

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

SONG OF THE SOUTH

(Disney—RKO Radio)

NOBODY in the realm of art or entertainment—certainly not such a restless individual as Walt Disney—can stay long in the same place; he must either go forward or go back. There would seem to be two main schools of thought about what Disney is doing at the moment. One contends that, having exhausted the possibilities of the pure cartoon in his early films and having gone as far as he profitably could with experiments in the field of abstract pattern (e.g. *Fantasia*), he is now making substantial progress towards a new style of film which combines live actors with animated drawings. The other takes the diametrically opposite view, insisting that Disney's new method is not progress but retrogression, and that if he had been a truly creative artist and not just an ingenious salesman he would have concentrated on perfecting his draughtsmanship until he was able to incorporate human figures successfully into

the pure cartoon form, this being something he has never yet managed to do.

There is a third school of thought—about midway between the other two—of which at the moment I am possibly almost the sole exponent and adherence to which requires that I should eat a few (but not all) of the words I wrote recently about *Make Mine Music*. Disney's new film, *Song of the South*, suggests that perhaps all hope is not yet lost. Having, with his previous picture, ventured much too far into the region of cheap, raucous cartoon-revue and there taken a bad beating, he has now withdrawn in fairly good order on established positions.

SONG OF THE SOUTH isn't vintage

Disney; much of the old magic is still missing, but more of it is there than I had thought possible after recent experience. The film, described as "Disney's first live action feature," is 70 per cent real people and real settings, and only 30 per cent cartooning. It would, I think, have been much better if these percentages had been approximately reversed; that is, if most of the footage had been devoted to Disney cartoon-versions of the Uncle

Remus tales of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and Brer Bear, instead of to a saccharine, Technicoloured portrayal of the kind of life presumably lived by Uncle Remus in 19th century Georgia and of the conditions under which the famous tales were first related. Uncle Remus himself is played as a venerable, easy-going dorkie by a Negro actor named James Baskett, his audience being a poor little rich boy (Bobby Driscoll) whose parents, for some reason never made sufficiently clear, have been estranged, and the 10-year-old daughter (Luana Patten) of a "poor-white" family. The film cheerfully accepts the familiar interpretation of Negroes as happy-go-lucky illiterates and, by implication, seems to commend their servile attitude towards their white masters and mistresses—a fact which is likely to arouse much more bitter controversy in the United States than it need arouse here.

More worthy of argument from our point of view is Disney's conception of our childhood favourites, Brer Rabbit and Co. Joel Chandler Harris's dialect tales aren't exactly easy reading unless you have been brought up on them, and they are not much easier to follow on the screen, though the fruity Southern voice of James Baskett does something to animate them. Disney and his pen-and-ink brigade do more, especially in the story of the Tar-Baby. There

will, however, be some (myself included) who, while regretting that he did not include more of the tales, will wish that Disney had stuck closer to his original sources, and who will quarrel also with his tendency to give animals so many of the characteristics of men. Harris did that too, of course, but they were, in his case, the more acceptable characteristics: he made Brer Rabbit bumptious and sharp-witted, and Brer Fox aggressive and vindictive, but he didn't apply a veneer of sophistication and cuteness to the behaviour of these well-beloved creatures.

Yet such considerations need not trouble adults to the extent of keeping them away from *Song of the South*. Still less need they trouble children, to most of whom this film should be a prolonged and unalloyed delight.

WELCOME STRANGER

(Paramount)

THIS is virtually a re-make of *Going My Way*, or at any rate a very obvious imitation achieved by the simple process of co-starring Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald as brother-doctors instead of as brother-priests and by substituting stethoscopes for crucifixes. It

(continued on next page)



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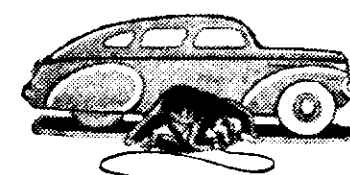
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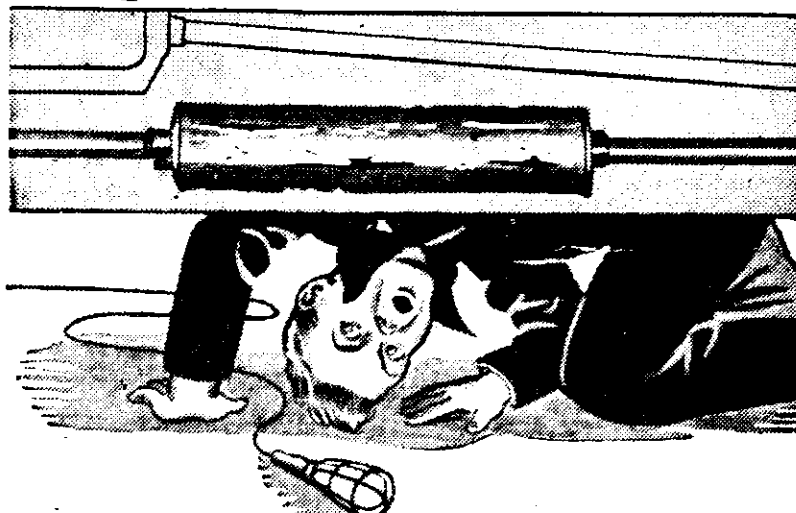
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