

‘It was terrifying’: 50 years after *The Godfather*, an Italian stereotype still burns

Rumours of criminal connections shattered the dreams of my hardworking parents in country Victoria.



Mark Brandi with his parents in the late 1970s.

By **Mark Brandi**

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When reflecting on *The Godfather*, the book that made him rich, Mario Puzo famously declared, “I have written three novels. *The Godfather* is not as good as the preceding two; I wrote it to make money.”

Whatever its literary merit, the book sold millions. But its creative and cultural legacy is dwarfed by the 1972 film adaptation, which won three Academy Awards and became one of the most famous movies of all time.

Francis Ford Coppola’s sprawling mafia family saga looms large over modern cinema. Fifty years since its release, it is still considered one of the greatest films ever made. It spawned countless imitators and paved the way for an entire genre of film, literature and television. Would we have *The Sopranos*, *Scarface*, or *Goodfellas* were it not for *The Godfather*? Even our own *Underbelly*? Unlikely.

But its influence goes beyond the creative sphere – the story, and its characters, infused popular culture. Many who have never seen the film can recite fragments of dialogue – a cliché shorthand for underhand deals and corruption.

As a piece of filmmaking, it's a compelling work of art. But its social and cultural legacy is more complex. And for me, it's personal. My parents were part of the post-war wave of immigrants who came to Australia in the 1950s. Unlike most Italian arrivals, who hailed from southern regions such as Sicily and Calabria, they were from Le Marche in central Italy. Like their southern cousins, however, they'd come in search of a better life.

After settling in Melbourne, where my dad worked as a train driver, they impulse-purchased a rundown hotel in country Victoria. My dad had barely set foot in a pub before, and my mum spoke no English, but they were keen for a new adventure. It was extraordinarily hard work, but the business prospered. And while my parents were a novelty to some townsfolk, they were quickly embraced.

“All of our friends were Australian,” my mum says. “They were good to us.”



Mark Brandi's parents with two of his brothers, Jim and Roy, beside the family pub in Stawell in the 1960s.

My parents took on the local ways of life, and were determined that their four sons should do likewise. This began with the simple, Anglicised names we were christened with – Jim, Roy, Gary and Mark. There was not a Fabrizio, Angelo, or Carmelo in sight. We played football and cricket, went fishing and rabbiting, and were raised as Australians (though with minestrone and lasagne for dinner). And despite our fair share of schoolyard scraps, we were mostly accepted.

But some time during the 1980s, something started to shift. A few local police took a deeper interest in the pub, and dark rumours began to circulate. In the era of Robert

Trimbole and the grass castles of Griffith, it didn't take much for such gossip to take root.

Then came a raid from the vice squad. Armed with batons and sniffer dogs, they arrested patrons and hit my dad with a slew of charges. Ultimately, he would be convicted of just one. The crime? Illegal gambling on the premises. The reality? A footy tipping competition.

Almost 40 years later, my mum still carries the scars.

"It was terrifying," she says. "I'll never forget that night as long as I live."

What led to the raid is lost in the mists of time, and it might be specious to suggest racial stereotypes were the sole cause. In all likelihood, it doesn't completely explain what happened, but it might explain part of it.

My dad wasn't Vito Corleone, or even Robert Trimbole, but he was Italian.



Mark Brandi: "Maybe we overcompensated."

Fast forward 40 years, and it's curious to examine the career paths of his four sons. The eldest became a forensic scientist, the second a lawyer and police officer, and the third works in criminal records at Victoria Police. And prior to life as an author, my career was mostly at the Department of Justice.

Why did we all end up working in the legal system? None of us have a clear answer. Maybe we wanted to subvert the stereotype of crooked Italians. Maybe we wanted to show another side to the criminal cliché of films like *The Godfather*. Maybe we overcompensated.

In Australia today, most especially in Melbourne, Italian culture is celebrated. So it's tempting to think we've moved on from the kind of racial profiling my parents might

have endured. But such practices are as persistent as they are pernicious. Just ask the Vietnamese scapegoated for the heroin trade in the 1990s, or African communities in more recent years. It seems most new Australians get their turn.



Mark Brandi's parents in their pub in the 1990s.

But for stereotypes to endure beyond tabloid headlines, they need a grain of truth. And the truth is, organised crime does exist in Australia. And the truth is, some Italians are part of it.

My uncle Frank used to own a cafe in Carlton, and he'd enjoy telling the story of how a certain self-styled Black Prince of Lygon Street sauntered in, demanding protection money. Frank, who was never one for taking a backward step, threw him out.

"He was all bluff," he'd say.

The Italian mafia has persisted and thrived (partly on bluff) for generations. But is there something intrinsic to our culture that lends itself to organised crime? Could there be something criminogenic to our way of life?

There's an Italian phrase that resists easy translation: *fare bella figura*. At a simple level, it means to make a good impression. More deeply, it's an understanding of how you might be seen to be, even if it's not sincere. It's a term sometimes used derisively to describe someone not especially virtuous, but who works assiduously to ensure they are perceived as such.

For Italians, appearances aren't everything (but almost). What's happening behind the scenes? That's less important.

In such an ancient culture, there can be little that's new under the sun. Among many Italians, there's a tacit acceptance that crime and corruption are an inevitable part of life: there will always be good and evil in society, because good and evil exists inside us all.

The Godfather is a high-drama study of this contrast, of light and dark. And at its heart is a deeply cynical portrayal of the American dream. In the opening scene, we see a sun-drenched, riotous garden wedding, with guests gathering for a good time, and to make a good impression (mostly on the titular Godfather, Vito Corleone).

While the bride and groom celebrate, Corleone meets a procession of acolytes in his darkened office, all seeking assistance or favour, mostly to criminal or violent ends.

First he meets an aggrieved undertaker who wants vengeance for the vicious sexual assault of his daughter. Then a pastry chef needs help dodging the immigration system for his prospective son-in-law. Lastly, a fading Hollywood crooner (reportedly based on Frank Sinatra) seeks Vito's intervention to win a prized film role. Cue the infamous horse head in the bed.

It's highly theatrical, completely melodramatic, and utterly riveting. But the message is clear – to get what you want in America, you gotta break the rules. But that doesn't mean you should get caught doing it.

At the film's climax, we see Vito's successor, Michael, at the christening of his god-daughter. As he gently cradles the innocent child and renounces Satan and all his works, we witness a series of violent murders he has ordered.

Such stark contrasts, and the cool ease with which these Italians carry them off, make for striking cinema. Similar scenes appear in sequels to *The Godfather*, and in films that followed. Darkness is almost always tempered with beauty.

One of my favourite moments is from 1990's *Goodfellas*, where gangland hoodlum Henry Hill takes his new girlfriend to the bustling Copacabana Club. Shot in one extraordinary, breathless take by Martin Scorsese, a life of crime has rarely looked so cool.

Is it coincidence that the best mafia films are made by Italians such as Scorsese and Coppola? Unlikely. Indeed, Paramount Pictures required *The Godfather* to be made by Italians, and with Italians starring, after the box-office failure of previous gangster films.

But while Hollywood filmmakers might have glamourised organised crime, they didn't create its allure. The deepest attraction lies in its power, and the wealth it can create.

Still, there's a big downside.

In my previous working life, I remember visiting the maximum security Acacia Unit at Barwon Prison, where a number of Melbourne's gangland figures were being held under 23-hour lockdown. One notorious hitman was crudely shackled by guards as I toured his tiny cell. Within those four walls, a life of crime has rarely looked so unappealing.

But the reality of modern organised crime isn't the knuckleheads who end up in jail. Instead, it's the seemingly respected figures who seek power and influence with threats and favours. It's the white collar crooks laundering money through dodgy accountants and casinos. It's the corrupt businessmen who find the dizzying profits of the drug trade just too attractive to ignore.

Seen today, *The Godfather* might not offer an accurate reflection of contemporary Italian communities, or even those past. But it does portray an enduring truth about organised crime. To paraphrase Tony Montana in *Scarface*, "You gotta make the money first. Then when you get the money, you get the power." Mario Puzo couldn't have said it better.

But there's one other reason the film endures – and that's because Italians embraced it, too. Because while it exaggerates dark corners of our history and culture, it manages to look beautiful while doing it.

Fifty years since its release, *The Godfather* is mostly a triumph of style over substance. But few Italians would consider that a criticism.