

Echoes of inspiration

Union leader Arthur Rorris is also a talented musician and composer. His passion for Greek has lead him to a landmark recording project, writes JODIE DUFFY.

ARTHUR RORRIS SQUIRMS IN HIS SEAT – strange, since the union leader can front a news conference of a dozen journalists shouting questions at him, but here in a Wollongong coffee shop Rorris is uncomfortable talking to one.

The South Coast Labour Council secretary is more at home championing workers' rights than discussing his musical talents – which up until now he's managed to keep largely under wraps.

Few know he composes his own music or that he has made many instruments for himself and others, including several guitars, bouzouki and baglamas.

About to launch a CD titled *Echoes*, Rorris returns to his Greek roots and pays tribute to Greek poet and Nobel Prize finalist Nikiforos Vrettakos.

This year marks the 100th year since Vrettakos's birth and there have been several festivals in Greece to mark the occasion.

The CD has been a three-year labour of love for Rorris who Googled the poet after coming across references to his work.

It was Vrettakos's poem about the 1944 Distomo massacre which planted the seed for the CD. More than 200 villagers, including 48 children, were murdered by German SS police in an onslaught which lasted less than an hour.

"Up until then I had not read much of Vrettakos's work," says Rorris.

"But his poem about Distomo really moved me.

"I found it so powerful that almost unconsciously I started composing a melody in my head for his words. In a couple of hours I'd written the first song."

A memorial plaque in the Distomo Museum recounts the horrors of the massacre: "They [the German soldiers] slaughtered the elderly, men and women, they stabbed and trod over children and babies in their cradles. They beheaded the priest and cut off the breasts of young women. They plundered houses and set fire

to them. It was less than an hour but it will go down in world history as one of the deepest depths of human depravity."

As Vrettakos had died in 1991, Rorris approached the poet's family to ask for copyright privileges. After listening to Rorris's composition about Distomo, they agreed.

Rorris says it's not unusual in Greece for the works of modern poets to be set to music.

"It's something that's always intrigued me, I've always thought it was a great way to popularise poetry.

"Some of the best and most ground-breaking poetry has been made into songs, but what I discovered as I researched Vrettakos was that little had been done of his work."

Rorris sips his cappuccino nervously as he makes another confession about his musical talents.

"I find it very difficult to perform live," he says.



... there are themes or strains of his poetry which to me echo across time ...

"People might find it strange that I can address a million people off the cuff with a speech, but can't play an instrument in front of 10. For me it's never been about performing. It's about composing and playing music.

"Almost all of my public appearances are in relation to a cause that I'm fighting on behalf of others – having to put something personal forward gets me off kilter."

Reading Vrettakos's poetry from the '40s, '50s and '60s, he says he saw similarities in the issues which are relevant today.

"I was very drawn to all of his work," Rorris says of the poet.

"There are poems about justice and social rights issues, there's even a poem he wrote about saving the environment which was ... ahead of its time. And I guess that accounts for the title of the CD, *Echoes*, because what I found is that there are themes or strains of his poetry which to me echo across time and continents."

Vrettakos was an academic and civil servant who completed his first book of poetry in 1929.

In 1949 the Communist party of Greece revoked his membership primarily because in one of his essays he urged reconciliation between the superpowers.

In 1957 he won his second State Prize for Poetry and was later nominated for a Nobel Prize.

"Vrettakos focused on the things that humanity stands for," says Rorris.



South Coast Labor Council secretary Arthur Rorris has composed and arranged a CD inspired by the works of well-known Greek poet Nikiforos Vrettakos. Picture: ROBERT PEET

"The horrors of war, the injustices – these are all things that the people of Greece have endured, but through it all there is a better world."

Rorris played most of the instruments on the CD which was recorded in his Mangerton home.

Others contributed to the project, including Melbourne singer Anthea Sidiropoulos, cellist Kaija Upenieks and guitarist Ann Lehmann.

"This is not a commercial venture – it's totally self-funded," he says. "If you told me three years ago that I'd be releasing a CD, I wouldn't have been able to even visualise it. I think we all have an artistic side to ourselves. We're not defined by our work or our politics although those things do blend in with our creative outlets. I find that in my music I'm able to express myself without compromise and without the usual boundaries or codes. That's the thing about artistic expression, it's not censored or restrained."

Rorris is a self-taught musician, whose father encouraged him to make his own instruments from the age of 14.

"My father said that he would buy me a guitar if I made one myself," he says.

"I think dad wanted to make sure that I was going to stick with it. He gave me the confidence to experiment and made me believe that nothing was beyond reach. One of the satisfying things for me is that the four key instruments on the CD I made myself."

While he never studied music formally at school or had lessons he says most of his teenage years were spent reading music books which he borrowed from the library, and practising the guitar.

The Earth's Poem

Don't kill my water.
Don't kill my trees.
Leave our things alone. Don't burn them.
Let the insects find their flowers.
Don't tear out these divine pages.
Don't kill the earth's poem.
Leave our things alone. Don't burn them.
Let the insects find their flowers.
- NIKIFOROS VRETTAKOS

"I guess my mis-spent youth was probably spent learning musical instruments," says Rorris. "I immersed myself in music. It was very important to me growing up. I've always been very keen on Greek music and even today I prefer to compose music to Greek lyrics rather than English lyrics. I just find it more natural. But learning music for me was a very slow and painful process. It accounted for most of my teenage years.

"Today, music provides balance in my life. It balances out what I do in the union movement, working for social justice and a wide range of community and political issues and it nurtures my artistic side." ■

■ The CD *Echoes* will be launched in Melbourne and Sydney at the end of September and can be bought from www.arthurrorris.com.



Distomo

We did not forget you. Our heart is a broad field of resurrection. We did not leave you unwashed and undressed, full of blood, holes and soil. If you can hear our silence, listen to it brothers and sisters. Forgive us. We did not forget you. You exist within and without us, in the trees that you planted and have grown tall, blossomed and borne fruit on their own, without you. We did not forget you. If you can hear our silence, brothers and sisters, listen to it. Forgive us. We did not forget you.

- NIKIFOROS VRETTAKOS