



**H**is short, casually parted hair, those sincere, hazel green eyes, a radiant and flawless complexion, and that picture perfect smile revealing an enviable set of pearly whites, all suggest anything but a talented and internationally acclaimed musician. But that's exactly what you have in Ira Heller, a gifted singer-songwriter who has inexplicably managed, through his moving lyrics and uncanny vocal ability, to transcend the cultural gap between the United States and Israel. His ability to "strike a chord" with both audiences manifests itself not only in the impressive commercial success he enjoys, but also in packed concert halls filled with spellbound fans and admirers. Though his roguish good looks suggest a man in his early to mid-30s, Ira, beloved musician and performer, will celebrate his 42nd birthday this year.

# IRA HELLER

## *'Striking A Chord'*

By: David Moser & Aliza Davidovit

But Ira's journey in the musical realm was not by any means a direct, or facile, one. He readily admits that, "Things are sent your way to push you to grow into areas which are a little more difficult for you. Ultimately, one has to realize that it's not what happens that is the key, but how one responds." His fervent belief in fate as a force that guides, rather than dictates the paths we choose as humans has provided Ira with a meaningful and happy life. "I was just born with a tremendous amount of faith; I've always had it," admits the artist. That same faith, inextricably bound to

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his worldly outlook, has instilled in him an unconquerable sense of security; his nonsense nature allows him to pursue those endeavors by which he is compelled.

Ira, true to character, immersed himself in music with the vigor and decisiveness of a man certain of the fate for which he was opting. Ira explains, "People tend to become comfortable with their level of personal growth, until they reach a certain realization: life is ever evolving-and growth must always continue. Somewhere along the line, we realize that it's God's truths that run the universe, and they're anything but obvious."

It comes as little surprise, then, that having already completed his Masters in psychology, and on the brink of receiving a doctoral degree in the same field from Yeshiva University's prestigious Ferkauf School, Ira felt perfectly at ease when presented with the opportunity to pursue what had always been an avid interest in music. He had supported himself as a band musician during his doctoral studies, but had never considered singing or performing full time. He only made the switch permanent, however, following several years of study.

After completing his first two years of undergraduate study as a pre-law major, Ira went to Israel to study Torah, where he remained for the next two years. He decided to venture back to school after his stay abroad, eager to begin study as a psychology major. When asked if he had chosen the field randomly, Ira replied: "I always liked to feel that I could do something to help and I guess I always felt I had a certain intuitive feel for people. I really thought that was a good profession for me because there's nothing really more 'people oriented' than psychology."

Eventually, however, Heller came to the realization that psychology, similar to law, was not the appropriate field for him. "In studying psychology, I found that many of the key figures in the development of the science were hostile to religion. For many in the field, psychology replaced the need for a belief in God, and regarded believers as people who needed a crutch. Unfortunately, this has done much to create the atmosphere in the field today, which sees belief in God and practice of religion as a weakness and limitation, rather than a strength and a liberator. Clearly, there are many good religious psychologists who counter this trend, and are doing excellent work. For me, I found that music provided all those opportunities for meaningful contact with people, but at the same time, made me much more free to be myself."

After several years of intensive study in clinical psychology, it gradually became clear that Ira would veer into the world of music, and that road has certainly made all the difference.

Accordingly, Ira refocused his attention on his musical education, and intensified his vocal training and resumed his instrumental studies. He was inundated with accolades upon release of his debut album in 1989, "L'Maan Yazamercha," a collaboration with popular composer/arranger Moshe Laufer. Each subsequent album

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has been met with the same critical praise as the first, yet this accomplishment is not the source of Ira's pride as a musician and performer. The most important part of his musical career, the part he considers the measure of any musician's ability, is the connection forged between performer and audience. He earnestly believes that "when you're with an audience, that audience has a unique character that is not unlike an individual person. If you see the audience as just a faceless mask or a group of unconnected individuals, you don't have a good chance of really forming a good audience performer dynamic."

It is clear that Ira uses his knowledge of people, gained through study, clinical counseling, and performing live, to establish and nourish the performer-audience bond so necessary for a successful concert experience. "You can't lose the line of communication, and if you do, any good performer can tell you that they have a tough time getting it back," he muses.

Ira draws pleasure from his laborious effort to establish, and diligence to maintain, a constant flow of energy from the stage to the crowd. Once he cut his first album, and was firm on his decision to pursue music full time, he said to himself, "If I'm going to succeed in the music business, I'm going to give it all my heart. So I burned my bridges, and haven't looked back since."

Ira illustrates his point about the performer-audience relationship with a vivid memory of a performance in a Catskills Hotel. He was featured on the bill with another performer, who was not pleased at being asked to be the opening act. Though he was an experienced performer, he allowed his mood to influence his performance, and his act fell flat. When he returned backstage, I asked him how it went, and he replied 'They're dead' (the audience). When I went out in front of the same audience, within five minutes it was magic. So I developed a philosophy: There aren't lousy audiences, only lousy entertainers. Never ask if you have a 'good audience,' but rather, are you reading them properly."

No song better exemplifies Ira's desire to relate to the audience than his enchanting song "My Little One," inspired by his daughter Tehila, who was born with numerous medical challenges. Ira asserts, "With this song, I had the opportunity to take a difficult personal experience and communicate a universal message, universal enough that everyone could personally relate." Six thousand people watched as Ira introduced "My Little One" for the first time, seated at a Steinway piano in the Madison Square Garden Theater with a 40 piece orchestra behind him. According to many, including premier DJ Nachum Segal of Jewish Radio, this was among the most memorable and emotional moments in Jewish Music history.

Ira has given us many other unforgettable concerts and performances as well, including several guest appearances at Shea Stadium in Queens as Anthem singer for the New York Mets. Just last August the Mets invited Ira to be the feature performer at "Jewish Heritage Day at Shea." He muses, "This was the next best thing to playing for the Mets, something I always dreamed about as a kid."

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Music has always been a large part of Ira's life, especially as a child and later as an adolescent. In a sense, his family planted the seed that would later blossom into an incredibly fulfilling career. Ira comments that, "Singing was in my family. My father has a beautiful baritone, and could have sung professionally. We liked to sing in the house, particularly around the Shabbos table. Most of the singing I did as a young person was in the synagogue, though I listened to all kinds of music, religious and secular. My first teacher was my father, who taught me how to lead the religious services. After he taught me everything he knew, he sent me off to study with the professionals."

It comes as little shock, then, that family has remained an integral part of Ira's life. Ira is a "middle child" of three boys. He is close to both of his brothers, and describes his family as a "tightly knit bunch." He boasts of a special relationship with his parents, and asserts that having the opportunity to share his success in the music business with them has been among its sweetest rewards. Ira admits that at times that his career choice has made them a bit nervous, but that never dampened their support, and certainly not their enthusiasm. Now being a parent of four himself, Ira understands their apprehensions and can sense their point of view. "Most importantly," Ira adds with an amicable grin, "I now know what they had to endure to raise their children, and whatever joy I can bring them is never enough."

The cyclical nature of life is reflected in Ira's music. Referring to his song "Shema Yisrael," Ira says "When a child is born, and a father takes him into his arms for the first time, he whispers the "Shema Yisrael" into his ear. This is the Jewish introduction to the world, that our God is one." As time goes on, the roles begin to reverse, and the child becomes the caretaker of the parent. Eventually, everything flips around, and it is the child that is whispering into the parent's ear, as he prepares to leave the world. This is the Jewish cycle of life that has kept our traditions alive for thousands of years."

Ira has amassed quite a resume in his 17 years in the music business. Apart from his hundreds of concerts that he's performed around the world, and his six albums, he is also a professional Cantor. For seven years, he was a full time Cantor at a prestigious congregation in Manhattan, and since 1995, has been officiating for the High Holidays at the Young Israel of Scarsdale. When asked what he wanted his epitaph to read, Ira replied without missing a beat: "That I lived my life as a credit to God's name - nothing more, nothing less."

(For more information about Ira, please visit his website at [www.iraheller.com](http://www.iraheller.com))

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