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Lucy Nicholson / Reuters

## American Idol

Could last night's finale have moved any more slowly? Our critic points out the evening's low notes, as well as a few moments that soared

By B. J. Sigesmund  
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

May 22 — Recount? It's not that I'm unhappy that Ruben Studdard took the top prize last night on "American Idol," earning himself a \$1 million record contract. And I don't even feel badly for runner-up Clay Aiken, who already has an album in the works, fans learned last night.

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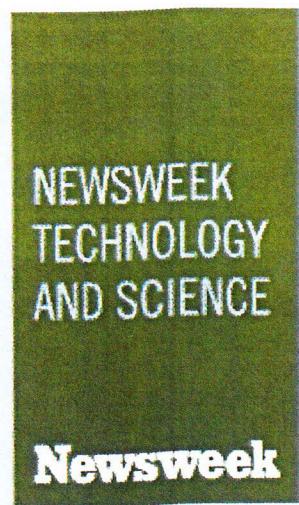
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Memorials Across the Country

BUT WHAT BOTHERED me most about the finale was the inconsistency regarding the closeness of the race. First, host Ryan Seacrest said we were "a country divided," and explained that of the 24 million votes that had been received the night before, only 13,000 separated the two finalists. As if that weren't already a little far-fetched, later in the evening, Ryan corrected himself, blaming a "drunk" accountant, saying there were actually only 1,300 votes between the guys. And then, once the show was over, news reports had the number at 130,000.

**RELATED NEWS** 'Idol' Worship

Now I know live television is hard, and the execs at Fox have been under a lot of pressure. But if you're gonna force fans to sit through two hours of self-promotional gimmicks before finally revealing the champion, at least check your math.

Let's talk for a bit about the filler that fans had to endure. After Monday night's added-at-the-last-minute special on Aiken and Studdard as well as Tuesday night's usual hourlong show, Fox still chose to turn its normally 30-minute Wednesday-night recap program into a 120-minute "Idol"-athon. What brilliant producer asked for yet more shots of screaming fans in Raleigh, N.C., or Birmingham, Ala.—the finalists' home towns? Did we really need a sunglasses-clad Clive Davis handing Kelly Clarkson her Recording Industry Association of America award for selling 1 million units of her CD, "Thankful"? Why ask Aiken to sing "Bridge Over Troubled Water" and Studdard to do "Flying Without Wings" again for the second night in a

row? And why exactly did the opening credits repeat, at 8:54 p.m.?

## AUDIO INTERVIEW



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**Ruben Studdard** on:

- ▶ Overcoming stage fright
- ▶ Dealing with celebrity
- ▶ Being a role model



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Some things worked, however. The medley with Aiken and Studdard singing with a group of the rejected "Idol" finalists, while clearly an advertisement for the upcoming 39-city tour, proved enjoyable, despite the inclusion of Lionel Ritchie's "Hello." Can anyone do "Over the Rainbow" better than Kimberley Locke? If she had a CD in stores right now, I'd buy it. But hey, where was Marine Josh Gracin? He was back to active duty, but hey, they couldn't give him a night off for the finale?



Today show

**Ruben Studdard wins 'American Idol'**

May 22, 2003 — Ryan Seacrest discusses the final tally which gave Ruben Studdard the win in the American Idol competition.

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**M**SNBC **Live Vote** **RESULTS**

**Do you agree with America's voters?**

\* 38576 responses

Yes, Ruben's my 'Idol'

 36%

No, Clay's the true 'Idol'

 64%

**MSNBC INTERACTIVE**

Survey results tallied every 60 seconds. Live Votes reflect respondents' views and are not scientifically valid surveys.

Another high point: The skit in which Simon Cowell and Paula Abdul finally revealed their love for each other, feeding each other strawberries and whipped cream and making out while "Love to Love You Baby" played? Pure genius. Nothing beats celebrities poking fun at the tabloid tales that have been written about them. (It also should be noted that I did not miss the judges *at all* last night. They barely had a role, and I was glad. I've grown tired of Jackson and Abdul's repetitive nonsense after each performance.)

What I liked most was the flashbacks to the terrible auditions. I've greeted the beginnings of both seasons with sick pleasure: that's when the three judges listen to wanna-be stars with warbling voices, terrible clothes and confidence built on sheer delusion. I could watch a whole hour or two just of *those*.

Note to Fox: Please, just don't put that special on just yet. You obviously need a little break. And frankly, so do we.