

Hush, there's an old rocker on the stage

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"In my dreams I wanted to be Eric Clapton or Jimi Hendrix" ... Les Gock outside the Belvoir Theatre last week. *Photo: Domino Postiglione*

Pursuing the dream of being a guitarist was difficult for a child of Chinese immigrants in the '70s, writes Adam Fulton.

Growing up in 1960s Australia, at least two obstacles stood between Les Gock and his dream of being a guitar star - one in his home, the other in the cultural landscape outside it.

Gock was the Australian-born son of Chinese immigrants, and his parents expected him to become a doctor. Besides, watching television shows such as *Bandstand* he saw Asians were not part of the emerging rock scene.

How he negotiated the barriers to achieve fame in the 1970s glam-rock chart-toppers *Hush* is at the heart of the personal story Gock is telling in his theatrical debut as part of a two-week program at Belvoir downstairs theatre, *COOLie - Asian Australian Performance Event*, reflecting the experiences of Asian Australians.



Les Gock, second from left, with Hush.

"When I was growing up, what I really wanted to do was to be a blues guitarist," Gock says during a break in rehearsals. "The way I start the show is really to say that they say you have to be black to play the blues. And white men don't know the blues. So where does that leave a Chinaman?"

"Because I did study hard, I got a scholarship to uni so I chose law ... But in my dreams I wanted to be Eric Clapton or Jimi Hendrix ... The story is: how did I get from where I was to there?"

Don't expect a return to the colourful outfits of his '70s heyday, though. At 57, Gock is all uber-cool black in a tight T-shirt, fine denim and hi-top Converse sneakers, stylish down to his designer black spectacles and TAG Heuer watch. But the music, climaxing in Hush's best-known hit, *Boney Maroney*, gets a blast.

"I talk, but I [also] talk with the guitar. There's no point me standing on stage without a guitar. And I'm loud. Very loud."

COOLie, associated with the city's Chinese New Year Festival, comprises three shows. In *Stories East & West*, returning after a well-received one-off staging last year, six people relate their histories with the aid of pictures in a project directed by the broadcaster Annette Shun Wah and the photographer and storyteller William Yang.

In Yang's latest show, *Meeting in Moree*, he and the Aboriginal elder Noeline Briggs-Smith, awarded an OAM on Australia Day, tell of their lives, with projections of photographs.

In *About Face* - the lighter side of the program - Gock and about 10 performers from the singer Lena Cruz to the Suara Indonesia Dance Group address the meaning of "face" in a sort of variety show with song, dance and comedy.

COOLie is, in title alone, provocative for some in using a sometimes loaded label given to Asian labourers in early Australia. "I don't mind that," says Shun Wah, who heads the Performance 4 organisation presenting it. Beyond referring to the diversity of Asia, she says, "I wanted to link back to the long history of the Asian contribution to the Australian story".

In *Stories East & West*, the stories are told in what Yang calls "my method".

"It's just a way that I evolved talking through the stories - because it has to be short. My method, really, is brevity ... You can't ramble on."

The method sharpens the stories rooted in China, Vietnam, India and Malaysia. "There's something about the real person standing on stage telling their real story from their own mouth, which, however halting or imperfect, is very powerful."

Yang has a separate exhibition of his own photos at Stills Gallery in Paddington from tomorrow to February 26.

Gock had reservations about joining *About Face*.

"I've played on lots of stages ... I can do that," he says he told Shun Wah. "But to play on a small theatrical stage, I said: 'That's not what I do' ... I didn't want to pretend that I was some sort of theatrical performer. "But when she explained it and when we started working on it, I could see how it would work and how the story fits in, so I thought, Great. I'm out of my comfort zone. Let's do it."

Rehearsing in Surry Hills, Gock stands at a microphone, guitar in hand, and tells his story in a monologue while weaving in riffs from Hendrix to Led Zeppelin. He still has the thick hair to shake coolly as he slips easily into his best guitar-hero postures, swinging arm, kicking leg, dropping to his knees.

His strikingly fit appearance may have to do with his steady path after Hush, which disbanded in 1977. He went into business making music for advertising, screen, all sorts. Today, married with two adult children, the focus is on "audio branding". He is enjoying the brief return to his glamour days. "It's great. I mean it's nostalgic - it's fun. When you actually look at it, it's kind of cute. And it's a back story which not a lot of people know."

***COOLie - Asian Australian Performance Event* is at Belvoir's downstairs theatre from today until February 13.**