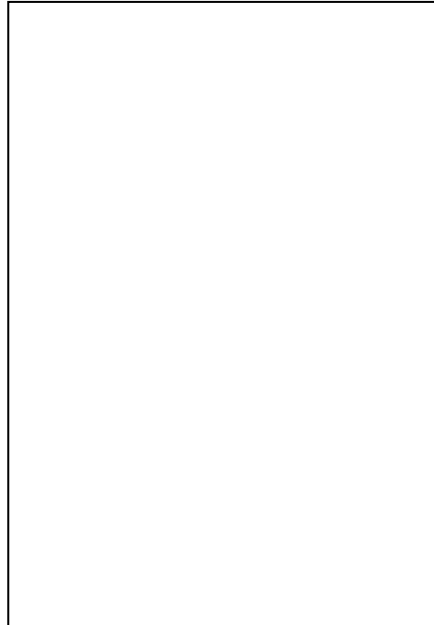


## LES GOCK

### HUSH - 1972-1977



Billed as Australia's answer to Slade and T-Rex, Hush were the undisputed kings of Antipodean 1970s glam rock. These long-haired, satin-clad boys from Sydney's Seven Hills tapped into the age of high theatre with exotic stage sets and outrageous costumes that stood out even in the decade that invented over-the-top kitsch.

Tailor-made for the age of *Countdown* and colour TV, Hush's arresting stage presence was feted by audiences all over the country – by guys who wanted to be them, and girls who wanted to be with them.

They ran the gamut from amateur band who placed in Hoadley's 1972 *National Battle of the Sounds* to supporting act on Status Quo's Australian tour in 1973, their heavy, driving rock sound simultaneously familiar and fresh, and more than a match for their British counterparts.

But nothing stays the same forever .....

## ROARING HUSH

‘It wasn’t considered a *smart* career move,’ is how ex-Hush guitarist Les Gock describes his family’s reaction when he threw in university to follow a career in rock music. ‘But I think that now – after thirty-one years in the business – they consider it a real job.’

An ‘unreal’ job is what we’d have called it during the dizzying ‘70s, when Hush strode the stage in their satin flares, bodyshirts and stratospheric platform shoes. But despite their notoriety, the Hush years comprise only a few of those on Les’s impressive CV; his other credits include writing soundtracks (*Puberty Blues; Water Rats*) and producing for Scandal’Us, the pop group spawned by (Australian) *Popstars*; not to mention twenty-six years at the helm of Song Zu, the phenomenally successful sound design company he founded in 1977.

Sound design? Read ‘advertising’ – something Les has been involved with, on and off, for most of his working life. His part-time job at an advertising agency became one of the twin casualties of his move to rock superstardom – his Law degree being the other. But while Law was discarded forever, Les was drawn back to advertising on leaving Hush, when he set up Song Zu on the strength of the success of a jingle – his first – that he’d written for Crystal Cylinders.

‘The effect of music is something that’s difficult to describe, but it’s evident that different kinds of music influence people in a profound way,’ Les explains.

‘Advertising is about understanding how music and sound influence people emotionally, which is valuable for helping brands to get their message across. If it’s applied properly, music is very effective in that way; there’s a saying: *music starts where the words stop*. And that’s absolutely right.’

Sound design was a natural extension of professional rock music, growing from the hands-on experience in production Les gained while working on Hush’s albums. ‘When you get involved with record production and learn how to make music sound good, the next step is producing music for third parties, be that advertisements, TV shows, films, or for an artist other than yourself,’ he says.

‘After years of working in the studios with the band I became aware of other careers within the music profession that I would never have known about if I hadn’t been working in that environment. I saw many career opportunities there that I couldn’t have aspired to while I was at school, because I didn’t know they existed.’

This came as a revelation to the young Les, who’d always seen his musical career as a short-term thing. ‘I thought I might last at it for three months, or if the band achieved success, maybe five years,’ he says. ‘I always thought Hush would have a use-by date, though I wasn’t sure what that use-by date was. So I needed a back-up plan, and that was to move from playing in the band to producing music for commercials. I knew nothing about what I was getting into, so I just made it up as I went along. It was the right move for me – after all, I had nothing to lose.’

That move from centre stage proves difficult for some, often creating an unbridgeable void in their lives. Les has mixed feelings about it: 'I sometimes miss being on stage; it's certainly something special, as the interaction between the audience and a performer - what we otherwise call 'stardom' - is psychologically very profound, and really is something to experience.'

'Celebrity can be difficult if you're not prepared for it - not so much dealing with it at the time, because it's a fantastic experience - but the fear of it all stopping can become destructive. A lot of artists end up with drug problems and so on from the fear that this [stardom] will eventually stop.'

Given he only ever saw music as a short-term career, and took out insurance in the form of a back-up plan, it comes as no surprise to learn that Les was never plagued by these fears. 'I'm too rational not to have thought it all through,' he says. 'and I look back at that time with a lot of fondness and nostalgia. It was a very special time - something that doesn't happen to many people - and a fantastic experience, that helped build a platform for me to develop a career in something I really love. I know I'm privileged as far as that's concerned, because not everyone ends up working in an occupation they love.'

So he's never regretted not becoming a lawyer? 'Not really, from most of the lawyers I've seen,' laughs Les. 'I only regret dropping out of uni because there were so many things I wanted to learn; I'm interested in useless information, and would have liked to have been a palaeontologist, or an astronomer, or an archaeologist, or something like that. Instead I chose a useless career in music.'

Not words you might expect from a rock musician, who - rightly or wrongly - aren't usually associated with things academic. 'Rock music was a very working class-type profession in the early 1970s,' Les explains. 'Very few musicians were tertiary educated in those days, and there was a perception that they couldn't get any other job. And there was no expectation you'd earn anything other than the basic wage, if that; more than likely you'd earn nothing. But people don't do things only for money, and if you love something enough, you'll have a go at it.'

'I've always been affected by music, and because I loved it so much, I've been driven by it', says Les. 'And although I've had some level of success [in my career], I don't consider myself a great musician; because I know of some amazing musicians, and wouldn't put myself in their category. Success and talent often overlap, but not always.'

'The business itself has changed dramatically over the time I've been involved with it. Everything's so much more professional now; and perhaps I'm speaking too much from the past, but that professionalism has taken some of the fun and soul out of the music. One of the things I loved most about the music of the 1960s and '70s was the unpredictability of performing,' he reflects. 'In the last twenty years there has been a clear move towards creating music artificially; and whilst it's a legitimate way of producing music - and something I've been doing myself with sound design - it's quite a different approach from having four or five people playing separate instruments coming together to unite a sound. When that collaboration works, the collective sound that's created is far more powerful than any individual sound can be.'

‘The human chemistry that’s involved [with live performances] is fascinating – when it all works, everyone within the space of the performance feels the same thing. And with the advent of mass media, people anywhere can feel the same thing, even if they’re watching from another country.’

‘Another thing you get with live performances is that the music can only be performed that way once – even if you try to play the same notes, it can never quite be repeated,’ says Les. ‘The microscopic bits of human error are what moves people, and what they listen to music for; without that humanity, you can’t really get that same soul out of the music.’

He pauses, the set of his face – so seemingly aloof in the Hush days – now clearly indicative of an insightful and reflective man.

‘Most people who enter this industry do so because they have a passion for music. Nobody does music grudgingly; if you love music and you love playing it, you become passionate about it.’

‘Therefore, no-one chooses not to stay in the music industry; if it were possible, everyone would stay. But to stay doesn’t necessarily mean you keep doing the same thing you did when you started,’ says Les. ‘It’s only really The Rolling Stones who’ve had a four-decade career playing on stage; so if you’ve achieved success in a performance sense and want to stay [in the industry], you need to look at what you’ll have to do to make that happen. But if you insist on remaining a performer when perhaps your market has gone, it’ll be very difficult - not only financially, but psychologically.’

‘If you decide music is going to be your life, then you have to look at your talents and skills, and utilise them in the best way you can so you can make a living out of what you love.’

Having sold his interests in Song Zu in 2003 to pursue other ventures - in sound design again, at Sydney’s Sound Thinking – Les is still making a living out of what he loves, continuing to explore how sound can be used for product promotion. ‘It’s like being a musical architect,’ he explains, ‘where a client gives you a brief and it’s your job to try to come up with a design that meets their expectations. And fortunately, most people want you to put your own inspiration in there as well.’

‘Music talks to people’s souls,’ he says. ‘And being able to connect to people’s souls through music is a wonderful thing to experience.’

In view of his obvious passion for music, it comes as a surprise to learn that Les and his guitar had, until recently, been amicably separated. ‘I hadn’t really played since I left the band twenty-seven years ago,’ he reflects, ‘and only recently picked up the guitar again and started playing with friends. I’ve found it really enjoyable - it’s so much more fun [playing] without business pressures, and I’d forgotten just how much I missed it. I’m not expecting a second career, but you never know .....’