



Dead man talking

IN MUSIC, it's all about keeping it simple. For Max, the dead hero of Venero Armano's new novel, *The Dirty Beat*, the message is a metaphor for (hard) living: shoot straight, or don't shoot at all; stay true to the beat and let the beat be your truth.

The Dirty Beat is a rock 'n' roll novel, set in Brisbane and written in an adrenalin rush of 18 days.

The urbane Armano may not seem like a likely candidate for this kind of work, but *The Dirty Beat* is full of the kind of lived-in authenticity that can't come purely from research. Long ago, Armano was the singer in his own band — albeit one that never got out of the practice room.

The band was called Paradox and played a mix of heavy 1970s rock (Deep Purple, Alice Cooper et al) and original material.

Then, at the end of 2005, he received a call out of the blue. The band's drummer, Cyril, had died of a heart attack. The funeral was traumatic. Armano was with people he hadn't seen for 25 years, confronted not only with the loss of their friend, but a dream.

"For almost anyone who has spent time on a stage, the dream never really dies. You always have this little glimmer in the back of your head somewhere," he says.

In the chapel, Armano stared at his friend's coffin, wondering what Cyril would have made of the spectacle — long-lost friends and lovers, an inappropriate choice of music — and reflecting on what a great dirty beat Cyril had created. The phrase stuck.

When he arrived home, Armano went to his study and picked up a notebook. Still in his funeral garb, he began to write in longhand and didn't stop until three more notebooks were filled.

"It just poured out. It was the book that had been waiting 25 years to be unplugged," he says.

"They were things I had been thinking about for a long time — what it is to be in a band and the incredible bonds people in them develop. People in bands just come to love one another, but it's

Old rock 'n' rollers never really die writes Andrew Stafford

expressed in different ways. It's not expressed in kisses and hugs. Often it's the arguments. We used to argue like a family."

The Dirty Beat opens with Max addressing the reader from the mortuary: "If you can keep yourself from becoming too anxious when you wake to discover someone using an electric power tool on your head, then you're on your way to making peace with your new circumstances," he says.

It's this device, and wonderfully mordant humour, that makes the book work, allowing Max — and Armano — the opportunity to reflect upon the nature of life. "While it can be full of cruelty, the upside is you can reinvent yourself any way you like."

When Paradox finished, before becoming a successful novelist and academic, Armano worked for a computer company: "It's that thing of wanting to be in a rock band and ending up in a suit," he says. (Ironically, the company was

run by one John Haug, whose son Ian ended up doing quite nicely with a band called Powderfinger.)

Don't go looking for any recognisable characters from Brisbane's past in *The Dirty Beat*. While Max's character took inspiration from Cyril's life, Armano was careful to fictionalise the details, with the exception of the coronary that accounted for both.

As for the speed at which *The Dirty Beat* was written, well, in the words of the book's most menacing character, record producer Iron John Tempest: "Black Sabbath did their debut in three days and how long do you think it took Led Zeppelin to record their first album? Thirty hours. You can't keep up with that?"

BOOK LAUNCH

***The Dirty Beat*, (University of Queensland Press, \$32.95) will be launched at the Turbine Platform, Brisbane Powerhouse next Friday for the Brisbane Writers Festival. Andrew Stafford wrote *Pig City* (UQP).**



Courier Mail
Saturday 8/9/2007
Page: 25
Section: etc
Region: Brisbane Circulation: 324,797
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 420.74 sq.cms.
Published: MTWTFS-

Brief: UNIQ-PRESS
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