




Spring 2023

## Song of the South: The Silence of a Song

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### Recommended Citation

Fernald, Magdalena E., "Song of the South: The Silence of a Song" (2023). *Student Publications*. 1089.  
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## Song of the South: The Silence of a Song

### Abstract

A persuasive essay explaining the history of the film Song of the South and the Uncle Remus stories that it's based on, and why the film deserves to be re-released with educational materials.

### Keywords

Slavery, Disney, Film

### Disciplines

Africana Studies | American Popular Culture | Film and Media Studies

### Comments

Written for THA 204: History of the Theatre

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Theatre History

June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023

*Song Of The South: The Silence of a Song*

In March of 1862, a fourteen-year-old bright-eyed Joel Chandler Harris took his first steps onto the Turnwold Plantation after being hired by its proprietor upon dropping out of school. Little did he know what would come of the years he spent there: from a series of books that were so well received in his time that they earned him an invite to meet President Theodore Roosevelt, to a highly controversial Disney movie, and not one, but two amusement park rides based on the stories. Although everything that spawned from Harris' Uncle Remus stories was controversial, none was more so than Disney's 1946 movie adaptation, *Song Of The South*. The movie is riddled with issues, such as its ambiguity as to whether the Black workers on the plantation are slaves or sharecroppers. It also glorifies stories that include deeply problematic terms like "tar baby" -- a derogatory way to refer to a Black person. The film's dubious reception upon its fourth re-release in 1986 --when its blatant racist issues became undeniable -- caused it to be shelved permanently. Although *Song of the South* is an inherently flawed movie, that does not mean that it deserves to be buried in the "Disney Vault" forever. It should be re-released along with educational materials to help people better understand Joel Chandler Harris, the *Uncle Remus* stories, and the difference between what life was like for African Americans during slavery and as sharecroppers after the Civil War.

The man who would ultimately go on to write the Uncle Remus stories was born in Eatonton, Georgia on December 9, 1848 to Mary Ann Harris -- an Irish immigrant -- and a father whose identity remains unknown due to his abandonment of Mary soon after impregnating her. (*Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography and Critical Study*, Bruce R. Bickly Jr. All further biographical information, including quotes, on Joel Chandler Harris also came from this book.) Harris was always cognisant of his illegitimate birth and it affected the stories he wrote and his constant need to prove himself. Since his mother was the only parent he had around, she influenced him a lot. In an interview for *Lippencot's Magazine* entitled "The Accidental Author" in 1886, Harris stated, "My desire to write -- to give expression to my thoughts -- grew out of hearing my mother read *The Vicar of Wakefield*" (418). In school, Harris was of an advanced level when it came to reading and writing but was

mostly known for his pranks. Like many still do, he used humor to hide his insecurities about his red hair, Irish heritage, and illegitimacy -- which both got him in trouble and made him a leader amongst the other boys in the school.

A major turning point in Harris' development as a writer came about when, at the tender age of fourteen, he dropped out of school to work full-time. He was hired in May of 1862 by the owner of the Turnwold Plantation, Joseph Addison Turner, as a printer's devil -- someone who performs odd jobs in a print shop. Harris toiled for Turner's newspaper, *The Countryman*, working for clothing, room, and board. During Harris' four years working on the plantation, he consumed the contents of the plantation library. Turner -- ever the strong Southern patriot -- had a plethora of books by Southern writers in his library but encouraged Harris to read all that he could by many different authors from all over the world. In his free time, Harris spent many an hour in the slave's quarters listening to their stories. With the slaves, he felt less insecure about his background, and he grew close to them as a result. He absorbed the stories of slaves like Uncle George Terrell, Old Harbert, and Aunt Crissy. The African-American animal stories the three told created the beginnings of the stories that Harris would spin in his books. Terrell, Harbert, and Crissy would be combined into one character in Harris' stories: Uncle Remus.

Harris' first opportunity for publication of his works came in 1876 when he moved to Atlanta, GA, and was hired to write a column for his local newspaper, *The Atlanta Constitution*. Harris penned the first of his stories, "The Story of Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Fox as Told by Uncle Remus", for his column in *The Constitution* on July 20, 1879. Following the major success of the short stories, the first of the nine Uncle Remus books, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings; The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation* was published. The first edition went into print in 1880 and was a compilation of many stories that Harris had already shared in his column of *The Constitution*. Fables like "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story", "Mr. Rabbit Finds His Match At Last", and "The Sad Fate Of Mr. Fox" are known even by today's children, many of whom have been introduced to the stories by the Walt Disney Company due to the Splash Mountain ride that exists in multiple Disney parks. The novel is very interesting in the way that it is written because it includes not just the Uncle Remus stories, but also footnotes about the stories and their versatility. For example, in one note, Harris describes how the stories varied based on the location of the storytellers who lived on different plantations [Br'er Alligator in Florida, etc.] (Harris, 88). During his lifetime, Harris himself published six Uncle Remus books: *Nights with Uncle Remus* (1883), *Uncle*

*Remus and His Friends* (1892), *The Tar Baby and Other Rhymes of Uncle Remus* (1904), *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation* (1905), and *Uncle Remus and Br'er Rabbit* (1907). *Uncle Remus and the Little Boy* (1910), *Uncle Remus Returns* (1918), and *Seven Tales of Uncle Remus* (1948), were all published by his estate posthumously.

The problems with the stories are evident from even a rudimentary read of the first novel. For example, the story “Why The Negro Is Black” details how all humans started out as Black people, but they were able to dip their bodies into a magical pond that made them lighter. Says Remus in the story, “N den, bless grashus! W'en de fokes seed it, dey make a break fer de pon', en dem w'at wuz de soopless, dey got in fus' en dey come out w'ite; en dem w'at wuz de nex' soopless, dey got in nex', en dey come out merlatters; en dey wuz sech a crowd un um dat dey mighty nigh use de water up, w'ich w'en dem yuthers come long, de mostest dey could do wuz ter paddle about wid der foots en dabble in it wid der han's. Dem wuz de niggers, en down ter dis day dey ain't no w'ite 'bout a nigger 'ceppin de pa'ms er der han's en de soles er der foot” (Harris, 164). Translated into modern vernacular, Uncle Remus said, “And then, bless gracious! When the people saw it, they made a break for the pond. The first to get there came out completely spotless. They became the White people. The next ones that came out were not able to get as much water on them so they were only partially lighter. They became mulattos [Mixed-Race]. There was such a crowd at the pond that they used almost all of the water up. Therefore, when the stragglers were finally able to get in, the most they were able to do was stand in it so it covered the soles of their feet and run the palms of their hands through it. Those people became the niggers [dark Black people]. And, to this day, there's nothing white about Black people except the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet” (Harris, 164). This story is an extremely racist way of looking at critical race theory. It implies that the Black people were lazy and slow, which is why they did not get to the water fast enough to become fully White -- the goal. Throughout the publishing of his books, Harris always claimed to be a “Black rights activist” despite his clear use of ebonics, a racist way of putting how slaves spoke phonetically onto paper, which is absolutely appalling to a modern-day reader. However, Harris was praised in his time for his ebonic style of writing by the likes of Mark Twain. Said Twain in his 1883 novel, *Life On The Mississippi*, “In the matter of writing [the African-American dialect], [Harris] is the only master the country has produced” (Twain, 210).

When Harris died on July 3, 1908 of acute nephritis and complications from cirrhosis of the liver, his obituary in the *New York Times Book Review* summed up well how much of an impact his Uncle Remus stories made on the nation: "Uncle Remus cannot die. Joel Chandler Harris has departed this life at the age of 60 ... but his best creation, [Uncle Remus] with his fund of folk-lore, will live in literature" (*New York Times Book Review*, July 11, 1908). And so Harris was laid to rest, and so too, it seemed, was the commercial success of Harris's stories. That was, however, until a certain Walter Elias Disney got his hands and his money on them -- launching them back into the spotlight and making them bigger than Harris could have ever dreamed.

Joel Chandler Harris was so influential that he even captivated one of the most prominent men of the twentieth century. Disney was so strongly moved by the Uncle Remus stories that he devoted an entire 1956 episode of his weekly *Disneyland* show entitled "A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris" to him. In it, Disney himself could not help but echo the previously quoted groups and individuals on Harris' Uncle Remus stories being extremely influential on future generations. Says Disney at the top of the show, "One of the most entertaining chapters in American folklore was supplied to us by the wonderful Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris. For four generations, these magical tales of Br'er Rabbit and his talking animal friends have delighted the hearts of children of all ages in all parts of the world" (Disney, 0:17-0:34). Disney was not just saying those words; he believed in them so much that he had acquired the rights to the Uncle Remus books in 1939 and had immediately started crafting a plan for a movie called *Song of the South* based on some of the stories. He began this process by hiring Dalton Raymond -- a White, Southern man -- to draft a script that was submitted to be reviewed in 1944. The first draft of said script was extremely offensive to Black people, to the point that it could not even be overlooked by the casual racism that was par for the course in Hollywood at that time. The script was so abnormally reprehensible that the Production Code Administration -- the enforcers of the Hays Code, the self-censorship of Hollywood movies -- strongly encouraged changing entire parts of the script. For example, the PCA suggested that the script switch terms like "old darkie" to "old man" and "Marse Jawn" to "Mister John". One of the PCA requests that was blatantly ignored, however, was the idea of making sure that viewers understood that the film took place after the Civil War -- thus making it crystal clear that the Black people on the plantation were sharecroppers, not slaves. Disney, in making no effort to implement this crucial change, started the film on the road to the criticism that led to its eventual blacklisting.

*Song of the South* begins with seven-year-old Johnny -- played by Bobby Driscoll -- excited to go on what he believes to be a vacation to his grandmother's plantation in Georgia with his parents. The main conflict in the movie begins when young Johnny finds out that, in fact, he and his mother will be living with Grandma for a while, while his father goes off to work in Atlanta -- thus setting up the fatherly issues that follow him throughout the film. Mad at his father leaving, Johnny sets off with a bindle intent on going all the way from the plantation to see his father. On his way out, Johnny just so happens to come across Uncle Remus -- played by James Baskett -- telling Br'er Rabbit stories to the Black, not-at-all-clearly-defined sharecroppers on the plantation. By this time, word had gotten out that Johnny was missing, but he successfully evades being seen by anyone else on the plantation except for Uncle Remus. Remus offers to accompany Johnny on his trip but also suggests that they stop by Remus' cabin before they leave so they can grab some food. At the cabin, Remus tells Johnny the Br'er Rabbit story "Br'er Rabbit Earns a Dollar a Minute", and sings the now-famous song, "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Da" -- accompanied by the animated Br'er characters. The tale, which mirrors the boy's current situation, talks about Br'er Rabbit attempting to run away from home, only to change his mind after an encounter with Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear. Johnny takes the story to heart and goes back to his worried mother in the big house on the plantation.

The second time that Uncle Remus tells Johnny a story with a moral, Johnny's mother gets angry and tells Uncle Remus to stop telling him stories. This time, Johnny has befriended a Black boy named Toby -- played by Glenn Leedy -- and a poor White girl named Ginny Favers -- played by Luana Patten -- who both live on the plantation with their sharecropping parents. Ginny gives Johnny a puppy that she owned pretty soon after meeting him, as he had saved the dog from being drowned by Ginny's older brothers. Although Johnny is thrilled with this gift, his mother is not and demands that he give the dog back as it is a "dirty mutt". He decides to give it to Uncle Remus for safekeeping. Remus agrees to this arrangement albeit reluctantly and then tells the children the fable of "Br'er Rabbit and the Tar Baby" -- which stresses that people should not get involved with things they had no part of in the first place. Johnny also uses Br'er Rabbit's method of reverse psychology and begs Ginny's brothers not to tell their mother about the dog. It works as Johnny intended and the boys get beat by their mother, then tell Johnny's mother as revenge.

The third story comes about when Ginny's brothers push her into the mud on her way to Johnny's birthday party. Ginny then runs off crying with a ruined dress. Johnny fights Ginny's brothers for her honor but

Uncle Remus breaks up the fight, scares the brothers, and tells both boys to stop bothering Johnny and Ginny. Johnny goes off to comfort her and explains that he also does not want to be at the party as his father will not be there, so they decide to stay together. Uncle Remus discovers the two downtrodden children and cheers them up by telling them the story of "Br'er Rabbit and His 'Laughin' Place'". The three return to the party where Johnny's mother proceeds to berate Remus for continuing to tell stories to her child after she told him to stop.

Uncle Remus's final story occurs when he, saddened by the fact that Johnny's mother continually misinterprets his good intentions, packs his bags and sets off for Atlanta. Johnny tries to stop him by chasing after him but has to cut through the bullpen in the process -- and is gored by a particularly nasty bull that lives there. While Johnny lies dying, his father returns. However, the boy still calls out for Remus. Uncle Remus tells the final Br'er Rabbit tale, "Br'er Rabbit Comes Home", and Johnny somehow lives. The movie comes to a close with a fully-healed Jonny singing with Ginny, Toby, and the puppy as Uncle Remus and all of the Br'er characters look on.

*Song of the South* had a plethora of problems from the get-go, even before its first scene was filmed. Disney's active refusal to change what was, arguably, the biggest issue that the PCA identified -- making it clear that the Black people were sharecroppers and not slaves -- was the first red flag that foreshadowed the movie's eventual blacklisting. On one hand, to be fair to The Walt Disney Company, they had hired a Black man, Clarence Muse, as a consultant after the initial pushback to the first version of the script. Muse poured over it and came back to Disney pushing for Black characters to be portrayed in a better light. On the other hand, the response to Muse's suggestions was so bad that he resigned before the final iteration of the script was even finished. Muse's resignation came back to haunt Disney when opponents of the movie assumed that the Black characters on the plantation were slaves, meaning they were unable to choose not to work, as opposed to sharecroppers -- whose lives were very difficult still, but who did possess a certain amount of agency in terms of their work life. These issues come into play when one looks at how happy and content the Black characters look to be working on the plantation. If the film had made it clear that they were sharecroppers, then the possibility could exist that they might be happy, even though sharecroppers were frequently exploited and often lived quite difficult lives. The issue arises when people assume that the Black characters are slaves, thus making it incredibly unrealistic that they would be happy doing a job they were forced to do under the threat of violence and/or death. The misunderstanding caused such a rift that on April 2,



1947, a group of protesters marched around the Paramount Theatre in California with signs that said things like, "We want films on Democracy, not Slavery," and "Don't prejudice children's minds with films like this." Another large issue is the way that the Black characters in the movie speak. Although not as intense as Harris' original ebonic style of writing, they speak in a way that suggests they are even less intelligent than the poor White characters in the film.

Despite the copious amount of problems with the movie, the critical reception by the White press when *Song of the South* premiered was varied -- though the negative reviews had more to do with aesthetics than unjust representation. For example, Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* expressed his immediate dismay at Disney's newest kick of live-action/animation combination movies. He noted that "more and more, Walt Disney's craftsmen have been loading their feature films with so-called 'live action' in place of their animated whimsies of the past, and by just those proportions has the magic of these Disney films decreased." He then went on to cite that the ratio of live-action movies to animated ones that Disney had produced at the time was 2:1, and concluded that that was also "approximately the ratio of its mediocrity to its charm" (Crowther, Volume 97, No 32450). One *Variety* review had an opposing view to *The Times*; it praised Bobby Driscoll and Luana Patten as "two of the most natural and appealing youngsters," and stated that James Baskett's performance was "as warming a portrait as has been seen in a long time" (*Variety*, 18). A *Time Magazine* review goes as far as to foreshadow the movie's fate. *Time* cautioned that the film was "bound to land its maker in hot water," because the character of Uncle Remus was "bound to enrage all educated Negroes and a number of damyankees [people who lived in the northern United States at the time]" (*Time*, November 18, 1946).

Interestingly enough, when it came to the Black press, the reception was equally as divided. On one side of the argument, Richard B. Dier of *The Afro-American* stated that he was "thoroughly disgusted," at the movie for being "as vicious a piece of propaganda for White supremacy as Hollywood ever produced" (Dier, 2). On the other side, Herman Hill of the *Pittsburgh Courier* felt that *Song of the South* would "prove of inestimable goodwill in the furthering of interracial relations," and thought that any criticisms of the film -- a la Dier -- were "unadulterated hogwash symptomatic of the unfortunate racial neurosis that seems to be gripping so many of our humorless brethren these days" (Hill, 956).

The actor playing Uncle Remus, James Baskett, was arguably hit the hardest by the racism inherent in the society that produced *Song of the South*. To begin with, as a Black man, he was not allowed to attend the

American premiere of the film in Atlanta on November 12, 1946, due to racist Jim Crow laws prohibiting Black people from going to "white" movie theatres -- even if that Black person was the star of the film. Unfortunately for Baskett, however, the premiere was just the start of his problems stemming from the film. When the 1947 Academy Awards came around, Baskett's name was not on the list of nominees for Best Actor. This was not because *Song of the South* was not nominated for anything; it won Best Original Song for "Zip-A-Dee-Do-Dah", which Baskett sings in the film, and two of the child actors, Driscoll and Patten, were even considered for the short-lived Academy Juvenile Awards. Baskett instead only received an Honorary Oscar (which celebrates large motion picture achievements that were not covered by the regular Oscars) -- notably, the first Black person to win an Oscar of any kind -- for his "able and heart-warming characterization of Uncle Remus, friend, and storyteller to the children of the world in Walt Disney's *Song of the South*" (The Oscars Committee, 1947).

The saga of Harris' stories did not end in 1946 with *Song of the South's* original run. Its first theatrical re-release was in 1956 for its tenth anniversary. The publicity campaign run for this re-release was immense, as it coincided with the opening of Disneyland. Disney went all out -- partnering with Scotch brand tape to have special packaging on 8 million tape dispensers. The designs on the dispensers included all three of the main Br'er characters -- Br'er Rabbit, Br'er Fox, and Br'er Bear -- Uncle Remus, and "Win One Of 25 Family Trips To Disneyland". The re-release/Disneyland campaign was so massive that it boasted "15,000 special counter displays in full color, 30,000 floor-stand display units in full color for large retail stores, full-color ads in Sunday comics, a national magazine ad campaign, back page full-color ads in eleven Dell brand comic strips, window streamers and banners, and ABC-TV nationwide network coverage" (*Song of the South* 1956 Official Campaign Book, Disney). Complete with its tagline of "Here Comes The Zip-A-Dee-Do-Dah Show!", the campaign was a smashing success. The first re-release not only got more people to see and fall in love with the movie but also played a major role in Disneyland seeing five million guests by October of that year.

Stepping away from *Song of the South* for a moment, it is important to note that Disney did not have a monopoly on Harris' stories. In fact, Disney was not even the first to create a log flume ride based on the Uncle Remus stories; that honor belongs to Six Flags Over Georgia. Beginning on June 16, 1967, one could find the original "Tales of the Okefenokee" ride nestled in the -- now defunct -- Confederate Area of the park. The ride was designed by Gene Patrick and contained simple animatronic figures, which are life-like robots that are

often used in theme parks or films. The figures were in no way on par with what Disney was producing at the time; but for a theme park not funded by a giant corporation, they served their purpose. The first iteration of “Tales of the Okefenokee” operated for the 1967 season with a lukewarm response from the public. In an effort to revive the ride, Six Flags hired Sid and Marty Krofft. The brothers were chosen for the redesign because of their long resumes of creative character designs and engaging plots -- which was evidenced by their wildly popular TV show at the time, *The Banana Splits*. The Kroffts created larger, more cartoony characters and an entirely new soundtrack for guests to experience as they rode. The ride itself follows Br’er Rabbit going through several scenes taken directly from Harris’ stories like him tricking Br’er Fox and Br’er Bear into setting him free by convincing them that there was a ghost or that a bee hive held riches. “Tales of the Okefenokee” was operational for thirteen seasons, during which time the rudimentary figures suffered from the damp conditions of the ride and lack of proper care. The final nail in the coffin was in the summer of 1980 when a giant fire broke out in one of the scenes due to faulty wiring in one of the animatronics. Some other animatronics were moved in an attempt to cover for the burned ones, but the damage was already done and the ride was closed before the next summer came around.

During “Tales of the Okefenokee”’s thirteen-year existence, Disney re-released *Song of the South* twice -- in 1972 and 1980. The 1972 re-release focused more on the music from the film, specifically “Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah”, then it did the buying of physical merchandise as Disney chose not to partner with another brand like it had in 1956. With the tagline of “We’re Headin’ for the Laughin’ Place”, Disney chose this time to focus on the animated portions of the movie -- i.e the Br’er Rabbit stories -- and Uncle Remus was now nowhere to be seen. The promotional material for 1972 included “a Famous Disney Music Radio Contest, a Library Promotion, a Music Promotion, Window and Counter Cards, a Newspaper Contest, and a Coloring Contest” (*Song of the South 1972 Official Campaign Book*, Disney). The 1980 re-release was almost identical to the one in 1972 with the slight caveat that the Br’er characters had been re-drawn in a more cartoon-esque/true to the film way. In addition to the previously mentioned promotional material from 1972, Disney had a “Best of the Baddies Contest, a Pet Store Promotion, and Theatre Imprinted Balloons” (*Song of the South 1980 Official Campaign Book*, Disney). This re-release happened solely because it coincided with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Joel Chandler Harris publishing the first of his Uncle Remus books.

*Song of the South's* final re-release was in 1986, and is notable because not only was the movie shown in theatres, but also was available to rent or buy on VHS in countries outside of the US. This run of the film celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and it was now being billed as "Walt Disney's Classic". The promotional artwork for this re-release was the most inclusive as it featured not only the Br'er characters and Uncle Remus, but Ginny, Toby, and Johnny too. This run was also the only one in *Song of the South's* history that did not include a specific campaign associated with it. Instead, Buena Vista Distribution -- the former distributors of Disney films, so named for Buena Vista Street where they were located -- created a simple press information booklet. This booklet contains only three glossy, black and white photos and thirty other pages of material. This included "Production Information, Credits, an article on Combining Live action and Animation, The Music, Joel Chandler Harris, About the Cast, Synopsis, and Notes" (*Song of the South* 1986 Official Press Information Booklet, Disney).

Despite the *Los Angeles Times'* Charles Solomon giving the film a glowing review during this newest run, stating that it was "essentially a nostalgic valentine to a past that never existed, and within those limits, it offers a pleasant, family diversion for holiday afternoons when the children get restless" ("Movie Reviews: Animation Sings in *Song of the South*", November 21, 1986), the problems in the film become unable to be overlooked by many others. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), led the charge and had been lobbying against the film since its premiere in 1946 stating things like "In an effort neither to offend audiences in the North or South, the production [*Song of the South*] helps to perpetuate a dangerously glorified picture of slavery ... *Song of the South* unfortunately gives the impression of an idyllic master-slave relationship which is a distortion of the facts" (Walter White, 1946). Due to all of the backlash, the former CEO of Disney declared that "the film would not receive a home video release in the United States" (Michael Eisner, 1986) because Disney did not want to include a disclaimer and feared accusations of racism. Disney has held firm on this stance with the current CEO of Disney confirming that there were "no plans to release the film on DVD" due to it being 'antiquated' and 'fairly offensive'" (Bob Iger, 2010). Disney's Creative Director, however, gave *Song of the South* fans a bit of hope when he announced that, "There's been a lot of internal discussion about *Song of the South*. And at some point we're going to do something about it. I don't know when, but we will. We know we want people to see *Song of the South* because we realize it's a big piece of company history, and we want to do it the right way" (Dave Bossert, 2010). Currently, it appears as though

*Song of the South* is going to remain in the “Disney Vault” for many years to come, as Iger confirmed that the film will never be on Disney+ -- even with the “outdated cultural depictions” disclaimer that Disney had put on other films like *Peter Pan* and *Dumbo* that do appear on Disney+.

A few years before Micheal Eisner would end shelving *Song of the South*, he had utilized the Br'er characters to help him out of a sticky situation. In 1983, Eisner had three problems. The first came when he noticed that his teenage son, Eric, was seemingly bored on his visits to Disneyland due to the lack of thrill rides. The second was the need to repurpose the characters from the recently-closed “America Sings” attraction -- which had used animatronic animals to showcase different styles of American music in honor of The Bicentennial. The third problem was Disneyland's lack of rides in its Bear Country section of the park. Eisner tasked his best Imagineer -- what Disney calls the people who work designing and building its parks and everything in them -- Tony Baxter, with this immense undertaking. Baxter mulled these problems over in his head for a few weeks until, while stuck in traffic of all places, inspiration struck. Drawing from having ridden Tales of the Okefenokee multiple times, his idea was to create a dark ride -- an indoor ride at an amusement park where riders travel through specifically lit scenes with characters and music -- based on some of the Uncle Remus stories that would use the “America Sings” animatronics to tell the story of Br'er Rabbit, his friends, and his enemies that would bring new life to Bear Country. When Baxter proposed “Zip-A-Dee River Run”, so named to capitalize on the most famous song in *Song of the South*, to Eisner and Dick Nunis -- the then-president of Walt Disney attractions -- they both had problems with the idea. Eisner did not like the name and insisted that it be changed to “Splash Mountain”, to tie it in with the recent live-action Disney movie *Splash* starring Tom Hanks, despite the ride containing no other references to the film. Nunis insisted that it be transformed into a log flume ride, much to the chagrin of Baxer and the other Imagineers, who thought that a flume ride was too ordinary for a Disney park.

In January of 1987, the plans for “Splash Mountain” were announced to the public. In response to the *Los Angeles Times* questioning Disney's choice to create a ride based around a movie they had just recalled from circulation, Disney executives claimed that they “would not be expecting criticism for its *Song of the South* theming due to the ride only including the film's animated characters” (“Disneyland to Offer Ride With Lots of Zip (a-Dee-Doo-Dah)”, January 30, 1987). In order for Disney to remedy the cutting of Uncle Remus out of the story, they substituted Br'er Frog in as the narrator of the ride. “Splash Mountain” opened in Disneyland on July

17<sup>th</sup>, 1989 along with the changing of the Bear Country name to Critter Country. The budget for the ride was \$75 million (\$200 million in 2023 money), making it one of the most expensive projects ever undertaken by Walt Disney Imagineering. There are also two other versions of the ride that exist, in Tokyo Disneyland (opened October 1, 1992), and Magic Kingdom (opened October 2, 1992). The rides in all three parks have almost the same plot as “Tales of the Okefenokee” with two differences of having better-quality animatronics and the featuring of three songs from *Song of the South* -- “How Do You Do?”, “Everybody’s Got A Laughin’ Place”, and “Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah”. The only differences between the three versions of the ride are the ride lengths, the number of drops, and the order of the scenes.

Unfortunately for Disney Imagineering, the public did not share their view of “Splash Mountain” not being problematic due to it only including the animated characters from *Song of the South*. After almost thirty years of backlash from the NAACP, other Black activist groups, and their supporters -- whose cause was only exasperated by the murder of George Floyd, a Black man killed by police brutality -- Disney announced in June of 2020 that the Disneyland and Magic Kingdom versions of the ride would be shut down and re-themed to the 2009 Disney movie *Princess and the Frog*. (Tokyo Disneyland is operated by the Oriental Land Company, which means that Disney would have to get permission from them before implementing the re-theme there -- permission which the Oriental Land Company is still discussing whether or not they should give.) The re-theme was headed by Charita Charter, a Black Imagineer, and Baxter who was pulled out of retirement to be a creative assistant. Magic Kingdom’s “Splash Mountain” closed for re-theme on January 23, 2023 and Disneyland’s closed on May 31, 2023. Tiana’s Bayou Adventure, the new name of the ride, will open in both parks in late 2024.

After being inaugurated as a Disney Legend, -- an individual who has made an extraordinary and integral contribution to Disney -- actress Whoopi Goldberg explained that she thought that *Song of the South* should be re-released publicly to American audiences. Goldberg stated, “I’m trying to find a way to get people to start having conversations about bringing *Song of the South* back, so we can talk about what it was and where it came from and why it came out” (YaHoo.com, July 15, 2017). Goldberg’s sentiments speak the truth; although *Song of the South* may be a movie with many flaws and shortcomings, there are still things to learn from it. The Br’er Rabbit stories in the film, though problematic, teach the other characters valuable lessons about life and hardships. The amazing actors in the film, like Baskett, Driscoll, Patten, and Leedy have been

underappreciated for far too long and deserve their time in the spotlight. Also, the film was a stepping stone for Black representation in mainstream media. Although it may not have portrayed Black people in the best way, it was one of the first cinematic blockbusters to have a mixed-race cast where some of the Black people played main or supporting characters. *Song of the South* should be removed from the “Disney Vault” and re-released with educational materials linked underneath the movie on the difference between slavery and sharecropping to help viewers to have context for the film. Including articles like “Black Agrarianism: The Significance of African American Landownership in the Rural South” by Katrina Quisumbing King and “The Strange Birth and Continuing Life of the US as a Slaving Republic: Race, Unfree Labor and the State” by Bruce R. Bickley Jr. with the film would provide the necessary background to help viewers better understand the world the movie takes place in -- post-Civil War America. (Many Americans have the unfounded notion, due to lack of education on the Reconstruction era, that after the Civil War, life got infinitely better for African-Americans. However, the end of slavery was only the beginning of Black people being given the short end of the stick in America -- something that is quite often overlooked in history until it becomes more prominent in the Civil Rights era.) It is also very important to understand the man behind the stories and the stories themselves. This can be achieved by also including the “A Tribute to Joel Chandler Harris” episode of the *Disneyland* television show that will play automatically before the film.

In summary, although *Song of the South* has its flaws, burying it in the Disney Vault does nothing but harm. For Driscoll and Baskett, the disappearance of this film means the elimination of their proudest work from existence and further contributes to history forgetting them. For those interested in the Reconstruction Era history, *Song of the South* is a good example of how the telling of stories based in that time are often incorrect about how things actually were as there is a lack of understanding of that period of time. Re-releasing *Song of the South* with educational materials will help to be a stepping stone in the public’s knowledge of the Reconstruction era and the Black struggle after emancipation.

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