

# Fast-tracked to comedy stardom

After only a year in Britain Kiwi expat Ben Hurley's Midas touch continues — he's just landed a seven-part sitcom with Radio 4. By **Tom Cardy**

**T**HERE'S something funny going on in Wellington and increasingly the world is taking notice.

First, Wellington comedy duo Jemaine Clement and Bret McKenzie of *Flight of the Conchords* made a comedy series with BBC's Radio 4. The high profile show — which included guest appearances by Neil Finn — helped them land a sitcom with American cable television giant HBO, which airs in the United States next month. Wellington director Taika Waititi — whose comedy feature *Eagle vs Shark* is released later this year — is directing and writing a few episodes, along with Wellington playwright Duncan Sarkies.

Now comes news that fellow Wellington comedian Ben Hurley has also landed a seven-part sitcom with Radio 4. Hurley, who performs in Wellington next week as part of the New Zealand International Comedy Festival, only moved to Britain last year to crack the country's notoriously competitive comedy circuit.

Like *Flight of the Conchords*, Hurley will star as a New Zealander in the Radio 4 sitcom to be recorded when he returns to Britain. The series will co-star British comedian and acknowledged Hurley mentor Andy Parsons, who has written for the likes of *Spitting Image* and *Alas Smith and Jones*.

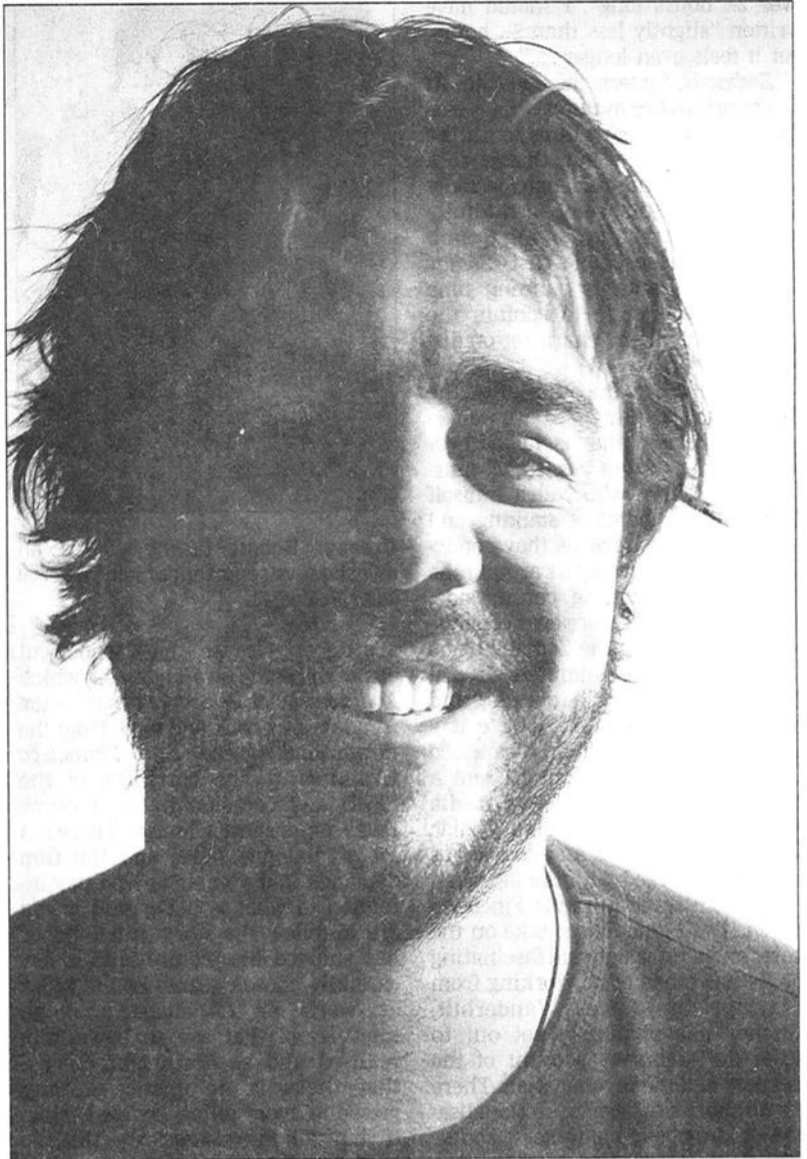
In Britain Hurley went from having to commute to seaside town Bournemouth for a weekly gig to seven-nights-a-week stints at big name comedy clubs including Jongleurs and the Comedy Store and appeared on *Comedy Store TV*. He also quickly learned that British audiences can be more volatile than their Kiwi equivalents.

It's an impressive feat for Hurley, 27, who cut his comedy teeth in Wellington after moving from Hawera to study political science at Victoria University. He is also that rare breed of Kiwi standup comedian — one that can make a living making people laugh. "I've never really had another job," he proudly states.

"I did a little weekend work on [radio station] More FM, but I've been really lucky. I've just worked at it and a couple of nice windfalls around the way."

In Wellington, Hurley spent six years not only developing his own craft, but helped establish the city's comedy scene which had previously lagged behind Auckland which has comedy venue The Classic.

**I**N 2002 with comedian Sully O'Sullivan Hurley set up a weekly comedy night at Wellington's Indigo, now the San Francisco Bath House. "We ran it for four years and it was very successful. When I started running it I was very new. I



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had only done five or six gigs and after about a year of running it I became one of the regular hosts. In the last two years I was basically the only host, improving my skills as an improviser and an MC. I could go on stage every week with new stuff as I could make it up on the spot. When you are very new you can't really do that. It was a huge learning curve.

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Hurley has always been a fast learner. He landed a spot on television show *Pulp Comedy* in 2001 after having only performed about half a dozen times. He went on to win almost every Kiwi comedy award including best new face award in 2001 on *Pulp Comedy* and the prestigious Billy T Award in 2004 — which helped fund Hurley's performances at the Edinburgh fringe festival and land him a British agent.

Hurley estimates he's done about 2500 performances. His worst? "A corporate gig at a Wainuiomata rugby league club. There were 300 people and they had all been drinking and they were playing [Australian] movie

*Bad Boy Bubby* on the big screen."

*Bad Boy Bubby* includes a bizarre scene where a cat is completely encased in cling film. "The stage was underneath the big screen and I said to the organiser 'You can't have that playing while we are trying to do our act.' He went 'Look, I tell you mate — they love that film here. If you turn that off there'll be a riot.' I managed to convince him to turn the sound off. But I was trying to do my jokes while there was a cat being wrapped in Glad Wrap above my head."

And the best? "Victoria University orientation — the first time I did it. I felt untouchable. There were more people than I've ever played to and it was one of the best I've ever done."

Hurley credits other Kiwi comedians, including Brendhan Lovegrove and Rhys Darby, as well as meeting foreign comedians, as fast tracking him into the British comedy circuit. As a consequence he's brought Canadian JJ Whitehead and British-based Kiwi Al Pitcher back with him for the festival show *Hurley's Choice International*.

"I work with some of the best comics in the world and, apart from loving being a comedian, I love comedy and love watching great comics. I'm hoping to do this every year."

As to Hurley's own segment, expect some subtle changes to the Hurley of old. Early in his career he described his comedy as essentially observational. He avoided satire or "making statements".

"I think I've moved on a bit. I certainly still do a lot of stuff that people relate to. But I talk a lot more about relationships and politics these days. I think it's just growing up a little bit — a bit more life experience."

■ *Hurley's Choice International*, next Wednesday till May 26 at the San Francisco Bathhouse