



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**.

# GEORGE WHITE

Caucasian, 50.

A towering visionary whose courage and sacrifice forever changed the world, White is the co-leader of The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the warmly endearing hero of this story. Tousled and unshaven with faraway eyes and an otherworldly air, White is far too captivated by visions of a world healed by music to think about trifles like grooming.

But as *Steal Away* opens, he's a failed dreamer, a "blind stargazer" and "dangerous visionary" that life has dealt harsh blows, including the tragic death of his wife, which torments him with guilt. Though some cruelly condemn White, the dreamer in him refuses to die; when supremacist forces unleash a reign of terror throughout the South to destroy black schools, White and the choir rise up and fight back, not with bullets or bombs but sensational songs of faith and freedom... the spirituals. Against all odds, they take the country, and the world, by storm, saving hundreds of schools.

And although his harrowing journey will brutally batter him by forces both external and internal, shattering him to the brink of destruction, we will witness in George White a conquering hero and beloved warrior who rose from the ashes and set the world ablaze.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Complex, unpredictable, and full of nuance, White is a maze of contradictions: wildly genius with a touch of insanity, brilliantly visionary yet at times delusional, deeply confident yet deeply insecure, as needy as he is strong. But even in his darkest hour, we never stop believing in the warmly endearing White.

So don't base your George White on any performance you've ever seen. Enthrall us with someone fresh, full of quirks and contradictions. Someone inimitable.

You introduce us to George White.

START → But what if... WHITE

-- something stirs in White's soul, something welling up to be said. He falters, unsure where to start, then goes back in time.

WHITE

I know a man, a poor blacksmith's son who fought at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, then after the horrors of war formed a Sunday school for the children of former slaves. And he sang with them and taught them to sing...

(his eyes widen)

And then they taught him to sing, and when the songs of their people passed into his soul, he knew their power to heal. One night as he faced the stars, voices on the wind, a great *choir* of voices, said to him, "*Our suffering was not in vain.*" Whether he was in or out of the body God knows, but they showed him --

(his eyes sweep the sky)

-- a great temple built of their songs. Its bricks were fired with blood and dust, and it towered over the nations bursting with songs of hope. They said "*God promised this world Jubilee; 'Jubilee Hall' is a beacon to that promise. Take our songs to the world; let us sing to the Earth as we've sung to you. The people will lay those bricks.*"

MINNIE

What happened?

WHITE

Eyes on the stars and songs in hand, he set sail to distant lands with his love and heart, Laura. Laura was ill, but he'd convinced her the trip would cure her...

(painful beat)

It killed her.

(struggles to go on)

His head was a storm; dark thoughts warred for his mind, and life. Enough of stars, and love; he returned in ridicule to bury her, bury the delusions. He fled it all for a desk.

But his eyes spark with a vision.

"GEORGE  
WHITE"

12/14/21

STEAL AWAY

WHITE

But what if their suffering *wasn't*  
in vain, those that braved slavery's  
curse? What if, as perfume is  
pressed from precious roses, God *has*  
lifted from their wounds *salves* that  
heal, inspire, lift up? What if  
those *anthems of hope* that brought  
them through so much darkness could  
light up the world?

IKE

(thunderstruck)

Y-you mean sing the spirituals for --

WHITE

Every soul, everywhere.

BENNIE

Some of those "souls" put us in chains.  
Some want us dead. Some of them --

WHITE

What if there *is* no "them"? Every man  
is slave to some darkness. Beneath our  
fears *and* fury, pain *and* rage, don't we  
all hunger for healing? What if these  
songs are our *swords* to break the  
chains of hate and set both captive and  
captor free? Make hatemongers  
*peacemakers* the world over?

The singers trade stunned looks.

LOUDIN

So the spirituals are gonna fix the  
world, get everyone holding hands?!

IKE

Master heard them, didn't free us. They  
sure as hell didn't "conquer the South."

GEORGIA

The Gospel didn't conquer Rome in a day.  
Maybe they'll do their part if we do  
ours.

Some are haunted by dark memories.

MAGGIE

I- I can't go back to those songs.

ELLA

They're songs of defeat!

WHITE

They're psalms of Jubilee!

ELLA

It's blood music!

WHITE

*That's why I run to it!* Those blood-soaked hymns bathe me in the faith and courage of your mothers and fathers!

LOUDIN

You *shed* their blood!

WHITE

And you *trample* it, leaving their legacy to the mockery of minstrels! Redeem their suffering! Get those songs out of blackface into the hearts of the people! Let's give America her *true* music... and the world what it's *really* hungering for!

The air is charged. Minds churn as White's vision sinks in. Then reality hits.

TOM

We've got one shot, tomorrow's concert.

AMERICA

No way we raise four thousand dollars.

All nod in agreement.

GEORGIA

We'd need songs, arranged and rehearsed overnight. Not a chance we pull it off.

More nods. They nervously search each other's eyes, then --

MINNIE

Where do we start?

White beams. Loudin gestures to the wind.

LOUDIN

This one, *Steal Away*.

ELLA

No.

All eyes turn to the lone holdout. *Steal Away*, which tormented Ella the night Sarah was beaten, is clearly still too painful; but does she mean she won't perform any spiritual?

END

Everyone laughs.

GRANT

Friends, your presence here is an honor to the White House and the nation. The Jubilee Singers have accomplished great things against terrible odds - you're warriors if I've known warriors. Miss Sheppard, I've been singing your praises to the Chinese delegation. May I?

He extends his arm to Ella. The Cutie Pies enviously coo.

PRESIDENT GRANT

Let's make it a party.

Grant escorts the ladies away, leaving White and Susan awkwardly alone. Susan breaks the ice.

SCENE 2

START →

SUSAN

And for his next miracle: waterfalls in the Sahara?

WHITE

Try *man pushing pencil*.

SUSAN

In a new office, on a brand new campus. Not bad for a "blind stargazer."

WHITE

(genuinely touched)

Thank you.

Breaking their gaze, Cravath walks past with a flock of senators.

SUSAN

You know, losing Fisk would have shattered Cravath.

WHITE

What? Old Genghis - *feelings*?

SUSAN

Hey! Are we suggesting my boss isn't the *Sugar-Plumb Fairy*?

They chuckle. Then she gets serious.

SUSAN

No, Milo Cravath is a do-or-die general in a just and dire war; he'd march you, *or himself*, into cannon fire if it would advance the cause.

WHITE

You're the Dark Lord's lieutenant;  
you run his war room. Do you like  
your job?

SUSAN

(hedges)

I believe in it very much.

WHITE

What's the hardest part?

Herr smile fades.

SUSAN

The *friendly fire*, the faces those  
cannons can bury. Heaven help them.

WHITE

Heaven help those led by the weak.  
Cravath can be brutal, but he's the  
best friend the cause ever had. He's  
a decent man.

SUSAN

And when war makes decent men monsters?

WHITE

Monsters cower from just wars.

SUSAN

So, follow command always. No exceptions,  
no exemptions of conscience.

WHITE

Unless *losing the future* is an option.

She takes that in. The ice is melting. He gets spunky.

WHITE

So, what enthralls Susan Gilbert?  
Quilting? Camel racing?

SUSAN

(marvels at his chutzpah)

You're a man of most curious contours.  
You've been told that.

WHITE

Never so nicely. Answer.

SUSAN

No camels I'm afraid, but I'm not  
without hope.

WHITE

Do tell.

SUSAN

I'm rumored to brew a fierce *café au lait*. Ever have a *true café au lait*?

WHITE

Uh, can't say that I --

SUSAN

Ah, watch your back! I may just barge in and brew you one!

They laugh. Then, fidgeting...

SUSAN

And I stay.

WHITE

Huh?

Wow, she can't believe she said that. Red-faced, she looks for the nearest staircase to hurl herself down... then steels herself and goes the distance.

SUSAN

I never leave or forsake you, doubt or disbelieve you. I'm in all the way.

White gazes at her, smitten.

WHITE

Remind me why you're not, you know...

SUSAN

Taken?

WHITE

At least *rented out*.

SUSAN

Maybe I am; *rental's* a low bar.

WHITE

Ah, some *café au lait* freak.

SUSAN

There ya go!

More laughs. Then her eyes sweep his.

SUSAN

You know, George Leonard White is more envied than he knows.

WHITE

Highly doubtful.

SUSAN

Not everyone knows exactly why she gets out of the bed in the morning. George White battles himself, yes, but the day is his sky, and his dreams his wings.

WHITE

Double-edged sword; wings can be a curse.

SUSAN

Some would die for that curse. George White's real problem? He's a very big man in a very small world.

WHITE

You believe that?

SUSAN

I always have.

Lost in each other's gaze, heaven and earth have melted away. These two are alone in their own universe.

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#### NEARBY - ANGLE ON ELLA, GRANT, AND THE CHINESE DELEGATION

END

As they schmooze, an ABDUCTOR'S HANDS discreetly clasp Ella's waist from behind. Her face lights up. His voice whispers in her ear:

ABDUCTOR

*"Excuse me, Mr. President."*

ELLA

(obediently)

Excuse me, Mr. President.

Grant nods, mystified. As Ella's heart races, the hands spirit her across the room, out through an obscure doorway, and into the --

#### WHITE HOUSE INTERIORS

-- where before she can catch her breath, Wallace is sweeping her through a maze of ornate chambers and parlors, ducking staff and security on a forbidden whirlwind journey through the White House.

ELLA

We can't be doing this! We are so deported!

CUT BACK TO THE:

7/10

SUSAN  
We wrote you!

ELLA  
We're drowning in mail; you should  
have cabled!!

SUSAN  
And have Vetter's men intercept it?!  
You'd be in prison already!

SCENE 3

START →

WHITE

Unbelievable! As we speak, everyone  
from the Queen of Holland to the  
Emperor of Germany is trekking here to  
revel in a "spectacular celebration" of  
"last week's" grand opening of Jubilee  
Hall, an event you're now telling us -  
eight hours before curtain - never  
happened! We're dead!!

SUSAN  
Let's not panic.

WHITE

It's not your head on the axe!!  
We're facing *fourteen* investigations!  
We've sworn to the Crown *and the*  
*galaxy* that *today* we'd deliver proof  
positive Jubilee Hall isn't the  
conjunction of scam artists, proof  
you were supposed to bring! Vetter  
will be there with a legion of cops  
to haul us off the moment we welsh!

The WAITRESS enters and sets down their drinks.

WAITRESS  
Two waters, another scotch.

ELLA  
What's the delay now?!

SUSAN  
Just finishing touches - windows,  
doors, paint. Three weeks, max.

ELLA  
You knew today was do-or-die; what  
in your letter spared our heads?!

SUSAN  
Hope, *hopefully*. One man can stop  
Vetter.

WHITE

The Prime Minister. He'll be there today with Vetter! Oh yeah, he was a friend once!

SUSAN

And may still be. Just three weeks ago, we received a warm but urgent letter from Gladstone asking for clarification on the delays. ~~It was the plea of a friend seeking any means to exonerate us.~~ We wrote back explaining our predicament and begging his forbearance.

ELLA

You sent *me* the letter to take to him.

WHITE

Which never happened. Brilliant, we dissed the Prime Minister!

SUSAN

I can still get to him before the show.

WHITE

Not a chance he bends now.

ELLA

~~It's all we've got.~~ All right, I'll face the crowd and explain. Then assuming Gladstone believes us, we do the show, pause the tour to let the choir rest, then knock out the last three weeks.

SUSAN

That's not the plan.

WHITE

and ELLA  
(glaring at Susan)

Translate.

SUSAN

~~We wrote you. The South is under siege; the Knights have unleashed an all-out reign of terror against our voters. With the elections around the corner, we don't have a day to spare — we need fresh revenue to finish Jubilee Hall. We've booked the choir into concert halls across Europe; their Continental tour launches today.~~

WHITE

You're out of your mind!

SUSAN  
You're seeing *faces*. Blot them out.

WHITE  
They're barely alive! *Bennie's dying!*

SUSAN  
Blot them out! Three weeks.

WHITE  
Not possible!

SUSAN  
Don't tell me what's possible! We're  
*here* doing the impossible!

WHITE  
There's no way!

SUSAN  
Then *make* one! That *is* what you  
preach?!

WHITE  
And if I choose *decency*?!

SUSAN  
Then *damn* you at a time like this!

WHITE  
We're damned all right, you saw to  
that! *Keep up* and we kill ourselves;  
*Let up* and we detonate civilization!  
And it's all moot anyway because  
Vetter's about to guillotine us all!  
Well-played, Miss Gilbert, we'll take  
the blade! ELLA!

Ella doesn't move.

WHITE  
You're not listening to this?!

Her head grinds, processing it all. White glowers at her --

WHITE  
You betrayed your people once for  
Master; thinking you might be back  
in business?

-- then fires his glare at Susan --

WHITE  
You... I never knew you.

END

10/10