

The Littlest Lessons Leave the Greatest Impact: 'Soul' Review

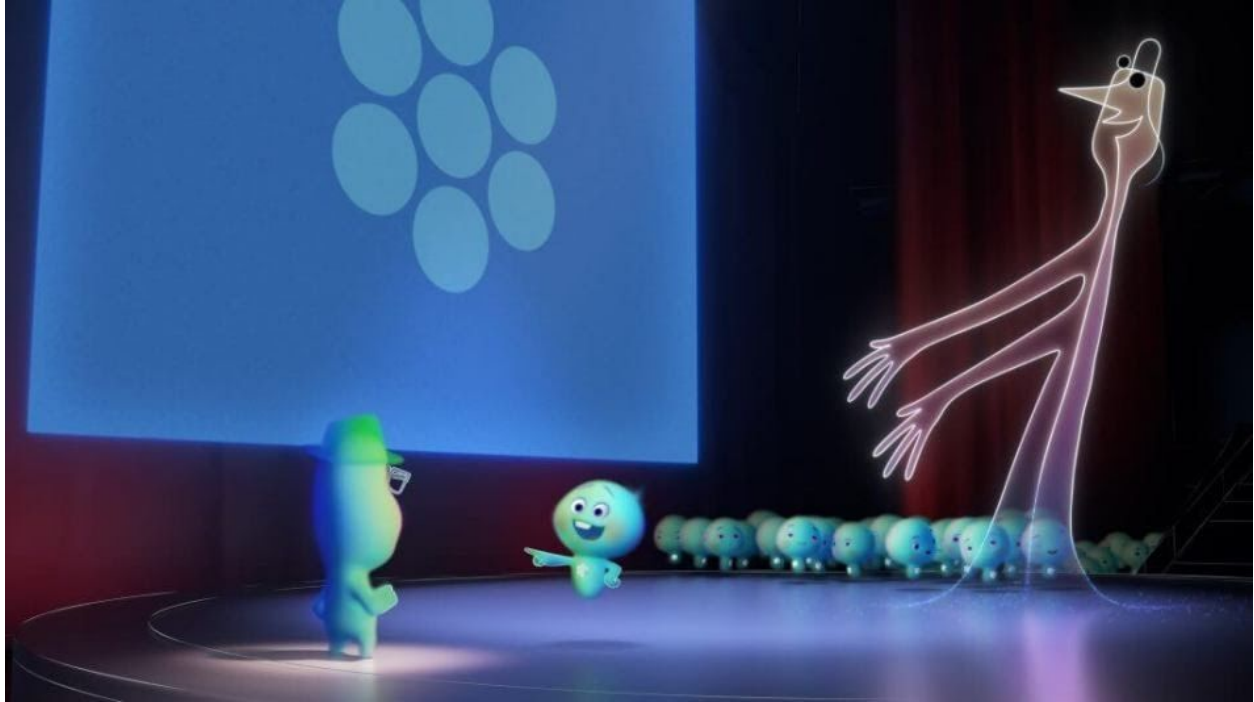
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After a tumultuous year and multiple delays, Disney-Pixar's *Soul* released on Christmas Day to widespread acclaim.

Originally slated to release on June 19, *Soul* faced a six-month delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The film was made in-part at Pixar, but after being affected by California state lockdowns, became one of the first films in which the crew transferred their workspace from their offices to their homes in order to release it before the year's end... and I'm so glad they did. Let's dive into why *Soul* is not only one of Pixar's best films, but **one of the best films in Disney's history**.

SPOILERS AHEAD FOR *SOUL*!



You heard me right. *Soul* is one of the greatest films in Disney's entire history. Pixar has delivered a remarkable piece of art — a piece of art we needed in 2020.

Soul tells the story of Joe Gardner (Jamie Foxx), a middle school band teacher and aspiring jazz musician who books the gig of his dreams, and shortly thereafter... dies. Morbid, right? Yeah. It's certainly a dark and mature thought, but that's nothing that Pixar isn't used to.

In fact, director Pete Docter's films have always pondered these adult concepts. No one ever claimed *Up* wasn't heartbreaking, or that *Inside Out* wasn't emotionally thought-provoking, or that *Monsters, Inc.* wasn't humanizing. Docter is experienced in delivering complex, mature concepts in a format enjoyable to families.

We've seen *Up*, *Inside Out* and *Monsters, Inc.* teach us big, important lessons and leave us feeling different than we went in. So what does *Soul* do? Which transcendent, grand lesson can we learn from Docter's newest flick? Well, **it's actually the littlest lesson yet...** and yet still leaves the greatest impact.



After his death, Joe is transported to a theoretical realm known as “The Great Before” where new souls gain their personalities. He’s mistaken for a soul mentor, and assigned to 22 (Tina Fey), the most ornery soul there. Through a turn of events, both 22 and Joe are implanted back on Earth, with 22 trapped in Joe’s body and Joe’s soul trapped in a cat. They go on a hectic adventure around New York City trying to restore what they’ve done.

I recently read somewhere that movies aren’t checklists with boxes for you to critique and judge on their merits, but that they’re experiences for you to take in and leave feeling changed. I agree with this sentiment wholeheartedly, but if *Soul* were a checklist, **it would still check every box.**

One of *Soul*’s greatest accomplishments is its beautiful and innovative animation. The landscapes presented are mesmerizing to say the least, from the realism of New York City, to the ebullience of The Great Before, to the entrancement of the realm of lost souls, to the unique artistry of the Hall of Everything, to the abstractness of The Great Beyond. The entire film is simply gorgeous.

Beyond the animation, the performances, characters and writing are all spectacular. Jamie Foxx and Tina Fey shine as a duo. They give the film the personality it needs, and **the writing does all the rest.**

The humor is sidesplitting, and each scene exists with a specific purpose. In fact, the film wastes no time jumping right into the story (Joe literally dies before the opening credits roll).

That said, I've seen *Soul* twice now, and I didn't hold this opinion each time. Upon first viewing, I found the pacing to be inconsistent. I found myself thinking "why did we jump right into the story so quickly only to waste time once we're in it?" Joe and 22 spend a lot of time doing things that, on the surface level, don't seem to do anything for the story. As a viewer, we know that Joe **needs** to get back into his body to play his gig, and 22 **needs** to get back to The Great Before. So why are we spending screen time eating pizza, getting a haircut, riding the subway, walking down the street, and doing just regular old life?

It wasn't until my second viewing that I realized... **that's the point.**



I've had some friends and family of mine tell me they didn't love *Soul* as much as they expected to. This may be due to a number of things, but I can't help but think that's the exact reason. As an audience, we're not used to films showing us such ordinary moments. We're used to films delivering a story that's relatable, sure, but the moments we see are heightened versions of real life: they're extra

dramatic, extra funny, extra action-packed. The best films are reflections of our lives, but typically cranked to 100. ***Soul... isn't.***

That's not to say *Soul* doesn't have its fair share of drama, humor or action. Of course it does! But so many scenes between Joe and 22 are simply... regular things, regular interactions between two people (or a person and a cat). So, how does a movie filled with commonplace events tug at the heartstrings so strongly? How does such a film rank in the top tier of Disney's illustrious filmography?

It's because, although these occurrences throughout the film are familiar to us as an audience, and even familiar to our protagonist, they're completely fresh to the character who the **real** spotlight of *Soul* is on: 22.

When 22 experiences these events in Joe's body, she's not **just** eating pizza, she's tasting a delicious food for the first time. She's not **just** getting a haircut, she's learning about the barber's life and how his "spark" may not have been what he thought it was. She's not **just** riding the subway, she's being moved by music for the first time by a street musician. She's not **just** walking down the street, she's playing music with her fingers on the iron railing, she's goofing off with the vent in the ground. I could go on for days.

It's easy for us as the audience to see scenes like this and write them off as inconsequential, but they couldn't be further from it. To Joe, 22 is just doing "regular old life," but in reality, she's **jazzing**, as Joe would call it. Joe's become complacent in a life where he only truly feels alive while playing jazz, but 22's living every single minute.



After their adventure comes to a close, Joe plays his big gig, and 22 returns to The Great Before... but it's not a satisfying close. We watch the whole movie hyper-focused on how Joe **needs** to get back into his body to play his gig, and 22 **needs** to get back to The Great Before. Yet, when each character gets what they want, it's not satisfying. Neither of them have changed. In fact, they're worse off than before.

Joe returns to his home questioning if there's more to life than jazz, and 22 becomes a lost soul. Immediately after 22 experiences life for the first time, Joe discredits her experience, telling her it's nothing special. It's a shattering thing for her to hear. She doesn't know it yet, but she's finally attained her "spark," and Joe shoots her down without a second thought.

It's heartbreaking. It's painful. It's selfish. **And it's what most of us would do.**

Don't get me wrong, I know many people have a zest for life and wake up every morning excited for every little thing that comes their way. Life is a series of ups and downs, and in my personal ups, I've felt what it's like to live that way. But 2020 has been a grueling year for every single person reading this, and I can't help but imagine that most of us would tell 22 the exact same thing Joe did.

It's why I thought the film was wasting time upon first viewing, it's why so many people become apathetic toward those little things. We're so accustomed to the commonplace, that we can only find ourselves "jazzing" when we're doing what we love. **But why can't that include the little things?**

That's what *Soul* is trying to teach us. *Soul* tells us that although the world may be weighing us down and lose its allure in our eyes, those "regular old life" events, those little things haven't changed one bit. What may have once given us a spark hasn't changed... **we have.**

Life itself is still exactly what it was when we were enamored by it. Those commonplace occurrences haven't changed, and there's no obstacle holding us back from jazzing with them as we once did... no obstacle we're unable to overcome, at least.

It's this lesson that makes *Soul* so special. It's a work of art that is not only technically excellent, indisputably hilarious and passionately crafted... but **it can reignite our zest for life itself.**



Pixar has marketed *Soul* on the message that it's "a film about what makes you... you." It's not a film about life, it's not a film about the afterlife, or jazz music, or even souls. The film is about you. It's about Joe Gardner, and he's you. He's me. He's all of us.

In a year as tumultuous as 2020, it's easy to feel as if the world is weighing us down. It's easy to feel like a lost soul going through the motions of everyday life. It's easy to lose sight of the little things in front of us every minute of the day.

Joe Gardner enters this film as a man who's weighed down by the world. He's lost sight of the little things in front of him, and he waits for the next time he can be jazzing. It's the only time he feels alive. After this year, many of us are in the exact same monotonous cycle.

I love writing. I love writing about movies and I love writing about Disney. You could say I'm jazzing right now as I write this. Soon, though, I'll publish it. I'll shut my computer off and go to sleep. I'll wake up tomorrow morning and go through my regular pandemic-altered routine. Maybe I'll watch a movie, maybe I'll hang out with friends or family. Normally, I'd be waiting for the next time I can be jazzing. But I don't think that will be the case tomorrow.

At the end of the film, Joe Gardner re-enters his body permanently, stepping outside and saying "I'm going to live every minute." He's no longer waiting for his next opportunity to go "in the zone," he's taking advantage of the little things, the familiar moments. He's ready to be jazzing even when he's not playing jazz music.

That's what I'm ready to do. I'm ready to live every minute. I'm ready to jazz. We don't always know what's next, but we do know one thing for certain: life is continuing, and the little things remain unchanged.

Pixar, Pete Docter and company have created a film so impressionable, a work of art so touching. *Soul* reaches for the stars and soars above them in every facet, leaving its viewers fundamentally changed as a

result. It's one of the greatest films in Disney's history, and its lasting impact on viewers like myself is nearly incomparable.

Soul's lesson is a lesson of little things, but nevertheless one that has the potential to change the world for the better. It's a lesson that may be the most impactful of any Pixar film yet, and it's exactly the lesson we needed to close out 2020.

It truly is the littlest lessons that leave the greatest impact.