

## Friends unite for Moscow

**MOSCOW** – Russia's victory in the annual Eurovision song contest not only boosted resurgent patriotism, but also sparked an outburst of gratitude towards unlikely Baltic friends.

After votes from several former Soviet republics helped singer Dima Bilan win the 43-nation competition, a pro-Kremlin group picketed the Latvian and Estonian embassies in Moscow to express thanks.

"It's very pleasant to hear that Russia was supported in this contest by our nearest neighbours, including the Baltic states, with whom our bilateral relations aren't very good," the Young Russia group said in a statement.

Past actions by pro-Kremlin groups were less friendly.

Estonia's decision last year to move a Red Army soldier statue sparked protests. This May, Young Russia activists burned an effigy of director Edvins Snore outside the Latvian embassy after his documentary on crimes under Soviet dictator Josef Stalin aired in Latvia.

On Saturday, however, the

once-Soviet Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as Ukraine, Belarus and Armenia, gave Bilan the maximum 12 points each in the Eurovision Song Contest. It was hailed as another Russian success on the world stage.

Karlis Streips, who provided commentary for the Eurovision show on Latvian television, credited ethnic Russians in the Baltics. But there may be other affinities.

"In Latvia's case, there may also be a cultural connection in that Dima Bilan has performed in Latvia often, although I'm not sure to what extent his concerts have attracted a (ethnically) Latvian audience," Streips said.

The Russian singer launched his career in the Baltics in 2002 when he performed at an annual music festival in the Latvian resort town of Jurmala.

In Western Europe, Eurovision voting was seen as a game of realpolitik expressed through song and dance, leaving Western Europe behind.

— DPA

**SAME OLD AIKEN:** He may criticise others' bad singing, but the idol is still the good boy he always is.



# Confessions of a former idol

**Clay Aiken talks about plastic surgery rumours, lousy singers, and the pain in his bum**

HE'S had four Top 5 albums on the Billboard charts, but Clay Aiken still can't shake off his days as the geek on *American Idol*.

"I think to some extent in the United States, you don't really shed that Idol tag," he said over the phone from Los Angeles.

"It's such a huge show that you can't escape it.

"But I got here being myself on *American Idol*, and I try my best on continuing to be here based on being myself," he added.

"If you want to be good at what you do, you can't slack off. You have to continue to try to do better. Anybody who assumes I'm here only because of *Idol* is wrong."

Aiken's latest album, *On My Way Here*, confirms that sentiment. Most of the songs, he said, are about "becoming and discovering yourself", and learning life lessons rather than lessons "from a book in school".

It's something that the Raleigh,

North Carolina, native has first-hand experience of.

"I never wanted to be a singer," he admitted. "I wanted to be a teacher. So all this kind of happened as a blessing – to be able to take my hobby and turn it into my job. All the experiences, luck and blessings have come because we've been open to a lot of things."

Still, he's quick to point out that fame does have its drawbacks.

"Like I was out the other day with my friends just wanting to get some dinner, and we had paparazzi following us the whole time – that's a pain in the butt," he said, sighing. "It's part of the job. I think you just have to learn to deal with it."

"It" includes rumours that the 29-year-old singer has had plastic surgery and is actually gay but afraid to admit it.

"That's what's so great about America," he said, laughing. "One of our valuable amendments to the Constitution – freedom of the press – is also one of the crappiest. You can write anything you want. You don't need to have any proof or any truth to what you write."

Lucky for Aiken, besides the surgery and gay rumours, he's not

exactly exciting tabloid fodder.

"I stole a car one time. At 15, you can drive as long as a parent is with you but one day, they were out, so I took the car out for drive by myself. That's probably the most rebellious thing I've done."

Yup, Clay Aiken stole his parent's car when he was 15. Doesn't exactly scream magazine sales.

"Nobody's ever the same person everyday, but for the most part, I think I'm pretty nice and easy to get along with. But my manager will probably say that's crap."

Still, he does have a snippy side. "Last night, I was watching one of the way-too-many music awards shows we have and the live performances were almost unbearable to listen to. I think people just don't realise how bad they are. It was really awful. People were off-key, and it was a ... mess."

Has Aiken turned into a Simon Cowell? "No, but it was really hard to listen to. I was telling my friend: 'Oh my god, if I were ever that bad, please promise to tell me.' I hope I'm never that bad."

*On My Way Here* is available at all CD shops.



**SEX IN NEW YORK:** After a string of premieres in Europe, *Sex and the City* finally went home to New York Tuesday night. Over 3,000 fans lined up outside the premiere at Radio City Hall to watch celebrities like Bette Midler, Mary J Blige, Donna Karan, Project Runway winner Christian Siriano, Ashley Olsen and Vogue editor Anna Wintour walk the pink carpet. But the attention, however, was focussed squarely on the four leading ladies. Sarah Jessica Parker wore a silver floor-length Nina Ricci gown, Kim Cattrall chose a similar shade of metallic green by British designer Vivienne Westwood, Kristin Davis wore a gold dress from Donna Karan, and Cynthia Nixon looked lovely in a white dress from Narcisco Rodriguez. Just the tip of the iceberg for a film with over 300 wardrobe changes.