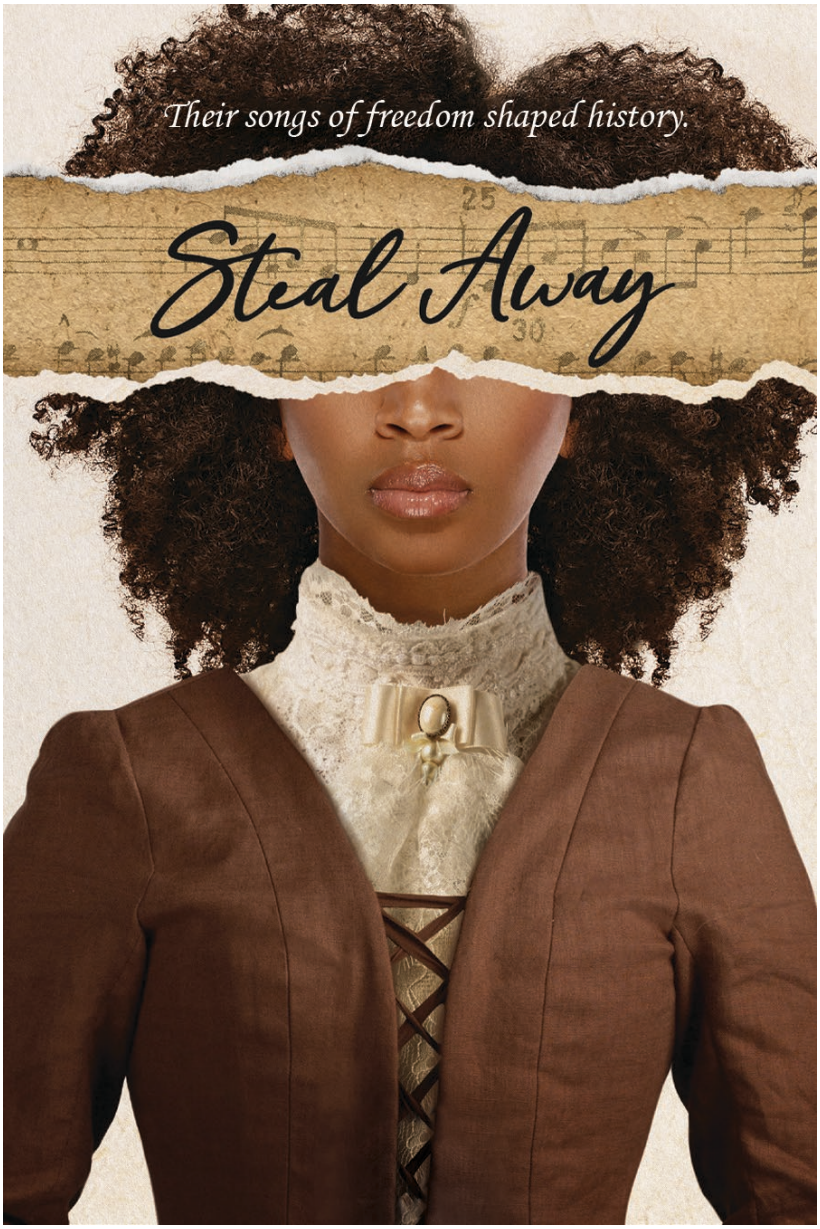

Based on Andrew Ward's epic "Dark Midnight When I Rise," *Steal Away* is the legendary true story of **George White**, **Ella Sheppard** and **The Fisk Jubilee Singers**, a spectacular choir of young former slaves fighting the KKK's reign of terror against their schools not with bullets or bombs but 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**.

CLIFFORD VETTER

British, any ethnicity but Black, 40-55, written as male but could be female.

Vetter is a venomous, power-hungry Crown Prosecutor, a dour prig whose only joy is inflicting misery. Bitterly spiteful towards anything smacking of religion, Vetter sets his/her daggers on The Jubilee Singers, who have brought the *spirituals* to England.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Although Vetter's dialogue is colorfully written, don't read Vetter as a two-dimensional, over-the-top villain. No caricatures. Imagine Vetter to be a highly intelligent, deadly serious servant of the Crown who just happens not to have smiled in decades... and genuinely believes that organized religion, and the Jubilees, are the enemy of the state.

And remember, Vetter was once an innocent child.

"CLIFFORD VETTER" 12/14/21

WHITE
Don't you give up, Sam; I won't let you!
(then, an epiphany hits)
Curse the fates - *build it for her!*
Build the house on Covenant Lane!

ELLA
No.

AMERICA
If England goes well, you can pay for it!

ELLA
I can't live in an empty house.

STEAL AWAY

WHITE
Sam --

ELLA
That house can't be empty!

WHITE
It won't be! You'll find your mother; Wallace will come to his senses.

ELLA
You *see* that?! You're telling me you *see* us together?!

Her tears beg him to promise it. White searches himself, then concedes...

WHITE
No, no I don't. But I see a fighter, a prayer warrior with *faith* that could stop a planet. And she's going to put feet to that faith.

Ella breaks down, clutching White and America as she takes that in. They enfold her deeply in their arms as we --

FADE OUT.

INT. ARGYLL MANSION - JUBILEE HALL FUNDRAISER - NIGHT

SCENE 1

We're at a posh affair with nobles and aristocrats. And thanks to Maggie, it's a total disaster: the Jubilees are causing an uproar emulating her highly offensive *Englishisms*. As insulted guests leave in droves, Ella frantically works the room to put out fires.

Meanwhile, a dour prick named VETTER mocks the choir to White's face:

1/9

START →

VETTER
Pretentious asses. And to think, you probably *prayed* a lot about this.

WHITE
What are you, an atheist??

VETTER
Freethinker, thank you.

WHITE
Methinks you're at the wrong party; we're just a bunch of backwards, *miracles-really-happen* bumpkins.

VETTER
Pre-enlightened Americans! You'll *need* an Act of God to get you out of this shipwreck. What are you, their driver?

WHITE
What's your beef, pal - did I piss on your leg?

VETTER
I'll season my words with grace: You missionary leeches are the excrement of the Earth. That your cesspool of Bible-Belt religion exists at all is scourge enough, but that like turds on the tide you should wash up on our shores to spread your sewage incites me to fury. *Oh my, was that indelicate?*

White slips a dollar into Vetter's pocket.

WHITE
Your eyes are browning; enema's on me.

VETTER
(outraged)
Do you know who I am?!

WHITE
No, but you'll smell better after the procedure.

As Vetter seethes, the DUKE OF ARGYLL storms up.

DUKE
White! We extend our guests to you, and your people send them home in outrage?! The Duchess demands an explanation!

LATER - MAIN ROOM - IT GETS WORSE

Bennie's fundraising pitch. As White eggs him on from the sidelines, Bennie displays the majestic Jubilee Hall rendering to the seated guests. Jubilee Hall is truly breathtaking - unlike Bennie's bumbling pitch. Battered by stage fright and blinded by cascading sweat, he stammers out a catastrophically incomprehensible speech.

BENNIE
Wh-while the chain of s-slavery is long in the behind of B-B-Britain, A-America's cast only j-just got th-them off. Every *quaid* you g-g-give to build Jubilee Hall...

Our heart sinks for Bennie. Sitting with the Prime Minister, the prick Vetter mocks Bennie...

VETTER
Buffoon!

... but the Prime Minister is quietly impressed:

END

GLADSTONE
No, there's a fire there.

MEANWHILE, IN THE --

ADJACENT ROOM

-- the humiliated Jubilees wait in doom to make their entrance.

AMERICA
Let's get this funeral over with!

MINNIE
England would have been nice.

TOM
Do thank Emily and Jane for us, Maggie!

Maggie fumes. Suddenly, we hear the MAIN ROOM stir. Georgia peers in.

IKE
What's going on??

GEORGIA
I can't see. Everyone's standing.

We hear the Duchess' voice:

DUCHESS (O.S.)
It's ma-*ma!*

EXT. DEPARTING STEAMER - STORM-CLOUDED DAY

From the ship's stern, the Jubilees, sans Maggie, wave farewells to English friends and fans. Susan is among the crowd; she and White trade agonizing looks across the widening chasm.

Alone at the bow, Ella stares grimly at the content of the envelope: the DEED to her new, empty house. She sighs. Then steeling herself for what comes next, she looks out to the violent waters ahead.

We BOOM UP, high above Ella and the ship, into the TURBULENT STORM CLOUDS until we're lost in churning mists, then

TIME DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. KANSAS CONSTRUCTION SITE - DAY

Many months have passed. Wallace spiritlessly oversees the construction of new homes. Bearded and bedraggled, he works ruggedly but with lifeless eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. FOREMAN'S TENT - DAY

As Wallace polishes off a flask, a beautiful WOMAN enters. She sets a BOX OF DELIVERIES before him then kisses him. He lets her, while anxiously rummaging through the box.

He finds what he's looking for: an Irish newspaper. He braces himself, then flips through it and stops on a page. His eyes fire with anguish. He slams it down, and we PUSH IN to the headline:

"JUBILEE HOAX? EMBATTLED CHOIR UNDER CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION."

INT. CROWN INTERROGATION ROOM - IRELAND

SCENE 2

A sweltering, underground chamber. A haggard, severely fatigued Ella is being savaged by the malicious Prosecutor. To our shock, he's none other than VETTER, the snarling prig we met at Argyll mansion. The tension between these two is blistering: Ella strains to endure Vetter's venom, but months of grueling work have worn her and her patience to shreds.

START →

VETTER
Yet another postponement! Like your truant Lord, that damned building just doesn't want to appear!

ELLA
The news from headquarters this morning was a blow to us all.

VETTER
Now the AMA is saying --

ELLA
December 1st, final word. Construction's hit --

VETTER
"-- a few more snags, thanks to this pesky recession."

ELLA
Depression now. ~~Your own economists are calling it the downturn of the century~~. It's crippled construction everywhere.

VETTER
Rot! The economy is a smokescreen and your own records will prove it. Which is why I've summoned you: Your people are stonewalling; the documents I subpoenaed are but dribbling in.

ELLA
Mr. Vetter, you've demanded quite the laundry list: receipts, invoices --

VETTER
Ledgers, logs, bank statements, petty cash disbursements down to the penny! I want an encyclopedic tracking of every cent siphoned from British pockets!

ELLA
Sir... as you've been apprised, the tour revenues I remit to New York are first allocated to Jubilee Hall, then to the hundreds of campuses this tour also sustains, each of which generates its own litany of expenditures. That's tens of thousands of documents. ~~I advise *patience*~~.

VETTER
Pathologically!

ELLA
(stands to go)
I've got somewhere to --

VETTER
Sit down!

She seethes... then bitterly obeys.

VETTER
I expected that imbecile White here; my men tell me he hasn't been seen in ages. Where is he?!

ELLA
Indisposed.

VETTER
Meaning?!

ELLA
"Unavailable," as it does.

VETTER
Watch it, I'm the face of the law!

ELLA
Really, the *face?*

Again, she stands.

VETTER
SIT DOWN!

ELLA
I have full power of attorney for the group; I'm afraid you're stuck with *me*.

VETTER
No, you're stuck with me! The Jubilee Singers are under investigation for fraud, embezzlement and racketeering.

ELLA
We've committed no crime.

VETTER
Dung! You ~~whip~~ the *Congregation of England* into raptures proclaiming the "Great, Glorious Coming of Jubilee Hall," plunder their purses, then when you've got all eyes looking to the clouds abscond to Ireland and hit replay?! You silk-robed swindlers are the crime! Oh you stage an impressive show - tending our orphans, serving at soup kitchens and prisons, packing out stadiums "bringing revival to the people"! You've got the world touching the hem of your garment, but I'll prove you're false as hell, you *and* your fictitious "Monument to Freedom"!

ELLA
(pulls out DOCUMENTS)
We've sent you the permits...

VETTER
You haven't barnstormed Britain prophesying *permits.*

ELLA
Construction-site photos...

VETTER
Impossible to authenticate. Nothing absolves you but a government-issued Certificate of Completion, and we both know *that ain't goan happen.*

ELLA
Then arrest us.

VETTER
Oh, I'd have *gallowed* you long ago if I had unfettered power. *But you understand fetters...* The Prime Minister's unfortunate blessing on your tour following Her Majesty's misguided benediction have *set my hooves on eggshells.* I'm forced to stalk you more gingerly than I'd like.

ELLA
You can't touch us without hard evidence. Welcome to justice.

VETTER
Justice is the firing squad you'll soon face. The Prime Minister is coming around.

ELLA
You're confused. Mr. Gladstone is a friend, and *he* at least understands depressions.

VETTER
True that, which is why, (as I haunt his ear), he's losing sleep trying to rationalize - EXHIBIT A - how it is a bunch of beggarly missionaries from a cash-strapped charity could afford those lap-of-luxury lifestyles we all so publicly witnessed in London.

Ella squirms; the room feels suddenly hotter.

ELLA
W-we may have gotten carried away in London, but the choir's hands never touch the till. ~~Our salaries are paid from New York~~.

VETTER
And a king's ransom I'll prove they are: EXHIBIT B - public donations *laundered* into exorbitant paychecks. Those documents will be the spikes in your coffin. The hunt is on.

CLOSE ON ELLA - Vetter's threat conjures something deep, something *ancient* within her. Her searing eyes seize his.

ELLA
Mr. Vetter, you've hunted me all my life. ~~From my birth as your beast to this moment, there hasn't been an hour I haven't felt your breath on my neck~~. Only I swore long ago to keep you behind me. Sorry to *rain reality*, but on December 1st, those "clouds" will part, Jubilee Hall will appear, and you *will* believe.

VETTER
Feculent scum!

ELLA
(stands to go)
We're through.

VETTER
Decidedly. See, what shattered the old man's heart was this *silver bullet*, courtesy of Nashville public records --
(pulls out a document)
EXHIBIT C - a Certificate of Completion, not for Jubilee Hall of course, but a brand new custom home built on choice waterfront property by a young choir director who by all reckoning was near-penniless upon her arrival here. "How is it, sir," (I press), "that while Jubilee Hall languishes unbuilt, this lavish house - a literal stone's throw away - was miraculously *passed over* by this "downturn of the century" that's "crippled construction everywhere"?

Rattled, for the first time Ella is speechless.

8/9

VETTER
His reaction exactly. As it sank in that he, Her Majesty and the whole of Britain were playing the catamite to a company of cons, I saw the scales of faith fall from his eyes. Racked with agony, he assured me that should just one untidy document come to light or Jubilee Hall be delayed just once more, he'd *unchain* me - which I pray happens before you destroy each other, which *my men* prophesy will happen any day.
(gets in her face)
So run, Ella, as far and fast as you can. I AM the fire of your hell, the fury of your nightmares. I will catch you, and after making a bloody spectacle of your arrest and trial, I will damn you to the dungeons, where I swear you won't see daylight until your Lord returns.

END

INT. PACKED-OUT CONCERT HALL - JUBILEE HALL BENEFIT CONCERT

A MASSIVE REVIVAL. Tens of thousands of fans weep, cheer and *catch the spirit* as the Jubilees raise the roof. The Irish are ecstatic for their Jubilees.

But up close, we're shocked to see that the choir is crumbling. Battered by sickness and exhaustion, we barely recognize the run-down human beings before us. Ominously, Bennie is plagued with a grave cough. White is conspicuously absent.

Suddenly, DRAMA STRIKES. As Minnie sings a high-flying solo --

MINNIE
Sometimes I am tossed and driven,
I don't know where to roam...

-- Loudin brazenly HIJACKS IT. Upstaging Minnie, he strides out front, bows to the crowd, then breaks out in a flashy solo that SOARS TO THE HEIGHTS and careens through an insane tangle of keys:

LOUDIN
I've hearrrrrd of a cityyyyy
called Heaaaaa-vennnnnn...

The choir panics - they're lost amidst his wildly chromatic harmonies. The performance tailspins towards a crash landing.

Ella growls. She scrambles to the piano and launches a spectacular ANTI-BALLISTIC ATTACK, bombarding Loudin with a barrage of tonal chords to lock him into key. The crowd goes wild --

9/9