



EVENT

BOOKS WITH LUCY CLARK

# Broken chord

Life is full of ups and downs, and none more so than drummer Max's. Dead at almost 50, his ghost looks back at his life and the relationships that shaped it

VENERO Armanno has selected five words that give a concise idea about his latest novel: Rock. Jazz. Sex. Love. Life.

The words grace the cover of *The Dirty Beat* (UQP, \$32.95) in salient summation, but there's a word that's missing, a crucial one that gives this lively book its narrative structure and core meaning, and it is: Death.

*The Dirty Beat* is a story told from beyond the grave. Max the narrator has just dropped dead on a dance floor at the feet of a beautiful young girl only days shy of his 50th birthday.

Twenty kilos overweight and with a micro-balloon keeping an artery

open, the former drummer has fulfilled the rock adage of live hard, die young.

The corpse is not that good-looking, however, cut up, re-stitched, and sealed as it is inside the wisteria-covered coffin in the chapel where those who have known him have come to pay their last respects.

Propped up on one elbow, the ghost of Max surveys the crowd and begins a journey into his past that plumbs the depths of regret and loss, and rides the soaring heights of true

love and hope.

Music frames the whole story, which shuffles between Max's troubled childhood as an orphan, his young adulthood spent in almost-successful bands, his dissolute 20s, his recovering 30s and then his resolute 40s.

As various characters take a pew at his funeral, Max has a series of one-sided conversations with the players of his past, although the biggest players aren't there: his one true love from his 20s, Debbie Canova; and his gentle, loving Italian stepfather, in many ways his salvation, Concetto "Conny" San Filippo, who taught him to drum and imparted his greatest life lesson: "You must shoot straight, or you do not shoot at all."

And so the masterful Armanno constructs the straight-shooting character of Max, unpeeling the layers of the man who died, going back and back and back to the boy

that was, and remained, his core. On the way he treads through themes of masculine behaviour, sex and regret, shattered dreams, more sex, the musician's life, drugs, sex, love — and all of it with a dirty humour and

a toe-tapping beat.

And while music gives the book its scaffolding, its soul comes from

Armanno's gentle exploration of the defining relationships that form a life, and this is where the novel is at its most engaging.

Scenes between Max and his stepfather, between Max and Debbie, between Max and the mysterious Laetitia show the intense emotional moments that can sustain a life, and this is where the book's rich passion lies.

Armanno, author of nine novels and now a lecturer in literature at the University of Queensland, was handed the idea of the novel on a platter at the funeral of the drummer from the band in which he himself played in his youth.

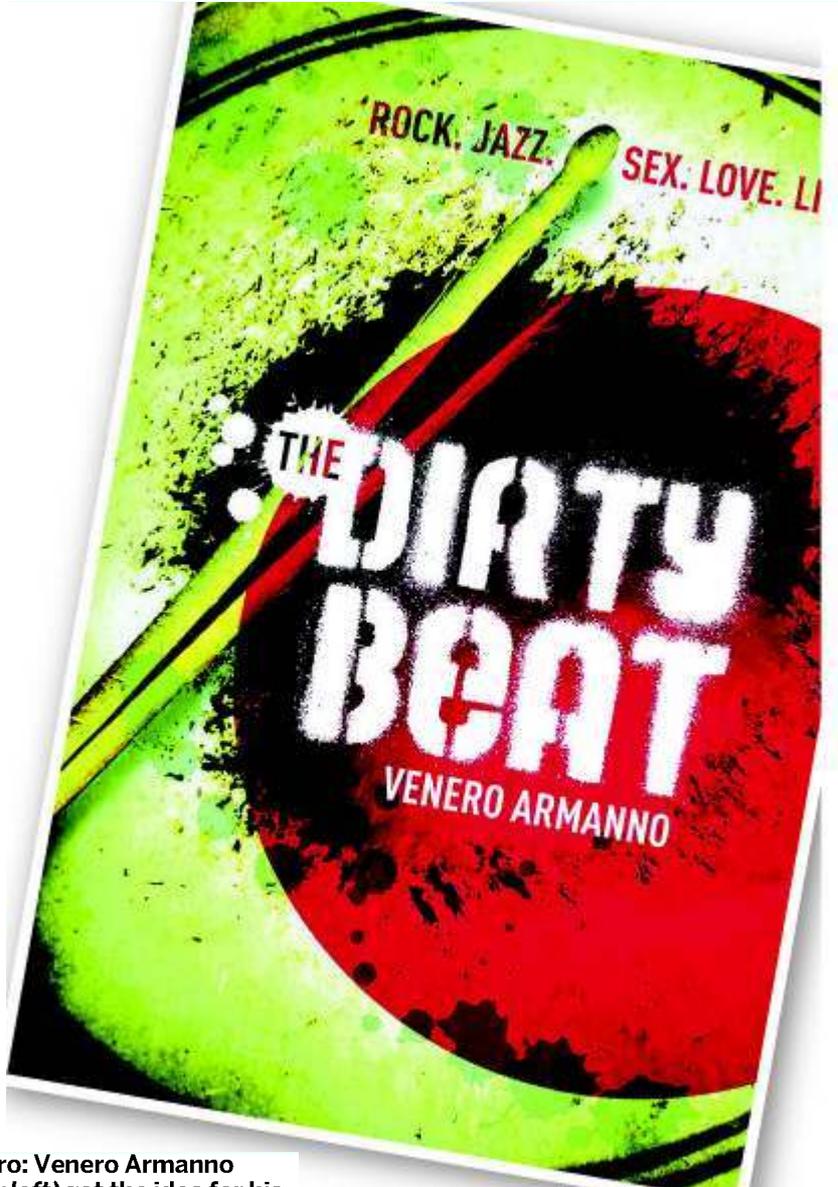
Surrounded by people he hadn't seen in 25 years, he was looking at the coffin of his drummer friend Cyril when: "Bang", he says, "a book".

And the book does go off like a shot, fast and furious and dirty and seeking a target that, in the end, explodes with a surprise, bittersweet ending that leaves you reeling.



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**Maestro: Venero Armanno**  
*(below left)* got the idea for his book from a friend's funeral