

The Brit who's taking on Hollywood

Ben Winston is the man who helped James Corden break America. He tells Helena de Bertodano how

When James Corden was first asked to host *The Late Late Show* on American network CBS, he was reluctant. "I said no about four times." Eventually he agreed — but only on one condition. "I told [CBS] that I would only do it if I could bring my friend Ben to exec produce and I'm so aware of how that sounds," Corden laughs. "They were like: 'Riiighhhhhh. And Ben is...?'"

Ben is Ben Winston, 33, a film director and producer, and the son of Lord Winston, the Labour peer and pioneer of IVF treatment. He is behind some of the biggest talent today — producing everything from the record-breaking *One Direction* movie *This Is Us* to the official song for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee with Gary Barlow. Last year he also executive produced *The X Factor* and *The Michael McIntyre Chat Show*.

The powers-that-be at CBS were quickly convinced: "As soon as they met him," Corden says, "they called me and were like 'Oh my God, he's amazing.' You'd think he'd been bossing a late night show for years."

I meet Winston at the CBS Hollywood studios in his new office, adorned with ID stars trophies and a photograph of the jubilee celebrations, showing himself and his wife, Meredith, an interior designer, sitting a few rows behind the Queen. Dressed in a grey T-shirt and black jeans, Winston is handsome, with kind brown-green eyes, and a ready smile.

When the first show aired on March 23, Winston describes how he nervously sat alone in this office until 6pm, monitoring viewing figures and reviews from different states. "I was braced for the worst. I felt like no one was going to watch it because they didn't know who James Corden was. And I was worried that if they did watch it, they'd hate it."

The reviews were overwhelmingly positive. Unlike most US late-night TV there is an emphasis on fun rather than snarkiness. Guests are introduced into their dressing rooms, then interviewed together, Graham Norton-style. There are some zany twists — carpool karaoke, with Corden belting out songs while driving through LA with a singer such as Ariana Grande; Jennifer Hudson; or *Crosswalk the Musical* — a hilarious segment with Corden & Co performing *Breazy* in 15-second snippets on a busy pedestrian crossing, irate drivers blasting their horns. All Winston asks: "I want people to tune in and never know what's happening."



Television, Winston says, has always been his passion. "I'd come home from school and it was a real treat to watch until 6pm. I loved *Grange Hill*, Paul Daniels, *The Muppetts*." The youngest of three children, Ben attended University College School, an independent boys' school in Hampstead, then read broadcasting at the University of Leeds. At 18 he had a two-week unpaid shift on the Channel 4 comedy drama *Teachers*, where he met Corden. "We just hit it off," says Winston. "I think we recognised ambition in each other."

After graduating Winston set up a production company, Fulwell73, with three childhood friends, co-producing his first movie *In the Hands of the Gods* in 2007 at the age of 25 — which became the widest release yet of a UK cinema documentary. Since then he has won two Brit Awards for best video of the year and worked with Corden on numerous projects, but producing *The Late Late Show* is, says Winston, "without doubt the biggest task of my career" and he admits to the occasional spot of tension: "James and I absolutely spar. We had a huge row three weeks ago — I've no idea what about, probably whether or not an idea with a guest was funny. James walked out, then six minutes later he came back and said 'What time are we doing dinner tonight?'"

When Corden married a couple of years ago, he asked Winston to be his best man. But, points out Corden, "I was not best man at his wedding. It's

our only bone of contention." Winston laughs when I bring it up: "To this day he has never forgiven me. My two oldest friends from school were my best men but I did make James master of ceremonies and his speech was even longer than theirs." Corden's wife Julia and Meredith are now "besties". Winston says, which has made the joint move to Los Angeles easier.

Winston says he doesn't remember when he first realised that his father

“I was braced for the worst: I felt like no one was going to watch

was famous. "I've always had huge pride that I am his son. The idea that has given life to thousands is incomparable really." Lord Winston never tried to influence his children's choice of career. "He's always said, 'You make your own choices.' He's coming out in a couple of weeks and we're thinking of doing an idea. Are you smarter than a drunk genius?" and we'll get Dad at the bar taking shots and he came back to a quiz against him. I haven't even pitched it to Dad yet but he's always up for fun."

One thing his father did impress on him as a child was the importance of his Jewish roots. "Every day Dad

would leave for the hospital at 6am and come back at 10pm and I'd never really see him but I always knew that on a Friday night we would keep the Shabbat and that we'd be a family together." But the rumour that Ben has converted Harry Styles to Judaism is "bullshit", says Winston succinctly. "I told a Jewish newspaper that Harry once came over for dinner on a Friday. And suddenly everyone is saying 'I've converted him.' He does not count the One Direction members among his closest friends. "In the last 24 hours I've spoken to three of them. I'm close to all the people I work with."

Does he ever wish he had some of the limelight for himself? "No," he says adamantly. "I have a very different skill set. I'm heading up a really creative environment here, James wouldn't want those pressures and I wouldn't want the pressure of having to walk out every night and entertain everybody." "Ben is like Google Earth," Corden says. "Whereas I concentrate on the minutiae, Ben can see it from above and look three moves ahead. I lose track of the amount of times a day I say 'We'll see what Ben thinks.' One night last month both Simon



Left: Ben Winston and, above, with Tom Hanks and James Corden on the set of *The Late Late Show*. Below: Winston with Harry Styles

Cowell and Michael Douglas were guests on *The Late Late Show*. The repartee was easy, Cowell was hilariously rude to Corden. Douglas did an absurd re-enactment of his erotic thriller *Basic Instinct*. Corden in a blonde wig playing Sharon Stone's role — all produced by Winston, who raced in and out of the control room during show breaks, reassuring Corden that he was doing a good job, reminding him to talk more to Douglas, adjusting Cowell's T-shirt, checking everyone was happy.

Despite the show's initial success, Winston is taking nothing for granted. Next month, host David Letterman retires from the *Late Show*, which airs just before and brings in many viewers. "We're going to take a significant dip and everyone will say the show has failed." But when comedian Stephen Colbert steps into Letterman's shoes in September, it is thought that the combination of Colbert followed by Corden will be a serious one-two punch to the competing networks.

Cowell, who worked with Winston on *The X Factor*, emphasises Ben's work ethic. "He is — after me — the hardest working person I've ever met. He has a way of luring you into doing things which should make you hate him." He describes how

Winston told him he was going to be filmed in a helicopter for the opening sequence of last year's *The X Factor*. "It turned out the helicopter was flying above the Shard at midnight; he told me 'Oh, and by the way the doors will be open but you'll be strapped in and can you eat a strawberry at the same time?' It's like 'I'm about to die and you want me to eat a strawberry?' But because it's Ben you do it."

Despite the stress of producing a new show each night, Winston says he remains sane by always maintaining a sense of perspective. "You're not saving lives or putting out fires. At the end of the day, you are just making silly television."

