



THE FACE

ROSEMARY SORENSEN meets **VENERO ARMANNO** WRITER

ONE of the questions readers often ask writers is, where do you get your ideas? Venero Armanno can answer with unusual precision where he got the idea for his most recent novel, *The Dirty Beat*. It was at the funeral of a friend he hadn't seen for a quarter of a century.

When Armanno was a teenager, living with his Sicilian migrant parents in Brisbane, he dreamed of being a rock musician. He could play a bit of guitar; not particularly well since his parents had resisted his entreaties for music lessons, fearing he would be distracted from his studies. Veny was going to get a real job and be a lawyer or a psychologist.

But, alone in his room, he was listening to Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin and making up songs like the ones he heard.

"At the same time as I was writing my first short stories, I was writing songs, hundreds of them," Armanno says. "They were the usual thing: teenage angst; apocalyptic."

In his second year at the University of Queensland, he decided he needed a band. Putting an ad in the local paper, he trawled for musicians, but found no likely lads until finally Cyril and his mates called him up.

"They were a bit older, already doing gigs, but they had lost their singer."

The band was called Paradox, but don't go looking for any mention of them in the thick and rich annals of Brisbane rock. The paradox was that this band liked to play together but didn't much like performing, at least not until they'd developed their sound. Then, they hoped and even half-believed, the world would hear something miraculous.

Cyril, the drummer, would connect intensely with the songs Armanno had written, turning his simple ideas into full-blooded thumpers that sounded pretty good, despite the fact the singer (according to Veny) wasn't quite up to scratch. When the band broke up after four or five years, unable to sustain the connection as their lives went off in different directions, Armanno felt the loss sharply.

He was remembering that pain of disillusionment 25 years later as he stood before Cyril's coffin. Cyril, a man just a couple of years older than 48-year-old Armanno, had suffered a heart attack, and a phone call out of the blue from one of the other former band members gathered

Paradox together again for the funeral.

"I was looking at Cyril's coffin, thinking what a waste, and the situation was also terribly confronting," Armanno says.

"There were people there I hadn't seen in 25 years, and time is cruel. Some of them I couldn't recognise. I couldn't see the young man or woman they had been. I thought, this is what happens to the rock 'n' roll dream when it goes wrong. But I also thought about Cyril and how he was one of the best drummers I ever saw. He

gave us the kind of beat we needed. He gave us a really great dirty beat."

A dirty beat, he explains, is not crisp, not that sharp, clean rat-a-tat that sounds like bubble-gum popping. A dirty beat is a sleazy sliding sound, "slow and sexy, slinky and grimy". The moment he heard the words in his head, that day at the funeral, Armanno was seized by an idea for a story. Within weeks, he would have the first draft of a new novel.

This is most unusual for the writer. One of his novels, *The Volcano*, took 10 years to complete and none of his other six books had the almost uncannily easy transition to the page that he found with *The Dirty Beat*. This one, he believes, came gushing out of him as though the two words, dirty beat, had opened a dam he'd closed up all those years ago, when he turned away from Paradox.

"It came out so fast because behind it was 25 years of not talking about it, of not wanting to confront the thing," Armanno says.

"We had actually thought we were building something and when it became apparent we

weren't getting anywhere it hurt so much. We had tried hard with that creative thing, and I genuinely loved the guys, but after the end of the band I didn't see them again. I don't think I could face it, so I had to deny it all."

Now the book is written, Armanno sees a parallel between his youthful desires and his eventual career as a novelist. The band, he says, prefigured his writing career: "We liked the



creation of it but weren't all that keen going out to do all the public relations stuff. And so that band was like this extension of me, what I went on to do as a novelist."

The Dirty Beat is not the story of Cyril and the band, although there are parallels. At book's opening a drummer lies in his coffin, dead from a heart attack, and it's through his eyes that we see the lives of a band of young men yearning for the musical dream. It's the feeling of being young and hopeful, young and vital, young and in love, that Armanno wants to capture in his novel. The music, more jazzy than the hard rock that is his own taste, provides more than a plot device; it's part of the tone and

even the rhythms of his story. "Listening to music effects the writing 100 per cent," Armanno says. "Usually, when I'm writing a book, I know the music (that) accompanies it, not in the sense that, if there were a film, this would be the soundtrack. What I mean is that there is a mood in the book that is encompassed in a particular song."

These days Armanno listens to much the same music as he did when he was a lad just starting out on the path that would eventually lead him back to the university, as a teacher. When he leaves his home in a leafy outer suburb of Brisbane to head to the University of Queensland, where he is head of creative writing, his is the loudest car on the road, he says.

He's a little frustrated that, although he has to nurture young writers with firm advice about planning and plot development, his own books tend to write themselves.

"The one I'm writing now, which was originally to be called *God Bless* but now is called *Black Mountain*, I thought it was one kind of story when I started and now it's turning out completely and utterly different," he says. "But it's 100 times better. In a way, the book found its own story and I'm happy just to go along with it. You lead, I'll follow, no problem.

"Sometimes, and this is true for young writers, you just need to let go a bit, let the creativity flow."

The Dirty Beat by Venero Armanno is published by University of Queensland Press.

CLOSE-UP

Big break: Getting my first publishing contract after 14 years of trying, with 10 unpublished (and unpublishable!) novels.

Career highlight: Winning the Queensland Premier's Best Australian Fiction Literary Award for *The Volcano* in 2002.

Career lowlight: "Sure thing" film adaptations of five of my books all falling over at roughly the same time.

Favourite quote: I'm paraphrasing, but V. S. Naipaul said the writer's ideal should be to transform the essence of events or life into fiction.

Guilty pleasure: Vinyl records.



Picture: Patrick Hamilton