**Interview with Black Box Recorder (*New York Press*, 2001)**

Britain is beat these days, and it's not just the mad livestock feeling the hurt. When I was there in the fall, there were train wrecks, floods, bombs, everything but a plague of locusts. Around that time, I heard Black Box Recorder's sublimely sweet single, “The Facts of Life.”

The sound was echt All Saints, lush and cotton-candy soft. I almost tuned out, yet right before I did, lead singer Sarah Nixey started to... well, not sing, exactly, but more, recite, in a clipped British accent: “When boys are just 11/ They begin to grow in height/ At a faster rate than they have done before/ They develop curiosity/ And start to fantasize/ About the things they've never thought of doing before...” It sucked me in, and by song's end, randy teens are exploring one another's bodies in, as Nixey relates, “a family car/ a disused coal mine/ a rowing boat/ or a shed.” It was brilliant pop.

When I heard the whole of Black Box Recorder's second album, also called *The Facts of Life* (Jetset), I realized that the single wasn't just a one-off novelty cut, but rather part of a nervy, pervy essay on pop style. This made sense because Auteurs agitator Luke Haines was behind it, teamed up with Nixey and former Jesus and Mary Chain drummer John Moore. To my mind, the Auteurs remain one of the most underrated bands of the 90s, as ignored on our shores as the equally guitar-bound Jam, but more perceptive and gripping. (Try *After Murder Park*, where Haines' brooding dissection of death and romance is filtered through Steve Albini.) Past that work, however, Black Box Recorder seemed quite natural after Haines' instant classic *Baader Meinhof* – a meld of 70s funk, casually tossed-off agit-prop and dramatic strings. A man who could do something that bizarre could easily send up mainstream pop.

*The Facts of Life* does that and more. The music wrapped around tunes like “Sex Life” and “Straight Life” and “May Queen” purrs and coos, yet the lyrics are at times as brutal as any of the Auteurs' dark maunderings. When I picked up the group's first album, *England Made Me* (also Jetset), I realized just how far Black Box Recorder's experiment in pop perversion had advanced. *England Made Me* is darker, sparer and closer to the Auteurs' sound, with lyrics like “Life is unfair/ Kill yourself or get over it” predominating. It's a fine record in itself, but there are moments – the bittersweet pill “New Baby Boom,” or the magnificent stuttering cover of Althea and Donna's 1978 reggae hit “Up Town Top Ranking” – that show where things were headed.

I talked recently with all three members of Black Box Recorder by phone.

Q: The Facts of Life *came out in England last year. Are you sick of talking about it yet?*

**Sarah Nixey**: You can never get sick of talking about your records, really.

*One article I read in* The Guardian *noted that Luke and John write songs from snatches of your conversation.*

**Nixey**: They have taken bits of my conversation and used them for songs, or anecdotes that I've told them. They'll show me a song and it will all come back to me, what I've revealed to them.

*When you've played out live, what sort of reaction have you gotten?*

**Nixey**: Well, we have these costumes that we wear. At Reading, we wore British Airways outfits.

*What kind of audiences have you drawn? Are they quiet and respectful, or drunk and heckling?*

**Nixey**: We draw the, sort of, mid-30s males. [Chuckles.] The older crowd. They're very respectful.

*While there's always been a school of English songwriting that bemoans the decline of Britain's institutions – it's been there since the Kinks – your music seems more in tune with the fluke and accident and disaster of contemporary Britain.*

**Luke Haines**: I think maybe the thing is, with Black Box Recorder, the writing doesn't necessarily come out of a particularly leftist tradition, which most British songwriting does. That's not even to say that it comes out of a right-wing kind of an idea. I think it consciously ignores that-the idea that most art comes from that tradition, which I think is a bit of a nonsense. This kind of nanny-state idea, that socialism is a very good idea. I think that's where a lot of the songwriting comes from.

*The first record was incredibly bleak, and the second is much lighter.*

**Haines**: The whole thing was that “The Facts of Life,” the single, was a fairly cynical effort to get us on *Top of the Pops*. We wanted to see if we could write something that was a fairly straight pop song.

*Did the single introduce you to a whole new series of annoyances than you'd run into in the alt-rock world?*

**Haines**: Yeah. It's all the things that you know exist. Not so much for me or John, ‘cause we’re older, but more Sarah, because she’s younger, and we put her forward when there was some kind of moron from some crap radio or TV show. We sort of had nothing to do with it. But that whole debacle is so humiliating, anyway. I'd be perfectly happy never to have another hit record again.

*The money helps, though...*

**Haines**: No, we made absolutely no money at all from it. Our record company at the time were going through the usual kind of nonsense that English record companies go through, i.e., not paying us. That wasn't the point anyway. The point is, who the hell wants any kind of level of fame, I really think. There's nothing there at all. It's actually quite vacuous. And from that point of view, it's funny.

*When you take the two Black Box Recorder albums together, it sounds like a perfect soundtrack for England falling apart – trainwrecks, floods, animal diseases...*

**John Moore**: I think it's more the cause [of it]. I suppose it is a soundtrack, but mainly for intelligent people. The real soundtrack for all the shit that's going on is Robbie Williams. That's what's on people's stereos.

*How did you decide to do the cover of “Up Town Top Ranking” on the first record?*

Moore: Pub conversation number 3581: What would be a song that we just couldn't possibly touch?

*It's wonderful. You really Black Boxed it.*

**Moore**: It was really helped by the fact that on the day we recorded it, Sarah had been out clubbing all night, and had this really incredible Sunday-morning voice on her, a bad hangover, and she was in no mood to be fucked with. So we had to write out these patois lyrics which we didn't understand and she just gave them the speaking cop treatment, and went home to have a hangover. It worked.

*You've got a very pronounced Englishness. Do you worry about whether it will translate over here?*

Moore: I don't think we'll excite the Anglophiles, because their idea of Englishness is Radiohead. They like too broad an Englishness, that Monty Python humor... Over here, [Virgin radio star] Chris Evans and Jamie Oliver, the Naked Chef, run things.

*But Jamie Oliver's the hot thing on one of our niche cable networks. He's replaced another cooking show called* The Iron Chef *as the trendy new thing. I've only watched one episode, but it's very odd.*

**Moore**: The Anglophiles who don't like Black Box Recorder will love Jamie Oliver. He's been promoted to this position of being the arbiter of taste from being a middle-aged ladies' choice of TV chef. He's got his own compilation records now, and any band that's on his show is guaranteed to get on *Top of the Pops*. He has his own band, which he plays drums in. The guy is a fucking disaster, really.

*I saw the episode where he had people over late and he was making some weird chocolate thing.*

Moore: Yep, yep. He is Swinging London. If you watch Jamie Oliver, everyone will be on the next plane over here. That's what they think is going on. It's not. There's foot-and-mouth disease. Probably caused by him.

*– Richard Byrne*