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# Ben was determined to escape South Bend

BY SIMON YAFFE

**C**OMEDIAN and musician Ben Lerman could not wait to leave South Bend, Indiana.

The 34-year-old, who is bringing his show *Ben Lerman: Size Matters* to the Edinburgh Festival next month, told the *Jewish Telegraph*: "Growing up gay in an Orthodox family in a small American town — there was no way I could win."

The youngest of six children, he moved to New York City to read television production and broadcasting at Brooklyn College — and was glad to leave suburbia behind.

Ben had told his parents he was gay when he was 17, while they were accompanying him to an airport to see him off to Belgium, where he was to be an exchange student.

He recalled: "I was too scared to come out before then. I did not want to admit it. I thought God would hate me."

"When my parents dropped me off at the airport, I just said, 'I am gay and I will see you in a year'. My dad cried a bit. I had never seen him do that before."

After coming out, Ben, of Russian and Polish descent, was approached by his rabbi uncle.



MUSICAL: Ben Lerman

He recalled: "He told me being homosexual was one of the greatest sins."

"He said there was a punishment, but did not make clear what it was — maybe death by stoning or starvation."

"I do respect people's beliefs and religion can be a good thing, but telling a teenager he is going to face a severe punishment for being gay is not a good way of going about things."

After leaving college, he worked as a waiter before landing a job as an editor on lads' mag *Maxim's* website, in New York City.

He worked there for a couple of years before being made redundant and later met musician Clint Asay, with whom he formed a band called The Isotoners, in 2003.

"We were New York City's only gay pop-rock band," Ben laughed.

He said: "It all started out with a keyboard, a four-track recorder and a bottle of vodka at Clint's place."

"I taught myself how to play bass guitar, not very well, but enough to perform live in a band."

"We earned a cult following, but we split because Clint wanted to take his music seriously — and The Isotoners were more about comedy."

Ben's older brother, Danny Lerman, is a well-known saxophonist in America.

Ben had bought a ukulele while at college, after listening to alternative American band The Magnetic Fields.

"It sounded like such a beautiful instrument," he recalled.

"When the band finished I could have learned another instrument, but I am lazy so I went back to the ukulele."

He started his solo comedy act, which has been described by *Time Out New York* as 'sick and brilliant'.

Ben said: "That is exactly what I am striving for. It is a big compliment."

"I would describe my show as stupid and smart. There is

a lot of clever word play and I talk and sing about taboo subjects. Every song is storytelling.

"The act has dirty elements to it, too."

Despite his show being adult-only, his parents have seen him perform.

"They have always been very supportive of me and no matter what I do, they keep on loving me," he added.

Ben said he is not observant anymore, but still goes home to Indiana to celebrate the high holy days.

He explained: "I did go through a couple of years where I was resentful towards Judaism."

"Religious Jews that I knew, while respectful of me, they were not accepting, and that was not enough."

Ben is looking forward to his upcoming Edinburgh shows.

He said: "I accept that I am going to be a small pebble in the ocean because the festival is so huge."

"I have been to the UK a couple of times before. The first when I was 18 and I threw up in a nightclub or two."

"But I am so excited and I am looking forward to watching other peoples' shows too."

**■ Ben Lerman's *Size Matters* is on at the Laughing Horse at Café Renroc (7.30pm) from August 6 to 30 (not August 12, 24 or 26).**



ROCK ON: The Dolly Rockers entertain at Leeds' Jewish youth centre, The Zone, last October

## Pop wannabes Dolly Rockers going for gold

THE Dolly Rockers take centre stage at Party In The Park in Leeds on Sunday, July 26.

The trio, which includes former Leeds Brodetsky Primary School pupil Sophie King, is also performing at Sheffield Leadmill on Thursday August 27 and Sheffield University on Friday September 25.

Leeds-born Sophie, Brooke Challinor and Lucie Kay, all 20, have hit the headlines in recent months, most notably on BBC Radio 1, as they bid to build a pop career.

Debut tongue-in-cheek download only single *Je Suis Un Dolly* gained critical acclaim and a first full single release, *Gold Digger*, is scheduled for August 31 with Parlophone records.

The wannabe chart stars first hit the headlines in 2006 when they missed out on reaching the final stages of TV show *The X Factor*.

But that has not stopped the girl band, who entertained Leeds' Jewish youth centre members last October, trying to forge a career in the industry.

Sophie is the daughter of Karen Williams and David King.

A former pupil of Allerton High School, Sophie, moved to London in 2002 where she attended the Susi Earnshaw Theatre School.

## 1907 exhibition to open in Tel Aviv

THE Tel Aviv Museum of Art has reconstructed an 'Exhibition of Jewish Artists', which opened in Berlin in 1907.

The original show featured more than 200 works of painting and sculpture, along with Judaica objects.

Among the noted artists represented in the exhibition were Jozef Israëls, Lesser Ury, Camille Pissarro, Maurycy Gottlieb and Samuel Hirszenberg.

A café area in the Tel Aviv exhibition provides an insight into the period with letters from the artists to the 1907 exhibition committee, local press reviews and even satirical jokes and antisemitic broadsheets of the period.

The exhibition will run until the end of September.

## Star names back in class

THE annual Tel Aviv-Los Angeles Master Class for film professionals takes place next week.

This year's participants in Tel Aviv will be Darren Star (creator of *Sex and the City*), Nina Tassler (president of CBS Entertainment), Gail Berman (former president of Fox Television, Viacom Paramount Pictures and producer of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), Bill Masters (a writer whose credits include *Seinfeld*), Jerry Levine (director who worked on *Monk*), Sarah Treem (head writer of HBO's *In Treatment*) and talent manager Danny Sussman.

## Cast of 400 in Aida

MORE than 400 artists from La Scala, Milan, will head to Tel Aviv for six performances of Verdi's *Aida*, under chief conductor Daniel Barenboim.

The special tour is dedicated to Tel Aviv's 100th anniversary celebrations.

The visiting artists will also perform Verdi's *Requiem* in an open-air concert at Ganei Yehoshua, followed by a reception.

## Stones roll into Israel

THE Rolling Stones are set to perform in Israel — although a date and venue are yet to be confirmed. Meanwhile, Polish death metal band Behemoth will perform at Tel Aviv's Barby club on August 28. It will be the group's third visit to Israel.

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# Ad poster withdrawn after 440 complaints

ANGER: The poster which provoked so many complaints

## A POSTER promoting Israel as a tourist destination has been banned in the UK.

The Advertising Standards Authority ruled that the poster from the Israel Tourist Office was "misleading" and "must not appear again in its current form".

The poster showed a map of Israel that only separated the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights with a faint line, prompting more than 440 complaints to the ASA, including from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Jews for Justice for Palestine.

Melissa Ramsden, Israel Government Tourist Office spokesman, said: "We would not have included the map on the poster if we thought it was going to offend."

"We probably won't include a map of Israel in our future campaigns."

The ASA said in its adjudication: "The ad implied that all of the areas featured on the map were part of the state of Israel."

"We understood that the borders and status of the occupied territories of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights were the subject of much international dispute."

"Because we considered that the ad implied that those territories were part of the state of Israel, we concluded that the ad was misleading."

Prof Eric Moonman, Zionist Federation president, was critical of the campaign.

He said: "There is a great responsibility on

advertisers to always check for accuracy.

"If there is any doubt about something, especially political doubt, then they shouldn't run the campaign."

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