

FILM BY JASON SOLOMONS

Soul
DISNEY PLUS

★★★★☆

There's a huge treat on the telly for all the family to watch together on Christmas Day: Pixar's brand-new feature animation *Soul*, which is premiering on Disney Plus.

We are not talking about a little offshoot cartoon, but a major motion picture deemed so good by the Cannes Film Festival that it was due a red-carpet premiere on the famous Croisette back in May. Sadly, as a result of you know what, it was cancelled and it's not been possible to release it on big screens anywhere since.

That's a shame as it would have given cinemas a badly needed box-office bonanza and audiences would have swooned over the computer-generated visuals that Pixar seems to improve on with every film. However, you can still marvel at this sumptuous, many layered, emotionally complex and bewilderingly clever film at home.

It's about Joe, a middle-school band teacher (voiced by Jamie Foxx) who dreams of playing in a jazz club. Just when it seems his wish will come true, he has a brush with death and is taken to The Great Beyond, a kind of spiritual realm where disembodied souls are sorted – the type of place you could only conjure up using the wonders of animation. He is

paired up with a reluctant 'soul' called 22, who doesn't want to be transported into a body on Earth, so Joe offers to mentor her (she's voiced, with a range of petulant one-liners, by Tina Fey). There's an adventure with Moonwind, a leprechaun-type who saves 'lost souls', vocalised by Graham Norton, then Joe and 22 are whisked off to New York but get mixed up in transit – she's in his body, he's in the body of a cat... I told you it was complicated.

But it never feels it. Despite the dizzying twists of the concept, you always know what's happening, who's who and where's where. It's a miracle of storytelling. You'll laugh, you'll probably cry and you'll love it. I'm sure some kids will watch it a couple of times on Christmas Day alone – multiple viewings are necessary, just to get your head – and soul – around it. It may be bad news for cinemas, but for Disney Plus it's a boon: *Soul* is the best new Christmas Day TV movie in years.



RADIO BY SARAH SHANNON

CHRISTMAS ON THE WIRELESS

Hallelujah for the radio this Christmas! Oblivious to the rule of six and ungoverned by tiered lockdowns, our wireless friend can be relied on for treats to lift the spirits. Classic FM will be going full-throttle festive with carols, pre-recorded concerts and Christmassy favourites chosen by listeners. BBC Radio 3 is running a competition to discover a new carol from an amateur composer. The shortlist of six new songs will be recorded by the BBC Singers and played in December

before the winning carol is announced. Another stalwart is Radio 4's *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols*; hopefully still broadcast live, albeit socially distanced and without the congregation, from the candlelit chapel of King's College, Cambridge. Then there's the *Today* programme with its guest editors, guaranteed to generate headlines. Last year's roused fury in some of the press who viewed the choices, including Greta Thunberg and Grayson Perry, as

evidence of left-wing bias at the BBC.

Finally, if you've ever thought that Christmas keeps coming earlier every year, then check out Magic's *100% Christmas* (available online). The station has been playing easy listening classics from Eartha Kitt's *Santa Baby* to Elvis's *Blue Christmas* since it launched in August. Yes, August!



PODCAST SPECIAL

All Ears

BY SARAH SHANNON

Podcasts positively thrived in 2020. Presenters and producers were able to keep recording safely from their homes throughout lockdown and, thanks to their efforts, there's now a bumper crop of podcasts to see you through the whole of the holiday season



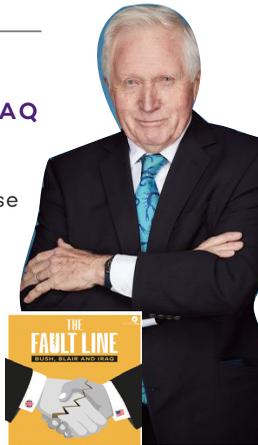
★ FOR LITERARY BUFFS
BACKLISTED

This podcast about books is a rattling good yarn. Its engaging hosts, John Mitchinson and Andy Miller, want to give 'new life to old books'. The duo are joined by guests to discuss what they are reading at the moment and to focus on an old book. It might be a debate on George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* or a parley on the rollicking romance of Georgette Heyer's *Venetia*. One recent resurrection was M.F.K. Fisher's *How to Cook a Wolf*, a 1940s guide to surviving the privations of war, an apt choice in our new age of pandemic and panic buying.



★ FOR POLITICOS
THE FAULT LINE: BUSH, BLAIR AND IRAQ

David Dimbleby (*right*) is proving as adept at podcasting as he once was at hosting General Election coverage. Last year, he brought us the rise of Rupert Murdoch in the excellent *The Sun King*. Now he's back with the Iraq war and how Bush and Blair led the coalition into a conflict that went horribly wrong. There is incisive reporting and a brilliant roll call of interviewees. The podcast retells this vital chapter in Britain's recent history and shows just how many of its repercussions we are still living with today.



★ FOR THRILL SEEKERS
TRUE SPIES

If you're impatient for the new Bond film, distract yourself with the clandestine meetings, gunfights and secret cameras in this podcast about real-life spies. Narrated by actress Hayley Atwell (*left*) and featuring interviews with the spies themselves, each episode zooms in on an espionage incident. There's the Soviet engineer who leaked secrets to the West, and the 100-year-old French spy who posed as a German nurse during the Second World War. Exciting stuff.



FOR PLANT ENTHUSIASTS
UNEARTHED: MYSTERIES FROM AN UNSEEN WORLD

Anyone expecting this first podcast from Kew's Royal Botanic Gardens to be all about plantsmanship and conservation is in for a shock. This fascinating series tackles everything from a poisonous plant used in a curry by a spurned lover to a zombie fungus that causes ants to explode.

Presenter and 'plant geek' James Wong starts the series with the theft of a tiny but rare water lily from Kew. He travels around the world chasing plant thieves and the obsessive collectors who commission them, with the help of experts from Kew and investigators from Border Force.

★ FOR MUSIC BUFFS
CLASSICAL FIX

Want to learn more about classical music? Here's a good place to start. Each episode of the BBC's *Classical Fix* sees Clemmie Burton-Hill compiling a playlist of vastly different music for her celebrity guests. They listen at leisure, then react to her choices. American comedian Rob Delaney was blown away by Benjamin Britten's *Concord* (from *Gloriana*), written for the Queen's Coronation. 'There's sadness in this music and I pride myself on listening primarily to sad music,' he says.

