



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**.

ELLA SHEPPARD

African-American, 18-22.

A brilliant musical prodigy, Ella is the visionary co-leader of The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the towering young heroine of this movie. From the opening scene to the last, *Steal Away* is Ella's story.

A reluctant beauty, she has a softly chiseled face, wide probing eyes, and beguiling if rarely seen smile. Though by appearances frail, looks are dramatically deceiving: Charged with saving African-American schools (the fledgling HBCUs) from supremacist destruction, she is a tireless warrior that takes no prisoners and suffers no fools, powered by a force of will that could stop a planet.

Yet haunted by the sins of her past, her deepest crusade is for redemption.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Ella shouldn't be based on any performance you've ever seen. Take a chance and give us someone we've never seen before, someone quirky and full of nuance. Enchant us with a beguiling young woman we've never met.

You introduce us to Ella Sheppard.

INT. COLT'S SHOWROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

As Wallace works, he spots an anxious figure outside in the moonlight nervously watching him, hesitant to come in.

He takes a breath then lays down his tools.

"ELLA SHEPPARD"

12/14/21

OUTSIDE

SCENE 1

Wallace approaches Ella. Her heart is heavy.

START →

ELLA

I-I was out walking... thinking...
Maybe you heard, Fisk shuts down
in the morning.

He says nothing; his eyes are as tense as before.

ELLA

You're working. I-I'm sorry.

She curses herself for coming... starts to go... then turns back.

ELLA

When Poppa died, leaving Momma and me
alone with Bishop, Momma lost all hope
of happiness; I never saw her smile
again. Watching her die day by day, I
promised her that one day I'd sweep
her away into our own home and take
care of her forever. In my dreams, I
saw the land so vividly that when I
saw that parcel on Covenant Lane, I...
recognized it.

WALLACE

(pacing tensely)

So that land is God's gift to you?! He
just *set it aside* for Ella Sheppard?!

ELLA

It *is* for sale.

WALLACE

To Whites, for Whites, to get us out!

ELLA

I'm not *getting* out! Nashville is
everything I believe in and stand for!

WALLACE

These people, this system - they
destroy your family, *your life*! Why
put down roots *here*?!

STEAL AWAY

ELLA

(searching his eyes)

Maybe a *promise*. Maybe a boy whose hope kindled my own. What happened to that boy?

WALLACE

Boys grow up!

ELLA

He had dreams!

WALLACE

Boys wake up!

ELLA

What happened to you?? You got your new father, your home, your new life - your prayers were answered. Why curse mine??

He clenches his fists. She clasps those fists and kisses him desperately. He resists... then yields... then seizes *her* wrists.

WALLACE

Come on.

CUT TO:

END

INT. COLT'S WAREHOUSE - JUST AFTER

A massive, bustling workspace. Ella gasps at the workforce of young black men building ENORMOUS STACKS OF COFFINS.

WALLACE

Every one built-to-order. Somewhere out there, one of us is being lynched, drowned, burned alive. You see Utopia down South, but coffins don't lie.

COLT (O.S.)

This ain't but a trickle; the tide's coming in...

Old Colt has entered; the young men look upon him reverently. Rail thin but tough as steel, his flaring eyes seize Ella's.

COLT

The Southern Cross bears strange fruit; when it resurrects, these stacks'll become mountains.

ELLA

And cowards defect to the countryside. Men of courage *change* the world.

2/16

WHITE

(gets in Proviere's face)

You pompous son of a --

• SNATCH!! A HULKING WOMAN yanks White into her MONSTROUS BOSOM.

ELLA

The Widow Fisher's had her eye on you.

The Widow grins through a minefield of mangled teeth. White SHRIEKS.

ELLA

East, Mrs. Fisher!

The widow SMACKS White's rump. He SCREAMS as she muscles him like a rag doll out to the dance floor.

 Ella gets in Proviere's face.

 SCENE 2
 START →

PROVIERE

You have no idea who I am.

ELLA

To the contrary, I wouldn't be doing my job if I hadn't swept this town for landmines, Proviere - real name Pincock - (let's not go there) - promoter, poacher, man of secrets; one being that despite your exalted status you're a skid-row slumdweller thanks to litigious ex-wives, pregnant ex-mistresses, and costly genital treatments for that stubborn social disease you picked up in either Turkey or Uruguay, depending on the source. Which is why, given your mythically precarious house of cards, it stuns me to have to advise you that as Mr. Dickerson is legally exclusive to this tour, if he were to cough for you onstage my lawyers would very publicly expose your charade and take you for every scrap you've got left... minus that appalling toupée.

Proviere stares at her incredulously. After a stunned silence, he breaks into weeping, resets his toupée, and slinks off to the exit.

 MEANWHILE, IN THE POWDER ROOM

END

America and her Parisian GIRLFRIENDS gab in SUBTITLED FRENCH:

GIRLFRIEND 1

So what's holding up the portrait?

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 3 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.

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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.

END

8/16

SCENE 4
 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.

9/10

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! Philipians 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.

12/16

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

ELLA

AAAUUUGGH!!

END

EXT. RURAL MANOR - LATER

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!

AFTERMATH (SERIES OF SCENES)

DOWNTOWN NASHVILLE

A devastation of cataclysmic proportions. Blood flows like rivers. Lamentation fills the streets. Survivors sweep up twisted metal and weep at the colossal ruins of hope.

Where a church once stood, Ella morosely sifts through a graveyard of rubble - an exploded pulpit, shattered pews, and the smoldering remains of Hiram's cross.

As if insufficiently damned, she unearths blood-splattered pages from Jubilee songbooks -- pages promising deliverance and freedom, peace and hope. Pages of *lies* bearing the words:

"ARRANGED BY ELLA SHEPPARD"

Her eyes go completely lifeless.

FUNERAL PREPARATIONS

A grave is dug. A headstone chiseled. "1874" is engraved as the year of death on a noble coffin. Wallace is the angry engraver.

MIRRORS

We DISSOLVE through grim CLOSE-UPS of White and the singers facing themselves in mirrors, dressing for a funeral they prayed never to attend.

As the singers bare their shoulders and backs, we see the deep scars of slavery that physically rack their bodies.

White's bleak, hollow eyes are windows to a dungeon; drained of life and will, Susan tenderly dresses him.

One face is missing...

ELLA'S HOUSE

READ ELLA'S V.O. LINES AS A MONOLOGUE

We MOVE THROUGH the aching rooms of a lonely house, and discover a tired soul on a cold floor, writing a heartrending letter.

ELLA (V.O.)

Dear Momma, I'm sorry to trouble you again, it seems I'm always troubling you. I'm going away, and wanted to leave you the deed to your house. It really is yours.

SCENE 5

FISK CHAPEL - HIRAM'S FUNERAL

A packed service on a BLACK, SUNLESS DAY. White, Susan, Cravath and the singers stare in agony at Hiram's coffin. The sense of despair is overwhelming.

ELLA (V.O.)

In case you ever get to wondering
about me, want to know anything, I
also leaving my letters. You'll see,
everything I've done, every breath
I've taken, has been for you. Or at
least a *dream* of you...

But on the streets outside, something momentous is happening -
MASSES OF PEOPLE are arriving in an endless cavalcade of vehicles.

ELLA (V.O.)

I've chased dreams all my life -
dreams of us, dreams of home and
country; I dreamed I'd make you
proud one day, that you'd take me
back. Dreams chasing dreams...

RAGING FLAMES

... consume Ella's songbooks and Bible. We PAN from the fireplace,
to the deed and Ella's tall stack of letters neatly laid out on the
floor, to Ella standing in the doorway.

ELLA (V.O.)

Dreams kept me alive, drove me on.
But I'm tired now, so tired. I'm
drowning in dreams and dreams of
dreams. It's time I navigate
reality...

She takes a last look at the house, marvels at its beauty, then
heads out back.

JUBILEE HALL CONSTRUCTION PIT, AFTER HIRAM'S SERVICE

White and the singers stand at the rain-filled pit staring bleakly
into the watery abyss, its depths as black as the heavens above.

ELLA (V.O.)

I've failed you, and so many. I
don't know why it is the things I
touch go so terribly wrong...

They don't hear the MASSES OF PEOPLE quietly filling the field
around them.

RIVERBANK BEHIND ELLA'S HOUSE

Ella stands at the river's edge facing her reflection with disgust. The black heavens bathe her in merciless, unforgiving light. Strong for so long, she looks unnaturally old, as if a lifetime of borrowed strength were coming fatefully due.

ELLA (V.O.)

One dream *did* come true, in a way.
I dream a lot about heaven, and
for the briefest moment, when you
opened that door and I saw your
eyes, I'd swear you were smiling.
I thought I was in heaven.

A shadow sweeps by. Ella looks up, and we CUT TO:

A RAVEN CIRCLING EXPECTANTLY ABOVE.

ELLA (V.O.)

But I'm awake now. Wide awake...

We CUT BACK to the riverbank. Ella is gone, but AIR BUBBLES rise from the river's depths, breaking at the surface.

ELLA (V.O.)

Good night, Momma.

The last bubble breaks, leaving pure silence. We CUT TO the gently rippling image of --

A SUSPENDED ANGEL

END

-- hovering against black clouds. We're underwater, looking up. At long last, all is peaceful and still. Until --

HANDS PLUNGE INTO THE RIVER

They seize Ella. She revives. She flails furiously to stay down but the hands won't let go. She fights to die, but they grip her harder and raise her out of the river.

Wallace pulls Ella into himself. She pounds him with fists of self-loathing but he absorbs it all. Then --

WALLACE

Shhh.

We hear voices on the wind. They're humming a spiritual. Ella clenches her ears, but Wallace traces the sound across the wind to:

WALLACE

Fisk.

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