



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**.

# **SARAH SHEPPARD**

African-American, female, plays 30 then later 50.

Ella's enslaved mother. A quietly towering figure.

Cursed by slavery, Sarah is the "property" of a cruel master. Devastated at learning he's been secretly exploiting her three-year-old daughter Ella to spy on other slaves then torturing them for disobedience, Sarah makes a harrowing sacrifice to protect her precious girl at any cost, a sacrifice that will tear Sarah's heart to shreds and haunt Ella for the remainder of the film.

A deeply emotional role.

## **DIRECTOR'S NOTE**

Though enslaved, Sarah is anything but weak. Bold and unflinching, her penetrating eyes, manner and speech reveal a woman of deep intellect, dignity, and courage.

Important: Sarah's dialogue, written in the vernacular of 19th-century enslaved communities, should be read as rich, vivid, and full of nuance, at times resounding with almost poetic beauty.

# "SARAH SHEPPARD<sub>2</sub>"

12/14/21

He wrests the girl free, then flips her over and WHACKS her back, begging God to revive her. The girl CONVULSES and COUGHS UP WATER.

SARAH  
NO! GOD NO!

The girl revives. Her wide eyes open, and we reveal the face of --

SARAH  
**SAM!** **ELLA!** BISHOP

-- SAMUELLA "ELLA" SHEPPARD, 3. Frightened, little Ella scans the scene as if in a nightmare, then sees Sarah --

ELLA  
Momma!

-- and buries herself in her mother's bosom.

Bishop glares incredulously at Sarah. Vexed and confused, he paces about in a state, replaying in his head what just happened.

BISHOP  
I'm down at the whipping post before  
service dealing with the *runaways*.  
Stain the robe, but before I can  
change hear shouts up at the river.  
Get here straightaway, looks like a  
woman, maybe a white woman, is being  
beaten or raped. *But I'll be  
goddamned if it ain't my house nigger  
fending off my field niggers!*

Thinning clouds slowly BRIGHTEN THE SCENE, revealing the Figures to be FIELD SLAVES. It's 1853. We're on Bishop's plantation, and he's seeing red.

BISHOP  
What happened here, Sarah Sheppard?!

But Sarah is lost in furious thought; Ella's revival has set her mind racing. A distant CHURCH BELL rings.

BISHOP  
ANSWER ME! I'M LATE TO PREACH!

His fists tighten. His son, MYRON, looks at her anxiously.

CLOSE ON SARAH - Her eyes fire with a VISION. We see that it's a heavy, heart-wrenching vision. Her eyes mist over; she looks at Ella, both shattered and relieved, then kisses her bittersweetly.

Then Sarah's face turns *fire*. She faces Bishop - fists clenched, eyes aflame.

STEAL AWAY

START →

SARAH

Brother Bo, good sister Hattie, their sweet boy Wallace...

BISHOP

The runaways; I got the boy here.

He points to the frightened slave boy cowering at his feet. This is little WALLACE.

SARAH

Samuella and me heard it all tonight - their flesh splitting, screams for mercy, throats choking with blood.

BISHOP

The sounds of *discipline*; you've heard it before.

SARAH

Many times. But tonight I notice Sam ain't troubled by it. I ask why not. She say, "*They's just getting they due.*" I feel a knot in my chest. "Child, who tell you that?" "*Bishop.*" Bishop?! Now it's a knife. "Baby, what else he be saying to you?" "*Just asking what the 'niggers' be up to, day in, day out.*" "Bo and Hattie planning to escape - you the one tell him 'bout that?" Sam start shaking. Tears of guilt fill her eyes. My heart stops; now I can't breathe; an eternity I want no part of goes by. She look away - "Yes'm." Oh God...

(turns to the slaves)

He been using Samuella to spy on us all, then raining down bloodshed. Forgive us!

STARK MOONLIGHT now reveals the HEINOUS SCARS racking the slaves' FACES and bodies, and the FRESH BLOOD drenching Bishop's holy robe. Strikingly, his son Myron's face - a sweet, shy face - is just as marred as the slaves'.

Bishop fondles Ella's hand.

BISHOP

Yes, my little helper is a godsend.

Sarah snatches it back.

SARAH

Was. My Sam will never again be party to your cruelty.

Bishop glares at her. The CHURCH BELL rings again.

SARAH

(contemptuous)

Better wash that robe, "Bishop".

Myron's eyes beg Sarah to *hush* - the boy clearly cares for her.

But Sarah is beyond fear. Bold and unflinching, she now speaks her vision... as Bishop angrily grasps what happened at the river.

SARAH

The voices were right...

BISHOP

So, full of woe, you brought Ella to the river and *drowned* yourselves...

SARAH

I see it now; I didn't then...

BISHOP

The niggers *saved* you.

SARAH

My baby won't be raised a slave.

BISHOP

(points at Ella)

INSOLENT APE! THAT'S MY PROPERTY!

SARAH

By God's reckoning or your own?!

BISHOP

THEY ARE ONE AND THE SAME!

SARAH

We'll see about that.

BISHOP

WE WILL!

(tosses SASH to two slaves)

YOU TWO, BIND HER!

The slaves hesitate. Just then, Wallace's folks BO and HATTIE race onto the scene.

↓	BO and SON!	↓	HATTIE
WALLACE!			
	BISHOP		
	(raises his SHOTGUN)		
	I SAID BIND HER!		

MOMMA!      WALLACE  
                  DADDY!  
                  BISHOP  
                  (cocks it)  
 NOW, GODDAMMIT!!

SARAH

BO!! HATTIE!! GET BACK!!

THE CHURCH BELL RINGS. ***BLAM BLAM!!*** He SHOTS BO AND HATTIE DEAD then takes aim at the two slaves. Wallace SCREAMS. Everyone SCREAMS. Ella SHRIEKS as the slaves SEIZE Sarah and WRESTLE her to the ground, their eyes begging her forgiveness.

Though harrowed beyond words, as the slaves hog-tie Sarah, she locks defiant eyes with Ella.

SARAH

As I faced the river, you in my arms, I heard the choir, the voices on the wind. They said, "Don't do it, Sarah; we have need of this child - far from here, far from you. Sing with us - 'Steal Away'." The voices were loud, but your tears were louder, and knowing that son of hell was making you his... This river's called out to me many times; tonight I was listening.

(looks at the river)

But God gave you back. The voices were right; *he's going to set you free.*

BISHOP

You're deluded!

SARAH

Free her or so help me this river *will* free us both.

BISHOP

I'll drown you myself first!

SARAH

(points to Myron)

And pretend to rear this boy when I'm gone, as if you had the first clue?! I've raised Myron as my own since missus' death, and he loves me as *his* own.

BISHOP

Let's remedy that.



Breathing fire, he hands Myron a SPIKED BULLWHIP.

BISHOP

Do her.

SARAH

Do it yourself! Myron's a good boy!

Myron bursts into tears. Bishop BASHES HIS FACE with the shotgun.

BISHOP

Craven!

Sarah SHRIEKS for Myron as the boy falls to the ground SCREAMING. Bracing for what's next, Sarah speaks to her baby girl as if for the last time.

SARAH

Go to the Seventh Street Church here in Nashville; ask anyone how to get there. Find old Mr. Dunley, the organist. He'll take you in.

(sweeping Ella's eyes)

Precious baby, you got a call on your life, God's word. Run your race, fast and far. Become everything your stupid mother wasn't. And don't ever turn back - *I won't let you.*

But Bishop shoves a rag into Sarah's mouth then seizes Ella's face **END** and GLARES PIERCINGLY into her wide eyes.

BISHOP

Now you *hear* God's word, Ella Sheppard...

(gestures to the carnage)

That blood, those battered FACES - it's all your doing. You betrayed your people, bringing heaven's wrath on them; then betrayed me, damning your mother. Those FACES will haunt you the rest of your rotten days, and no matter how far or fast you run in your miserable life, you'll never escape the truth that you're worthless trash your mother *should have drowned.*

CLOSE ON ELLA - She gasps, her mouth violently agape as she silently SHRIEKS at his curse.

Bishop takes a stance over Sarah, winds back the bullwhip, then commands his bleeding son --

BISHOP

Take note.