CHANNELING CHANGE

STREAMING AND SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES ARE PROVIDING COMFORT AND ESCAPE IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

BY LINA LECARO
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Shared cultural moments are powerful, especially when they are based in tragedy and struggle. But the world is sharing much more than the fear, loss and sickness of living through a deadly virus. Now more than ever in our history we are sharing the need for escape and connection provided by home entertainment. With the isolation and boredom of pandemic times, we are craving the comfort, laughter, love, mystery, drama and distraction provided by TV and film in particular, but also true life stories, documentaries and “reality” television that allows us to forget the troubles of the real world, if only for a moment. Thankfully, this and more is all available via our television, computer, tablet and phone screens thanks to streaming services.

Even before the coronavirus changed our way of life, streaming services were emerging as an unstoppable force in entertainment. Sure, cable subscription services such as HBO, Showtime, Starz and the like created the template, expanding our viewing choices, offering provocative and adult fare without network TV restrictions, but we had to pay a pretty penny for it. As cable TV transcended the options we had before, the prices seemed to increase exponentially — moreso as internet became bundled into the billing packages — leading to exorbitant fees that at some point simply didn't seem worth it anymore.

For those who already had Netflix (Seems like eons ago when it was just a DVD rental service, doesn't it?), Hulu and Amazon, there was enough to cut the cable cord the past few years, especially when supplemented with Sling TV for certain cable channels and a bargain-priced TV antennae from Best Buy for local stations. But many of us wanted more and with the genie out of the bottle in terms of services, we got 'em.

And now we're all stuck at home in need of something to fill a myriad of hours and satisfy multiple tastes within individual households. From families looking for educational and fun programming for kids to classic and cult film fanatics, to blockbuster buffs, to niche lovers attracted to horror, animation, documentary, sitcoms and more, there is thankfully something for everyone, plus a lot of weird stuff we didn't know we needed. TV, like real life, is full of villains, and yes, heroes too, but beyond local and national news programs, we need more.

As we stay safer at home and wait for a happy ending to our current global distress, at least we can enjoy a few of them on the slew of streaming services out there. Here, a Top 10 list of the best based on price (many are free) and content.

10. PLUTO TV
The leading free streaming television service in the U.S., with an audience of over 22 million and over 250 live, linear channels and thousands of movies and television on demand, Pluto is one of the most bountiful and diverse streaming options available — and it's 100 percent free.

“We offer ease of access with infinite streaming options,” says Jodi Lederman, head of Glob-
al Communications at Pluto TV, “[Plus] a wide array of branded partner channels in addition to our own Pluto TV original channels that are thematically curated from a library we cultivated from our 200 major media partners."

Our favorite feature on Pluto might be its signature “Binge Watch channels” which feature marathon-style programming. Yes, they have entire channels running Bond films (007 on now as a way of reflecting on the current state of world and feeling better by comparison). Highlights here include the new Creepshow series, Cursed—a fun documentary series that looks behind the scenes at famous scary movies — and of course, the spine-tingling films that gave us nightmares as kids, including the original Hills Have Eyes, Shudder Party Massacre and Phantasm.

7. HBO NOW/GO
While many said goodbye to HBO subscriptions after Game of Thrones ended, just as many probably said hello when the service offered 500 hours of programming during pandemic earlier his month. The WarnerMedia-owned network’s #StayHomeBoxOffice initiative made select movies and popular TV shows available without a subscription. The list of free programming includes every episode of nine iconic HBO series, such as The Sopranos, Veep, Six Feet Under and The Wire; WB blockbusters from HBO’s current catalog like Pokémon Detective Pikachu and The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part, and 10 HBO documentaries and docuseries, including McMillions and The Case Against Adnan Syed. Pay for the service and you unlock even more, including Thrones. HBO Go comes with subscription, NOW is $14.99 a month.

6. CBS All Access
NBC’s new Peacock service is on its heels (coming this July), but CBS’ streaming service came out with a bang first, boasting Jordan Peele’s Twilight Zone reboot (which didn’t quite deliver) as well as Christine Baranski’s The Good Fight, live feeds from Big Brother and the opportunity to watch all the network’s shows the day after broadcast on regular TV. Currently, its best offerings include the Star Trek update Picard, and a nicely curated library of films and family shows. It costs $5.99 per month with advertising and $9.99 per month without.

5. Apple+TV
Putting their money where their mouse is, Apple+TV kicked off with an impressive selection of shows, each production as lavish and star-studded as the next. The breakout hit on the platform was definitely The Morning Show, which saw star Jennifer Anniston win big in last year’s award show circuit, but other inspired programming includes originals such as Home, exploring the world’s most imaginative dwellings; Servant, a supernatural thriller; and See, the Jason Momoa vehicle (he can’t see us, but thankfully we can see him). This week, the service debuts the Spike Jonze-directed Beastie Boys Story live documentary which is worth signing up, if only for the trial (7 days). It’s $4.99 per month after that or free for one year with the purchase of Apple hardware.

4. DISNEY+
This ad-free streaming service is shock-full of the classic animated films you’d expect, Star Wars-themed shows and over 50 days worth of The Simpsons. The dizzying Disney array also features content from Pixar, Marvel Studios, National Geographic, 20th Century Fox, Lucas Films and Muppets. If you’ve got kids at home or kids at heart, there’s not much else to say — it’s worth it. They offer a week free and then it’s $6.99/month or $69.99/year ($5.83/month). You can also get the service as part of a new bundle with an ad-free version of Hulu along with ESPN+.

3.1. Amazon Prime Video, Hulu and Netflix
Though all of the above have sought to unseat them, these services make up the holy trinity of streaming and probably will be getting knocked off the top anytime soon. Solidifying their standing as entertainment juggernauts and omnipresent cultural influencers, each service deserves props for never resting on its laurels. Prime’s highpoint thus far was probably winning Emmys for The Marvelous Mrs Maisel and Fleabag, and now that the latter is over, it has some great shows to fill the void (such as the Project Runway wannabe (but better) Making the Cut and the Pacino Nazi thriller Hunters).

Over at Hulu, shows in conjunction with FX top our favorites list such as the white nerd rapper comedy Dave and the feminist drama Mrs. America. (And by the way, you probably noticed that every network, service and movie company continues to merge and merge over again, so yes, one day everything on this list will probably be owned by one entity and we have no idea what that will mean, but as long as they work with talented people, it shouldn’t matter too much).

Finally, there’s Netflix, which has proven anything but chill in terms of new content, especially original content designed to engage us all. As many a think piece has noted, Tiger King for example, couldn’t have come at a more well-timed moment in history, its WTF slice of oddball docu-drama providing a much needed mind-blower when we all really needed to think about something other than our own lives.

As we all do our part to stop the spread of sickness and death, streaming services’ (and social media too) offer endless options and new ways to connect with each other and marvel at this crazy world we live in. When this virus thing is all over, and we all struggle to get back to normal, one thing is for sure, home entertainment will be there, more alive and full of humanity (or not) than ever. We’ll need it too.

Amazon Prime is $119 annually/$12.99 a month; Hulu (Basic- $5.99 per month, Premium- $11.99 per month, Basic + Live TV- $5.49 per month and Premium + Live TV-$60.99 per month); and Netflix is $8.99/$12.99/$15.99 a month.
CALL & RESPONSE: DUBLAB AND ONASSIS L.A.’S QUARANTINE TAPES

A new collaborative radio show speaks to everyone in the world

BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT

L

isteners of beloved indie internet radio station and cultural collective dublab may have noticed something different about their morning lineup lately. At 9:30 a.m. every weekday morning since March 23, a phone rings. The caller is Paul Holdengräber, OLAs founder and director. And on the other end of the line? Well, it could be just about anyone.

The Quarantine Tapes is, structurally, an interview program. A literary historian both blessed and burdened with a curious, restless mind, Holdengräber is happiest conducting conversations with cultural icons and thought leaders, as he did for years leading LACMA’s public programs and subsequently the New York Public Library’s live talks series. Since returning to L.A. and launching OLA, he’s been on the lookout for an innovative way to inhabit its mission as a center of dialog. About three days before the order to stay home was issued, they’d hosted the first of what was meant to be a new salon series held at the cozy OLA house in Los Feliz — a conversation with Henry Rollins, a rather organic process comprising people Paul always wanted to talk to, people he already knows quite well, suggestions from dublab and from other QT guests, research and discovery, and pure chance.

Prompted by the existential quandaries facing us as we move into the second month of danger, uncertainty and isolation, some themes emerge across the conversations. People are worried about going back into the world, medically and emotionally. Some are excited about the rebound of the environment in our absence, others troubled by the exposure of systemic societal faults. Some wonder whether we will remember the lessons we learn at this time or shed them like bad dreams at the first opportunity. Some simply grieve the loss of dear friends.

“I love the idea of doing something both global and very much based in L.A.,” says Holdengräber. “Speaking to each other from within our solitude, wrestling with ideas about what the world will be, what we will be, after. Will we re-prioritize? Perhaps, and I do mean perhaps… but I believe there’s hope.”

Time in every weekday at 9:30 a.m. (or peruse the archive) to find out why: dublab.com/shows/the-quarantine-tapes.
MUSIC

INDIA SHAWN IS FULL OF CALI LOVE

The R&B songstress releases a pair of singles after signing to major label

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

Despite the fact that she's been active in the music industry for a full decade, not nearly enough people are aware of India Shawn. This is due, in large part, to the fact that she's spent a large portion of her career so far focusing on other people. She's written songs for the likes of Chris Brown and Keri Hilson and, as part of the Full Circle writing collective, for Atlanta R&B star Monica. She's worked with Ludacris, Kanye… Shawn's talents have been in demand.

Her own debut album, Origin, dropped in 2012 but things are really hotting up now. In the midst of this pandemic, she's just released two singles simultaneously — "Cali Love" and "Not Too Deep." Both are from a forthcoming EP, and they represent her first releases for Epic Records (and her first on a major).

"That's actually the plan for the forthcoming singles," Shawn says. "We wanted to do something different. Personally, it's been years since I put out a full project and I just wanted to give my fans, and the people who have been listening and supporting during this time, a little something extra. Two is better than one, right?"

Both songs, Shawn says, are representative of the EP. Both were produced by D'Mile (Rihanna, Justin Bieber), and both are blessed with the smooth, emotive, sultry vocals Shawn is known for.

"D'Mile executive produced the whole project," she says. "I'd like to think 'Cali Love' is a little bit more experimental, and then 'Not Too Deep' is a true R&B, soul record. That's the project. I have R&B roots but I love to dabble in different sounds, going against the grain a little bit. That's my preview of what's to come."

Shawn is a Los Angeles native, though she only recently returned after spending 12 years in Atlanta. As a result, this new project is directly influenced by her surroundings.

"I feel like this particular project is kind of a compilation of stories of me being back in Los Angeles as an adult," she says. "I grew up here, and then moved to ATL for 12 years and just got back a couple of years ago. So the project is just having to define it because, to me, after getting out of that relationship, defining it sounded like more work than anything," Shawn says. "So it's just about keeping it light."

Ten years after Origin, and after countless background gigs for other artists, Shawn has clearly grown a lot. Certainly vocally. There are no tricks here — just a beautiful, classic R&B voice conveying feelings and telling stories.

"I think I've definitely grown vocally, just from doing background gigs throughout the years and just getting older," she agrees. "And just I've become more free in what I'm willing to share and say. I think before I had a bit of a filter, or I'd censor myself in some ways. I grew up actually in a very religious home, and had a lot of fear about what my family would say on certain topics. But now, I'm breaking out of that shell and I'm a little bit more free with the songwriting."

It's all working out perfectly, and her evolution earned her that major label deal.

"It's amazing because the A&R who signed me, Ezekiel Lewis, I was a fan of his 10 years ago when he was a part of a writing team called The Clutch," Shawn says. "They were my biggest inspiration at that time. I actually ended up forming a songwriting team of my own [Full Circle] with my sister and a couple of friends, based on their model. I was always in touch with the business side of the industry. Ten years later, he's the one signing me to my first major label deal. That's pretty cool."

It's interesting, because much of the narrative over the past few years has been about the decline of the majors in the wake of the digital revolution. Shawn, though, is delighted to have the support.

"I had been doing the indie thing for forever, and so now it's like I'm learning to relinquish certain responsibilities that I don't have to take care of anymore," she says. "I was laughing with one of my people — he was like 'India, you don't have to edit your YouTube videos, we've got you — there's a person at the label for that.' I'm like, 'Oh, OK.' I can just chill a little bit."

Again, her major label debut releases are coming while the country, the world, is on lockdown. Still, the rollout is keeping her busy.

"Putting the music out and promoting it," she says. "Other than that, I've been cooking, eating and Netflixing like everybody else. Trying to work out. I've been more in touch with friends and family, which has been nice because before this, I was on the road and didn't really have time to connect like that."

Besides that, planning this year out is next to impossible. Everything is obviously up in the air. For now, she has a bunch of Instagram live streaming shows on the horizon, so we can at least look forward to that.

"Cali Love" and "Not Too Deep" are out now. The EP is due soon. Follow India Shawn on Instagram to keep up to date on live streaming shows.
FOOD

KEEPING THE FLAMES ALIVE

Bludso’s Bar & Que gets $10,000 infusion from Kingsford Charcoal to keep feeding community

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

In an effort to help save BBQ joints from closing, Kingsford Charcoal has launched the #TogetherWithBBQ program, which will provide financial contributions of up to $250,000 to pit masters across the country to help them keep the flames ablaze. The first recipient of a $10,000 donation is L.A. pit master Kevin Bludso of Bludso’s Bar & Que.

Kingsford will identify 25 U.S. restaurant recipients in need and contribute up to $10,000 each. “When we first talked to the Kingsford team, they said there were so many places in consideration, but Bludso’s was on the top of the list because they were familiar with our story and knew that we would pay it forward,” Bludso tells L.A. Weekly, as his location in Hollywood is surviving the pandemic with a steady takeaway business. “Whatever we give right now will come back to us tenfold. That donation is coming in and going right back out. We need it but there are many who need it much more than us. Bludso and partner James Starr are working with Dine11, the nonprofit organization that’s currently delivering meals to healthcare workers and first responders, as well as the pit master’s Faith Inspirational Missionary Baptist Church community in Compton, where the original BBQ shack opened and has since closed.

“The black community has been hit hard by COVID-19,” Bludso says. “I don’t give to be blessed, I am blessed, so I give.” Additionally, with avid grillers spending more time at home, Kingsford has also implemented realtime responses for its #GrillWhatYouGot program to help curate recipes using ingredients readily available at home. Home chefs can submit the ingredients they have in the fridge and pantry to the Kingsford social media platforms for recipe ideas.

Try these two for coffee-rubbed pork medallions with BBQ butter and a grilled peach-es and cream pizza with salted caramel for summer:

kingsford.com/recipe/coffee-rubbed-pork-medallions-with-bbq-butter

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