Stand out ludicrous, my calling card. I'll give you one and you can call me up when you're in the mood for a moment of absurd embarrassment. If I could charge for it, I'd be a rich man.

He laments that his songs won't have the impact they deserve, but one cannot negotiate how others find their own presence and meaning in another's life. To someone, even just one Berlin

song might be that threshold. After all, what person of principle and inquiry becomes principled and curious without stepping over thresholds?

Steve Popovitch—founder and president of Cleveland International Records—once saw something in Berlin and told him, “I’m going to send you to Europe, Rick. Every artist deserves to walk the streets of Paris,” suggesting, maybe, the streets of Boston will not do. But Popovitch walked away, preferring the flash and pan of Meatloaf. In a long list of contractual separations, Berlin sought a “person who settled business matters as a human being first and as a businessman second.” Alas, Orchestra Luna was his “first toe in the slime water that is the music business. Addicted ever since, though not to the biz, but to having bands. One of the great gifts in my life.” His epiphany about being in a long established band: “It’s a blur, those years. A cloud of up-swirling Tinkerbell pixie dust. We were magic. We didn’t realize it. Those who saw us did.” He didn’t fully appreciate this until later when he got further along and realized how much pretense passed for authenticity.

However, *Balloon* does not dwell on the triumphs and travails of his various musical entities and encounters, even though it seems that every artifact, every place, and every person in his life is punctuated by a song. It is the people who most populate his thoughts and eloquence, despite the catalogue of broken-hearted stories of those who, “in the present [...] forget anything promised in the past and flake”:

Part of me thinks each new connection stands on the shoulders of the former. Building a reading room library of heart wisdom upon which we hope to make fewer mistakes. I think I’ve failed the love exam more than I’ve passed. Bottom line: we’re here on this earth to learn to love properly.

Attracted to the weird, the bizarre, and the fringe, the people he meets defines Berlin’s lifelong fascination with absurdity, e.g.—“I met an Italian actress/ dancer who decided to ‘become’ a tree. She stayed in the woods overnight, hugging a single oak. I have no idea if she transformed, if her skin turned to bark or moss, but I admire the dedication.”

The bizarre and absurd aside, his loyalty to the present, to the neighborhood ethos of the home boy, Berlin is devoted to all things local, even contributing as an artistic and nuts and bolts force behind Boston’s Jamaica Plain music festival—“a Mom-n-Pop, Corner Store Festival... Sprung life-like from the oddball JP community womb.” But nothing rings his heart out more than the shuttering of Doyle’s: “Now the place is gone. No entrance. No exit. Hell hath no fury for what happened. I refuse to convict myself by telling the truth and getting sued. People know the truth anyhow.” His friend and co-worker, Jill Petruzzello, was more effusive:

THESE PEOPLE. I have never met a more selfless group of people in my entire life, and I will never work with a better group ever again. I started at Doyle’s when I was 16 years old, and these people have truly molded me into the person that I am today. I will never forget everything you guys have done.

Memory is love and *The Big Balloon* is mostly a story about both. In *Armchair General...*, the death of Janie’s father ended her childhood and dampened a deeper fealty to

hope. Berlin's effort in life is not to lose hope, but to accept those who stay and those who "flake"—a measure of his own resolve to practice a pragmatic loyalty towards the power of love. "If this is first love, it is also first death. The lesson of letting go. [...]. In some ways I think we hope to recreate that first moment each time we find a new friend, a new lover, a face that rings a bell." He believes that as we invent ourselves we invent the kinds of friendships that births this "mother of invention."

A cavalcade of characters populate Berlin's "Loveland"—the "spark plugs," the forever broken-hearted, the wise, the adventuresome, and those that won't chance evolving beyond the honeymoon stage. "Like all top of the mountain friendships, they seem most vital with a definitive, unavoidable departure." As he questions the nature of fidelity and longevity, he finds a hard truth, but a liberating one: "I've read that past a certain age, those without a particular someone earn a new liberty. Loving life and themselves with or without partner intimacy. Rejoicing in the unencumbered free time to make art, to be useful to others, to sustain friendships, to be fully awake." He fights the hardest habit, jealousy—the "ownership charade." But he alights upon a deeper suspicion: "Unless you're jealous, you're not in love"; then a sadder one: "It's either sex or love, Ricky. You can't have both," offers another friend.

The ecstasy and tragedy of true love in the grip of uncertainty; the feeling that love is framed outside of the heart in temporal stasis while it rattles like broken glass—the epiphany crashes with Berlin's suicide rhapsodies, crushing realities screaming from the vortex of the unrequited, the betrayed, the helplessly "cobwebbed" with the "fear of otherness."

"Walking home last night, under the stars, I realized that only once in my life, and for only ten minutes, was I embraced by someone, for real, both of us naked, an embrace of heart and passion in your bed." It's safe to say that Rick Berlin was/is a man drowning in ideas drowning in romance, free floating in a gay purgatorial self-acceptance, but always surfacing, always howling at the moon, waiting for an answer. But an answer to what? Ideas? Orchestra Luna bandmate/vocalist, Peter Barrett, lauded him: "'Will you stop having so many ideas!' he'd yell at me outside rehearsal." Pete succumbed to AIDS. "[He] was clear-eyed about his decline. He had become, for a skeptic, out-there spiritual. Trying all remedies, just in case. God, I miss him. I miss his fraught belief in me, my writing, my sputtering, helter-skelter artistic landmines." What was it then? Was it the purgatory of place and marginal acclaim? "It had an offhand feeling about it, the opposite of this place, this life of drugs and sex and anger and paranoia and desperation. Maybe I arrived at the wrong time."

It was truly the end of an era, the end of the most liberated art epidemic I've known. A profusion of unrestrained ideas and liberties taken. Peter was the shining caboose on the end of that train. None of it would have been half as interesting or groundbreaking without him. I can still picture him in an empty Orpheum writing up the OL setlist in his trademark handwriting, as we took for granted how easy it was to be opening up for Roxy Music...

But it wasn't the ideas alone, or the purgatory of quiet success; it was the repetition of not finding where his heart belonged that somehow was built upon these questions of music, place

and artifact. Ruminations cascade: romantic repetition, love as a chaos when it is anthemic to the heart singing, but as an unrepeated verse, seeking invention and life as song structure, obeying the narrative of the beginning, middle, and end ethos of life. He talks of past loves: “How we were with each other? How I’ve been with others who captivate in spite of caution, in spite of self-destructive impulse and fear of loss? What might be the original cause of romantic repetition?” He owns that he inhabits illusion and creation—the fatal twin-ship of attraction—knowing that lovers trade illusions as space, as in place; and trade time as in forever and never, hoping to “glimpse that rare view of the Bigger Picture.”

At some point I have to allude to his music, most of which functions as an elixir to experience. Berlin loves baseball, the Red Sox, Fenway Park, so an apt metaphor makes him the third baseman fielding his own turn at the bat. While there’s no one song in his canon to cover all the bases, those bases lying strewn about on the diamond of desires, reached safely or abandoned, “Something Breaks My Heart Everyday” sums him up for me—a nice sinker that makes no one feel safe with preconceptions, which, are, of course, writ with simple observations of ruination:

*Something breaks my heart everyday
A little boy getting yelled at
A bully making points
Latino dude sitting on a porch, smiling
But his face is out of joint
Best friends breaking up
Getting jealous on a girl
A late night phone call
A circle of blame
No refuge in this world.*

Berlin knows that there is something of deeper consequence beneath these observations. He has a Ray Davies-like sympathy for the common, the everyday, the neighborhood he wanders through for inspiration, finding communion with the addled, the addicted, the lonesome, the elderly—any thing that allows his “soul to feel for you.”

By the end of *The Big Balloon*, Berlin has to refine, summon and collect the primal essences of his free-floating certainties and anxieties. He compares himself to “dragonflies in an afternoon sky,” hovering above a past that may be “fiction after all,” the fiction alluding to the dragonfly’s very short life span. Dragonflies are often confused with another member of the order of Odonata—*damsel*flies—who hold their wings while at rest. But the dragonflies keep their wings in a perpendicular direction while at rest, expecting to fly. Both are symbols of strength, happiness and courage.¹ In the end it's all about reconciling the consciousness you have (dragonfly) with what you are unconscious of (damsel

¹ Navodita Maurice—<https://dragonflywebsite.com/dragonfly-facts3.cfm>

As *Balloon* deflates there is a deep sense of ambivalence, traces of regret, and a focus away from transcendent prose, bringing his keen observations face to face with not only ending the book, but searching for some final resolve to understand the whole from its parts. For that he invokes a flurry of his literary icons:

Everyone does the best that they can with the consciousness they have at the time (Isabel Hickey). *Ambition is more intoxicating than fame, desire makes all things flourish, possession withers them; it is better to dream one's life than to live it* (Marcel Proust). *It is a human right to live divinity* (Maharshi Mahesh Yogi). *Beauty will save the world* (Fyodor Dostoyevsky).

Berlin quotes *Dune*—an epiphany and apology for knowing and not knowing: “The Freeman were supreme in that quality the ancients called *Spannungsgenen*—which is the self-imposed delay between desire for a thing and the act of reaching out to grasp that thing” (Frank Herbert).

They had helium balloons from school. They put them in my car. I kissed them all goodbye and drove away crying. I could barely see the road. Somehow I made it home, ending the longest, the most enduring emotional and physical current between myself and another human being I had known. I drove straight to Newtown Square. When I opened the car door, one of the kid's balloons floated out onto the driveway. I didn't see it and stepped on it.

I'm left with my own synthesis: Rick Berlin is apt corollary to the balloon that didn't necessarily deflate, but simply got away. The hovering of all that could be sometimes is the *never* that was catching up to the *maybe* that was the *always*; and the levitation between now and then, the sun and the earth, and the duration of flight is all for the sake of love. For me, he remains whole, still levitating above the morass of the kind of despair that would preclude writing such a book.

We are both human and being. The being side of the coin practices selfless love, an even keel in a towering emotional wave. The human: a chaos of contradictions, miscues, misinterpretations and possessiveness. Just the way it is in my pulsing heart corner here on planet earth.