



Based on Andrew Ward's post-Civil War epic "**Dark Midnight When I Rise**," *Steal Away* is the legendary true story of **The Fisk Jubilee Singers**, a sensational young **warrior choir** fighting the KKK's reign of terror against their schools - **the newly-founded HBCUs** - not with bullets or bombs but electrifying 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 England** as they conquer the world... and must then conquer their own demons.

A music-filled epic, *Steal Away* will feature a spectacularly **diverse cast** (Bridgerton, Hamilton), **towering characters** with sweeping dramatic arcs, the **strongest Black female lead ever onscreen**, and a soundtrack by multi-Grammy-winning legend **Billy Childs**.

For Director's Notes and the full script, please visit [RealMPictures.co/DirectorsNotes](https://RealMPictures.co/DirectorsNotes)

## AMERICA "MERRIE" ROBINSON

African-American, female, 20-22, a Fisk Jubilee Singer.

Though roughly the same age as the others, there's something motherly about Merrie.

Merrie is an old soul - gracious, elegant, prayerful, wise - a woman of deep insight and quiet strength.

Merrie's ancient wisdom and strong hands will stabilize her beloved friend Ella and steer her through the dark, deadly trenches she will face on her epic journey.

[LEAD]

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.

Upping the mania, America strides out front and whoops like a Baptist preacher to the "Congregation."

steal away

Scene 1

Start →

AMERICA

Thus mercifully endeth this edition of "Sing That Tripe: the Sad, Soulless State of American Top 10 Music" featuring instant classics such as "Carve That Possum," "Goober Peas," and of course "Let the Old Cat Die."

"America Robinson" 2/24/22

CONGREGATION

BOOOOOOOOOO!!

AMERICA

Which is why we stick with Bach, Beethoven, and of course Brother Buxtehude!

CONGREGATION

AMEN!!

AMERICA

We turn now to that dreaded lady of the hour, that merciless maven in our midst that crashed this Earth exactly twenty years ago today to taunt and torture every poor unpitched singer!

CONGREGATION

HISSSSSS!!

AMERICA

Let us praise the Almighty that she be mere assistant to the Director!

1/5

CONGREGATION  
*PRAISE BE!!*

AMERICA

For heaven help us - heaven help  
*humanity* - should she ever ascend to  
 the throne!

CONGREGATION  
 NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!

America and the choir break out chanting --

AMERICA AND CONGREGATION

*NEVER DIE MR. WHITE, NEVER DIE DIE DIE!*  
*NEVER DIE MR. WHITE, NEVER NEVER NEVER DIE!*

They break out laughing. Ella rolls her eyes.

AMERICA

(Elizabethan accent)

Who'll toast that Despot of Diction,  
 Tyrant of Tempo, Pharaoh of the Fermata,  
 terror to the fool and faint heart?

White stands.

AMERICA

Ah, that *noble signior* who, despite  
 his name, skin and birth certificate,  
 doth oft strike us as *more black than*  
*fair*. Brother White, you have the  
 floor.

End

Seething, she stands to go. Susan knocks back her drink.

SUSAN  
Julia Hayden.

ELLA  
What about Julia??

SUSAN  
Assassinated by the Knights. In *your*  
classroom while teaching *your* students.

ELLA  
Oh God, no.

Ella gasps, her shattered eyes processing the unimaginable. Our hearts sink; we remember Julia and her ravishing eyes.

SUSAN  
It happened months back. The choir was already at the brink; we didn't want to destroy their morale... like it destroyed Cravath. Julia's murder tortures him day and night - he's gone half out of his mind tormented with guilt. He hasn't slept for months; I've never seen him like this.  
(then, seizing Ella's eyes)  
Julia knew the risk but fought to the end. Will you? This tour is our last stand against the Knights. Quit now and you render her sacrifice meaningless. Quit and the epitaph of hope forever bears your name. Just *three weeks* seals your legacy; make up your mind what side of destiny you want to stand on.

CUT TO:

**"... SARAH SHEPPARD HAS BEEN LOCATED  
IN BELLEVUE, TENNESSEE..."**

Falling tears smear the ink. We WIDEN to the:

**SANATORIUM ROOFTOP - LATER THAT NIGHT**

Ella sits under the night sky, reading the letter. America enters.

Start → AMERICA

Well, Mr. White and I broke the news.

Scene 2

ELLA  
How did they take it?

3/5

AMERICA

Of course, Tom and Minnie are a go if you give the word. And despite his heat, Mr. White won't abandon the tour.

ELLA

Loudin and Ike?

AMERICA

Strange. Didn't say a word, just made a beeline for Bennie's room. A few minutes later, they went out somewhere.

ELLA

(suspicious)

Huh.

AMERICA

It's you I'm worried about. You've got a call to make.

Ella sighs, feeling the weight of those words.

ELLA

What would you do, Merrie?

AMERICA

What I always do... ask myself what Ella Sheppard would do.

Ella groans... more weight. Merrie's spots the letter.

AMERICA

So?

ELLA

She's a half-hour from Nashville.

AMERICA

(pumps her fists)

Yesss! And proud she'll be at her daughter's triumphal return!

ELLA

Merrie...

AMERICA

You know the people will be lining the streets. I can see Miss Sarah beaming as they hurl confetti at their conquering hero!

But Ella's face flush with dread. She takes a heavy breath then looks to the heavens. The stars flicker fitfully in her tired eyes.

ELLA

I feel old, Merrie. Old and spent.  
Every breath I take feels borrowed.

AMERICA

Sweetie, that's because your soul  
needs rest.

ELLA

My soul, Merrie?

America sits beside Ella and clasps her hands

AMERICA

There's a girl I pray for, a precious  
princess with a smile as wide as a  
barn. I call her "my girl." She  
deserved all the joy of her innocence,  
but was crushed with guilt as heavy as  
the world then sent running to redeem  
herself. She's something, my girl -  
her trophies could fill a room - but  
her hands are ever too empty. That  
guilt has already stolen her youth; I  
pray Dear God it doesn't take her  
life. I want my girl freed.

Ella clutches her deeply. America kisses her forehead and gets up.

ELLA

Th-there's something else, Merrie,  
something I'm not supposed to tell you --

AMERICA

Shhhhhh, then don't. I trust my girl  
with my life. *Just free her.* } END

She exits. As Ella looks to the heavens, a warm breeze sweeps in,  
bathing her in the strains of a spiritual. Clutching herself  
protectively, she takes a breath... closes her eyes... and sings.

ELLA

*S-ste-steal away, s-steal aw-wayy...*

Or tries to. The NIGHTMARES immediately CRASH IN. Her eyes flare  
with terror. Her face beads with sweat. Her lips quake as each word  
becomes excruciating to utter. She tortures herself to sing on --

ELLA

*S-steal a-away t-to J-Jesus*

-- but breaks down, unable to go on. As she weeps violently into  
her fists, we TILT UP to the fitful stars and

FADE TO BLACK.

5/5