



Based on Andrew Ward's epic "Dark Midnight When I Rise," *Steal Away* is the legendary true story of **George White, Ella Sheppard** and **The Fisk Jubilee Singers**, a spectacular choir of young former slaves fighting the KKK's reign of terror against their schools not with bullets or bombs but sensational songs of faith and freedom. *Steal Away* follows the choir's titanic rise from the darkness of slavery to the glittering ballrooms and throne rooms of Europe as they conquer the world... and must then conquer their own demons.

One of the most breathtaking stories ever known, *Steal Away* will feature a spectacularly diverse international cast, the strongest Black female lead ever onscreen, and a sweeping soundtrack by multi-Grammy winning composer **Billy Childs**.

## **WALLACE MOORE**

African-American, 22-25. Tall, strapping, handsome... and a hardcore militant.

Once a shy, tender boy, the brutal murder of both his birth family, then later his adoptive family, by supremacists has made Wallace a fierce separatist militant. Coarse, crass and full of gangster swagger, he believes "our people have no future among whites."

To Wallace's great exasperation, the woman he hopelessly loves - the prim, refined Ella - is staking her life on an integrated, racially colorblind future. She's siding with the enemy. Star-crossed lovers from violently far-flung worlds, their impossible love is a ticking time bomb set to explode.

### **DIRECTOR'S NOTE:**

In meeting Wallace, we aren't encountering a heartless two-dimensional thug. Beyond Wallace's hate-filled veneer, we see in his aching eyes a lifetime of unshed tears - tears of a tender boy's loss, of searing heartbreak and grief - an ocean of tears that, if ever shed, might douse the fires of hate.

But he refuses to cry, imprisoning his tears.

Bringing together the raging militant and the innocent victim whose kind heart was cruelly destroyed are key to creating this complex, nuanced character.

At the rear counter is the movement's leader - old COLT COLTON, an indestructible cuss with a scar-racked body.

SCENE 1 Ella is gazing at lovely HOME MODELS as Wallace and his gang enter.

START → WALLACE  
Sorry we're late, Colt.

Damn he's fine, even with fresh scars. Ella fans herself pretending not to notice - then manically slaps on more rouge. Then --

ELLA  
AAAAHHH!!

"WALLACE  
MOORE"

-- he sneaks up and gooses her.

ELLA  
Garden of mercy! You are a rogue!

12/14/21

WALLACE  
And you've got rouge on your teeth.

She checks her teeth and gasps. He roars with satisfaction and gets to work marking lumber. Coarse, crass and full of swagger, this isn't the sweet kid we met way back.

Ella turns in a snit, waits in vain for an apology, then hisses back:

ELLA  
Jailbird.

WALLACE  
Gonna waste that preacher and his daddy.

ELLA  
Oh now *that's* enlightened.

WALLACE  
(points to shattered windows)  
Those crackers shot this place up last night. Don't worry, first I'll bleed out of them what happened to your mother.

Ella can't go there. She *harumphs*, then goes back to gazing at the home model, talking to herself only louder.

ELLA  
Fifty-Three-B, I do believe you're the one; you'll be "the finest house in Nashville." Maybe just... extra bedrooms, for children?

She bats Wallace a look.

STEAL AWAY

WALLACE

Why stop there? How about marble floors? Sapphire outhouses? One of those new "toilets" that's all the rage?

ELLA

I can dream.

WALLACE

Dream on.

*Ouch*, his scoffing hurts. Just then, she spots a YOUNG MAN approaching Colt from the back room and gasps.

ELLA

Mr. Turner! Not you!

Turner sees her and ducks out. Ella hits the roof.

ELLA

That's *another* of my students, ~~Mr. Colton, not one of your separatist disciples!~~ He hasn't been to school in weeks! *DON'T SELL OUT, MR. TURNER!*  
(fumes)  
He sold out.

WALLACE

He saw the light.

ELLA

*Moths* see the light. "The Great Black Exodus" is a dead-end.

WALLACE

Your delusions are the dead-end. Add all the "rooms" you want, Nashville is white-man's land; we got no future here.

ELLA

Ah, but a militant *realtor-slash-prophet* and his *carpenter-thugs* herding Negroes off to some Caucasian-free Nirvana in Kansas - sounds like a *real* future.

WALLACE

Just bought a thousand acres; we break ground in the fall.

ELLA

Well *Happy Pitchforks*.

WALLACE

You should see it - blue skies, green fields, freedom like the wind.

ELLA

Thanks, we get wind here. And, by the way, *freedom*. What don't you see?? It's a bright new day!

WALLACE

(beat, his eyes haunted)  
Suns set.

ELLA

This one's not. We'll get the Civil Rights Bill. After that, we'll be --

WALLACE

"*Living the Dream!*"

ELLA

Our friends in Congress are seeing to it; the President has sworn his support. Meanwhile, the AMA --

WALLACE

Your white shining knights!

ELLA

Our *friends*. They're paving our way to the White House.

WALLACE

*The White House...*

(shakes his head)  
Let me help you --

ELLA

*Garden of Mercy.*

WALLACE

Whites come in two stripes - devils and devils. Your problem is, you think there's a third.

ELLA

You're wrong. Our friends are true friends.

WALLACE

So they seem. But beneath his nods and smiles - *at his core of cores* - every white man fears black flesh. Black is the *color* of white fear, and what he fears he must put down.

ELLA

You're wrong as wrong gets!

WALLACE

He can't help it, it's primal - supremacy and domination flow like gangrene in his blood. His retinas see us as threats to be taken out.

ELLA

Hence their orphanage that raised you.

WALLACE

Some suffer flare-ups of guilt, so to douse their liberal conscience they condescend from on high, take the form of a bondservant and present themselves as angels of light, casting benevolent crumbs at our tribal feet. And long as we remain downtrodden niggers looking gratefully up at those white wings, all is well. But rise up - stand to our feet and look across space into those retinas - they'll snap out of their stupor and reclaim the throne. Then we'll wake from ours and see the horns we'd overlooked all along.

ELLA

(bristles)

You're the other side of Bishop's coin. You hate as much as they do.

WALLACE

Well said.

ELLA

Then I fear for your soul.

WALLACE

Do.

ELLA

*What happened to you??* Your father builds here in Nashville, right? What does he think of --

WALLACE

Leave Pop out of this!

ELLA

~~He's not going to Kansas, is he?~~  
~~I've never even seen him in here!~~  
 What, after he "taught you everything" you're abandoning him for Colt?!

WALLACE

LEAVE HIM OUT.

ELLA

(shattered)

God, what am I doing here?

WALLACE

O mystery of mysteries!

ELLA

Come again?!

WALLACE

Come on - you're here four times a week, every week, on my shift.

ELLA

(turns bright red)

To see the models!

WALLACE

You know those models down to the glue!

ELLA

Meaning?!

WALLACE

You're full of sound and fury, but we both know --

ELLA

What?! What?!

Her mouth agape, he INCINERATES HER WITH A KISS that would scorch a volcano. Her heart blazes; her head sizzles; she flails like a drunken boxer to beat him off but is too disoriented to connect.

He releases her with a wink.

WALLACE

You'll be chasing me to Kansas.

*Unbelievable!* She stares at the villain, woozy and wobbly, commanding her brain to function. Desperate to regain control, she racks her head for a potent comeback but manages only --

ELLA

Oh you know that, do you?

WALLACE

(grins)

Like water's wet and flies fly.

She SLAPS him, then SLAPS him again. *There!* It took a minute, but she's back on her game.

ELLA

Get used to flies. When Kansas goes bust you'll be back cleaning latrines.

WALLACE

Oh will I?

ELLA

Sewage Services, a *thug's* future. Say Hi when you get to the "sapphire outhouse" on Covenant Lane.

He glares at her.

WALLACE

Covenant Lane??

Something just changed. He looks at her incredulously.

ELLA

Th-that's the parcel I hope to build Momma's house on.

END

His eyes go cold. Suddenly, she feels horribly alone.

ELLA

It sounds far-fetched I know, but I'm cobbling my pennies. Looks like the land's been vacant years. Maybe God --

***SNAP!!*** The plank in his hands SNAPS IN TWO. She flinches as he SLAMS IT DOWN and exits.

**INT. MAKESHIFT CHOIR ROOM - THAT NIGHT**

A madcap BIRTHDAY PARTY for Ella. White and the motley choir surround her at the piano, guzzling cider like drunks and howling their way through stacks of wretched American songs:

ALL

*Let me spank him for his mother,  
He is such a naughty boy!  
He the baby tried to smother  
And he's broken Fannie's toy!  
Oh I'll spank him for his mother,  
For he's such a tiresome braaaaat --*

**GONG!** They murder the foul song with a nasty PIANO CHORD. Uproarious laughs, merciless jeers.

## SCENE 2

After a breathless eternity she sweeps him with daydreaming eyes.

START → ELLA  
Build us a home.

WALLACE  
Done.

ELLA  
(holds her breath)  
Extra bedrooms?

WALLACE  
Three?

ELLA  
(smiles)  
Three works.

WALLACE  
Sapphire outhouse of course. Toilet.  
Farm out back.

She steps back.

ELLA  
Farm?? We're talking Nashville.

WALLACE  
I'm talking Kansas. You know I'm  
moving there to build settlements.

ELLA  
That was *then*. Look where we are -  
everything's changed!

WALLACE  
(points to her wounds)  
Yeah, it's getting *worse*. I heard  
what that preacher did to you; I'm  
going to put a bullet in his head!

ELLA  
Brilliant, like his father did yours!

He winces. She curses her insensitivity.

ELLA  
I-I'm sorry. I know he was your life.

WALLACE  
(raging at the memories)  
What they did to Pop... a bullet would  
have been a courtesy.

ELLA

~~Don't let them drive you away - we'll stay and defy them! I know you're a great builder; we'll find you clients in Nashville! I'll teach! We'll save and start new lives on Covenant La--~~

WALLACE

(clenches his fists)

Covenant Lane!

ELLA

There's more to this. What aren't you telling me?!

WALLACE

(pacing furiously)

Nothing to tell!

ELLA

I don't believe it.

WALLACE

Believe it! I'm *through* going to black funerals, watching them chalk out black figures on concrete!

ELLA

Hate won't bring him back!

WALLACE

Hate's all I got - they took everything else! You want me and my boys out of Nashville! We stay, it burns!

ELLA

I can't believe that!

WALLACE

*Believe it!* I want them dead - ALL OF THEM!

ELLA

No... no... I won't --

WALLACE

BELIEVE IT! I WANT RIOTS! BULLETS!  
NIGGERS IN WARPAINT CUTTING HEADS!  
WHITE BLOOD SOAKING SIDEWALKS! I WANT  
THIS HOUSE OF LIES TORCHED TO CINDER  
WITH THOSE BLUE-EYED SNAKES IN IT!

He SHOVES OVER A TABLE. She shudders in horror. Seeing her cower, he checks his rage and starts over.

WALLACE

I want to *protect* you, make a safe home for our family. I can't do that in Nashville. Now with Bishop's *butchers* set to seize power --

ELLA

Take back?!

He looks at her incredulously.

WALLACE

The Amnesty Act. Your "friends" upstairs just restored voting power to the Sons of the Southern Cross. Our slavers have been cleared to retake government, *and us*.

ELLA

(staggered, but defiant)

Congress can pass whatever they want. The President's on our side --

WALLACE

Your boy *Judas* signed it into law. And those U.S. troops that're supposed to "protect" us down South? They're packing it in - lock, stock and barrel. Game over.

ELLA

(breaking down)

Y-you're wrong. We're winning this. It's a new day.

WALLACE

Oh right - "*Rise and Shine, it's that Great Getting Up Morning*." Wake up!

ELLA

Y-you haven't seen what we've seen, the change breaking out. Read the papers!

WALLACE

Read past your own headlines to the real news! America's washing its hands of us and handing us to our executioners - and while you crow "*Mission Accomplished*," they're gearing up for the kill! With nothing standing between us and that Southern Cross, Nashville's a bloodbath waiting to happen! It's dark midnight for our people; there'll be no sunrise for us, not in this life or the next!

ELLA  
Please...

WALLACE  
Wake up!

ELLA  
DREAM WITH ME!

WALLACE  
WAKE UP!

Shattered, she slumps to the floor. He SMASHES a glass cabinet.

GUARDS rush in. Wallace doesn't resist as they furiously BEAT HIM DOWN. As they haul him off, he SHOUTS back:

WALLACE  
YOUR AMA "LIBERATORS" - ASK THEM  
WHAT'S GOING ON! ASK THEM!!

CUT TO: END

**EXT. WHITE HOUSE - ROOFTOP TERRACE - SHORTLY AFTER**

The Jubilees anxiously huddle with Hiram, Susan, and Cravath. The mood is dire. Ella is there but not there, her head still reeling.

Hiram points into the distance at an ABORTED CONSTRUCTION SITE.

BENNIE  
The Washington Monument, abandoned by  
Congress twenty years ago.

HIRAM  
Ruins of a great promise.

WHITE  
Translate.

HIRAM  
The Southern Cross' race-baiting has  
panicked Middle America, and Moderates  
in Congress, into fearing us as  
equals. We're losing Washington.

SUSAN  
Which puts the Southern Cross within  
striking distance of retaking the South.  
If their party wins the upcoming  
elections --

AMERICA  
Goodbye tomorrow.

**"MR. COLTON, WILL PURCHASE HOME MODEL 53B CONSTRUCTED ON COVENANT LANE PARCEL. SUSAN GILBERT TO TRANSACT IN MY ABSENCE. ELLA SHEPPARD."**

We WIDEN to reveal an anguished Wallace reading the telegram. He's sitting alone on the dirt at the:

SCENE 3 COVENANT LANE PARCEL

Looking the property over with haunted eyes, he digs his hand into the earth and pulls up hardened ash, the remnant of a great fire.

STAY →

SUSAN (O.S.)

This is where it happened.

Susan has quietly arrived.

SUSAN

Mr. Colton said you were here. I know why.

Wallace wants to shout *GET AWAY* to her and everyone like her... but his heavy spirit pleads for a shoulder. She sits beside him.

He fights saying anything, then gestures to the home that once was.

WALLACE

We were there in the den, Christmas Eve. I'd just given Pop the chess set I'd been carving all year - I wanted to make it just like he would've. I could tell he saw the flaws, but he just smiled and held me as if there were nothing more perfect in the world. I hated myself - *there were so many flaws* - but Dad's heartbeat always made everything all right. *That's when they broke in...*

(long, painful beat)

After the funeral, I came back and burned it down, which is kind of funny because all I ever wanted was a home.

He releases the ash from his hand.

WALLACE

I miss him so much.

Tears well up, but he curses his weakness and beats them back.

SUSAN

You can cry.

WALLACE

(deflecting)

I gave the land to Colt. Now he's asking me to build the house for her.

SUSAN

You could tell her what happened here. If she knew, she'd give up Nashville.

WALLACE

And kill *her* dreams? This is "God's gift" to her, and where he cursed *me*.

SUSAN

You think it hurts now; let her go and you curse yourself.

WALLACE

How do I make a home here?! How do I live in this hell?! Everything reminds me of that night!

She clasps his hand.

SUSAN

Her dreams would be your cross to bear.

Ashamed of his emotion, he covers his face. Susan leans in, lays his head on her shoulder, and weeps for him.

FADE OUT.

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**INT. "HAVELL'S PORTRAIT STUDIO" - DAY**

END

The Jubilees enter to find a curious peacock wrangling an enormous BACKDROP into place. The painter HAVELL is a short, snarky, strangely endearing character with a Dali moustache, bizarre foreign accent and mauve staining rag he literally slings from a holster.

He's painfully unimpressed with the choir.

HAVELL

Look what the low tide swept in.

WHITE

Mr. Hovel?

HAVELL

Havell.

WHITE

The painter?

Havell spits at White's feet.

SCENE INT. WALLACE'S CARRIAGE - CLEAR SKIES - DAY

A bumpy ride on a rural road. Ella is furious at being kidnapped.

START → ELLA  
You have no right! It's *my* life!

WALLACE  
*She's* your life.

ELLA  
Don't do this to me. She'd know what happened over there; it's a miracle our lawyers got us home on bail.

Livid, she turns in a snit... but can't stop eyeing his shirt.

WALLACE  
So, someone walks into the Bureau, tells them where to find her. Doesn't give a name, just mumbles "No more" and leaves.

ELLA  
I know, sounds cryptic.

WALLACE  
Sounds like a confession.

ELLA  
And you know this, and the way there *how?*

WALLACE  
Bureau records are public.

She festers with attitude... yet again eyes his shirt. The air is a powderkeg of emotion.

Wallace has something solemn on his heart. He takes a breath.

WALLACE  
Ella...

ELLA  
(snitty)  
Miss Sheppard.

WALLACE  
Miss Sheppard...

ELLA  
(thaws just a little)  
Ella.

He sighs; this is going to be hard.

WALLACE

I know things didn't pan out as you'd hoped...

ELLA

If you came to take a victory lap, you can swagger your six hundred miles back to Kansas.

WALLACE

*Eight*, and that's not why I --

ELLA

How *is* Haystack Haven?

WALLACE

That's what I'm getting at. It's a place of fresh starts.

She *harumphs*. He pushes back.

WALLACE

Granted, it's no Chelsea.

ELLA

Meaning??

WALLACE

No ballrooms, waltzes, *octopusses* named *John*.

ELLA

You read gossip?!

WALLACE

Some gossip ain't gossip. Maybe *I* should take up the fiddle!

ELLA

Let's set the record straight - you ditched *me*!

WALLACE

Fact check - *I* didn't cross the Atlantic for greener pastures!

ELLA

No, you crossed the Mississippi! At least *I* dress myself.

WALLACE

Huh??

ELLA  
Don't change the subject. What's her name?

WALLACE  
Whose??

ELLA  
The little strumpet that dolled you up!  
Don't coil your nose at me! A woman knows!

WALLACE  
A woman *imagines!*

ELLA  
Men don't wear lilac!

WALLACE  
I *like* lilac! You've *seen me* in lilac!

ELLA  
Not that shade! Come on: Tish? Latonda?

WALLACE  
You're tripping!

ELLA  
Kaneesha? Koolaidria?

**BUMP!!** The carriage LURCHES ON A POTHOLE, flinging Ella's dress clear over her head. ↓

ELLA  
(flailing in horror)  
AAAUUUGGH!!

She snatches down her dress and SWATS HIM.

ELLA  
You looked! I *know* you looked! Did you see anything?!

WALLACE  
(biting his lips)  
"Anything"??

ELLA  
(SWATS him again)  
Stop grinning! *Anything!! Anything!!*

WALLACE  
Nothing Providence didn't want me to.

ELLA

If you did, Scripture abjures you to blot it out of your mind! Philippians 3:13!

WALLACE

"Forgetting that which is behind."  
It doesn't say forgetting *your* behind!

He roars with laughter. She SWATS HIM HYSTERICALLY.

ELLA

Thug! You're no theologian! You did that deliberately!

WALLACE

And bust the carriage? Lose my deposit?

She turns in a huff and fights to stay mad. Getting serious again, he forces a straight face and picks up where he left off.

WALLACE

Look, I know I'm rough around the edges...

ELLA

Oh, at middle, too.

WALLACE

Probably, but...

ELLA

Waaaaay down to the core.

WALLACE

Doubtless.

He reaches for her hand...

WALLACE

This isn't the most traditional way of asking --

ELLA

What is it?!

... but it's all going over her head. He gives up.

WALLACE

No matter.

ELLA

I'm not going to beg.

She turns away in a snit. Wallace grins, then - **BUMP!!** - DRIVES OVER ANOTHER POTHOLE, sending her dress sky-high.

ELLA  
AAAUUUGGH!!

**EXT. RURAL MANOR - LATER**

END

They've arrived. Ella SLAPS Wallace for his mischief, then checks her makeup and asks --

ELLA  
How do I look?

FRONT DOOR

Ella quakes with dread; this is the moment she's poured out her life for. She knocks, then tells herself not to run away.

An eternity passes. We hear footsteps, then a pause. Then the narrow peephole opens, revealing EYES we last saw in a sweatbox.

ELLA  
Momma!

SARAH  
Sam!

And here they are, mother and daughter, together again after twenty years. Their eyes light up, and for the briefest moment they gaze at each other as if beholding dreams.

THEN THE DOOR OPENS

... revealing two women that couldn't be more different: one coarse and disheveled wearing field-stained rags; the other an elegant Victorian. Ella breaks into tears of joy, but as Sarah looks at her opulent daughter, we see a terrible self-consciousness set in.

ELLA  
May I?

INSIDE

Sarah awkwardly shows Ella in. After a lifetime of longing, Ella can't control herself; she breaks out and clutches Sarah deeply, burying herself in her mother's bosom as if all were finally right with the world.

ELLA  
Oh Momma, I've missed you! I've missed you so much!