

Based on Andrew Ward's epic "Dark Midnight When I Rise," *Steal Away* is the legendary true story of **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 African-American female lead ever onscreen, and an epic soundtrack by multi-Grammy winning composer **Billy Childs**.

For Script, Sides, and Director's Notes, visit StealAwayMovie.com

ELLA SHEPPARD

African-American, 18-22.

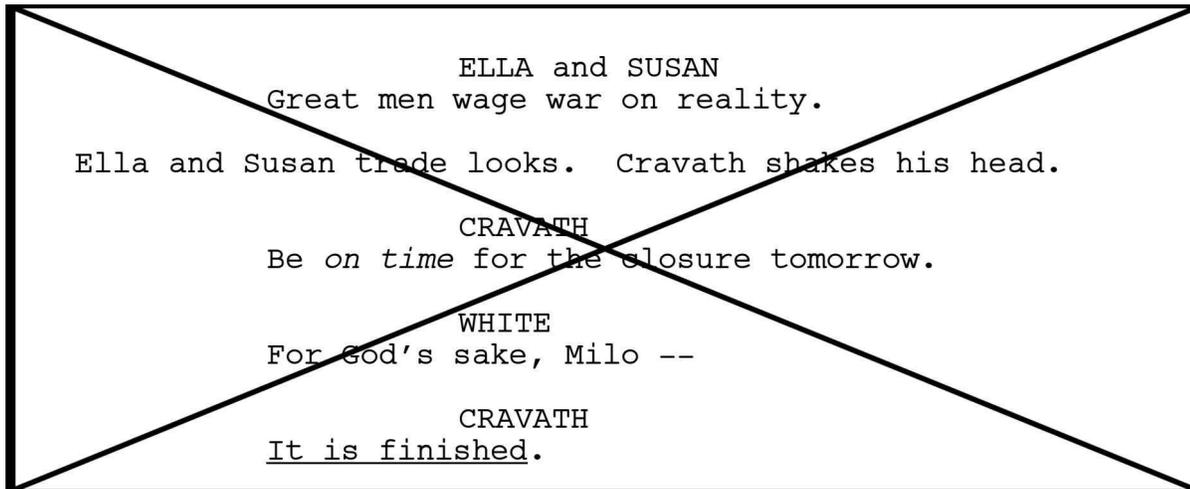
A brilliant musical prodigy, Ella is the visionary co-leader of The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the towering young heroine of this movie. From the opening scene to the last, *Steal Away* is Ella's story.

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

Don't base your Ella on any performance you've ever seen. Give us someone fresh and unique, full of nuance, perhaps even quirky. Mesmerize us with a beguiling young woman we've never met. *You* introduce *us* to Ella Sheppard.



SC 1

INT. CHOIR ROOM - THAT NIGHT ← **START**

Devastated at the news, the singers mill about the room grimly as if in a bomb shelter awaiting the end. Meanwhile, HEAVY WINDS batter the windows insistently as if to get their attention.

White and Ella are off to themselves playing a solemn violin-piano duet. He looks preoccupied, and her playing is too rigid for him.

WHITE
Let it breathe, Sam.

ELLA
She looked at you.

WHITE
Forget the metronome; *feel* the music.

ELLA
You traded looks. Yours said "Have we met?" Hers said "Do dreams count?"

WHITE
(breaks into a sweat)
Sam...

ELLA
Live again, Mr. White. The past is past; what happened with Laura --

The bow drops from his hand. He's hyperventilating.

ELLA
Mr. White!

She swings him onto the bench and helps him --

ELLA
Breathe... breathe...

As White catches his breath, something heavy hangs in the air.

ELLA
The map today, you saw --

WHITE
(deflecting)
Lines.

ELLA
They went north. Then east to New York?

He hesitates, then nods.

WHITE
Would the others come?

ELLA
In a heartbeat.

Then he looks to *her*.

ELLA
You know I've got to wait for her
here. Go.

WHITE
Not without you.

ELLA
It's the only hope.

WHITE
Then there *is* no hope.

Just then - *WHAP!* - a skylight blows open. The wind ushers a ravishing melody into the room.

WHITE
Listen.

It's the spiritual *Steal Away* being sung by distant voices. White is in raptures; bewitched, he drifts upstairs as if drawn by a siren. The others trade knowing looks and follow him up to the:

← **END**

EXT. ROOFTOP - MINUTES LATER

A brilliant star-filled night. White, Ella and the choir stand on what feels like the top of the world.

The heavens are charged with song; *Steal Away* is being sung by what sounds like a great timeless choir of souls, filling the Earth with piercing beauty as if a benediction over humanity.

The attackers halt.

MYRON
I SAID HANG THEM!

But incredibly, as the singing intensifies, the men cover their faces... then one by one break into weeping.

Sensing a chance, the choir joins in.

JUBILEES
*Fix me for my starry crown,
Fix me for a higher ground,
Fix me Jesus, fix me...*

As a stunned Myron looks on, the attackers begin releasing the lynchies then back away from the clearing until only he is left.

CLOSE ON MYRON - Bathed in the spiritual, he glares incredulously at the choir, fists clenched as if fighting off an invasion, quaking as if some war were raging inside. Then at last, he too relents. He backs off... scans the wind... then disappears into the night.

Spared their lives, the Jubilees sing on, and we

MATCH CUT TO --

INT. WHITE HOUSE - EAST ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

-- the choir closing out a scorching performance for the President, congressional leaders, and ambassadors from around the world.

JUBILEES
Oh fix me Jesus, fix meeeeeee.

Rapturous applause, standing ovation!

AFTER - GALA RECEPTION

← START

SC 2

A high-powered global affair. Senators and foreign diplomats trip over themselves praising the Jubilees as heroes. Freshly scarred and shaken, the singers paste on smiles and press the flesh.

ANGLE ON ELLA AND WHITE

Ella introduces White to Julia Hayden and her four Cutie Pies.

ELLA
Mr. White, you've met Julia Hayden.

WHITE
Of course. How are you, Miss Hayden?

JULIA HAYDEN
(looking around)
Dazzled.

No, we're dazzled; Julia is just as radiant and ravishing as we remember her.

ELLA
And my girls.

WHITE
Your "little pickles." Let's see -
Carole, Cynthia, Denise, Addie Mae.
And now we know their names. The girls' bright smiles capture our hearts all over again.

WHITE
Any word on Ella's mother?

JULIA HAYDEN
I'm afraid not.
Just then, a beaming Susan Gilbert enters.

SUSAN
Mr. White, congrat--

WHITE
Excuse me.
Something vexes White's eye. He steps aside and rebukes a nearby Diplomat taking Minnie's hand.

WHITE
She's fourteen, got it? She doesn't dance with strangers.
Minnie sighs. The Diplomat awkwardly exits. White returns to Susan.

WHITE
Kids... Well, Miss Gilbert, I hope you enjoy the recept--

Ella elbows White to *Stay Put*. He groans. PRESIDENT GRANT enters.

ALL
Mr. President.

PRESIDENT GRANT
I'm thinking I'll scrap this suit for a choir robe and get something done in this country!

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.

←END

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.

ENGLISHMAN
 I know when you were dying out on those streets to save his sinking school, that two-faced fraud disowned you like syphilis until you *whored up* twenty-five grand, then took every penny without leaving you a cup to crap in. Which explains why he's sporting a new three-piece *Herriman*, you're bleeding through cheap burlap, and behind their nods and applause folk are saying Fred Loudin *took it up the cargo*.

Unbelievable! Loudin hauls off to destroy this guy --

ENGLISHMAN
 You *could* turn that around.

-- but Georgia stops his fist. They look the Englishman over. Impeccably groomed and bejeweled, he is polish personified. His coarse, quarried face is set off by magnetic blue eyes.

GEORGIA
 Go on.

ENGLISHMAN
The enemy has come to steal, kill and destroy; let no weapon formed against you prosper.

Georgia and Loudin trade weighty looks. The Englishman grins.

ENGLISHMAN
 It's all right there.

His card hovers before them like a pendulum, and we

CUT TO.

SC 4

A HIDDEN ROOM - SOMEWHERE, SOMEPLACE

← START

Wallace and Ella breathlessly enter. Alone at last, they devour each other with ravenous eyes. The attraction is nuclear.

She quivers as he reaches for her, then quakes as his rugged hands make gentle contact. As his fingers brush and probe her throbbing flesh she silently screams, her body a crush of sensations.

His fingers stop on a wound. The wound angers him, but she shushes his lips and pulls him deeply into herself. Her mouth waiting, he penetrates her with a blistering kiss that melts time, space and them into one. Fused inseparably, they writhe and moan as if awakening to life.

After a breathless eternity she sweeps him with daydreaming eyes.

ELLA
Build us a home.

WALLACE
Done.

ELLA
(holds her breath)
Extra bedrooms?

WALLACE
Three?

ELLA
(smiles)
Three works.

WALLACE
Sapphire outhouse of course. Toilet.
Farm out back.

She steps back.

ELLA
Farm?? We're talking Nashville.

WALLACE
I'm talking Kansas. You know I'm
moving there to build settlements.

ELLA
That was *then*. Look where we are -
everything's changed!

WALLACE
(points to her wounds)
Yeah, it's getting worse. I heard
what that preacher did to you; I'm
going to put a bullet in his head!

ELLA
Brilliant, like his father did yours!

He winces. She curses her insensitivity.

ELLA
I-I'm sorry. I know he was your life.

WALLACE
(raging at the memories)
What they did to Pop... a bullet would
have been a courtesy.

ELLA

Don't let them drive you away - we'll stay and defy them! I know you're a great builder; we'll find you clients in Nashville! I'll teach! We'll save and start new lives on Covenant La--

WALLACE

(clenches his fists)

Covenant Lane!

ELLA

There's more to this. What aren't you telling me?!

WALLACE

(pacing furiously)

Nothing to tell!

ELLA

I don't believe it.

WALLACE

Believe it! I'm *through* going to black funerals, watching them chalk out black figures on concrete!

ELLA

Hate won't bring him back!

WALLACE

Hate's all I got - they took everything else! You want me and my boys out of Nashville! We stay, it burns!

ELLA

I can't believe that!

WALLACE

Believe it! I want them dead - ALL OF THEM!

ELLA

No... no... I won't --

WALLACE

BELIEVE IT! I WANT RIOTS! BULLETS!
NIGGERS IN WARPAINT CUTTING HEADS!
WHITE BLOOD SOAKING SIDEWALKS! I WANT
THIS HOUSE OF LIES TORCHED TO CINDER
WITH THOSE BLUE-EYED SNAKES IN IT!

He SHOVES OVER A TABLE. She shudders in horror. Seeing her cower, he checks his rage and starts over.

WALLACE

I want to *protect* you, make a safe home for our family. I can't do that in Nashville. Now with Bishop's *butchers* set to seize power --

ELLA

Take back?!

He looks at her incredulously.

WALLACE

The Amnesty Act. Your "friends" upstairs just restored voting power to the Sons of the Southern Cross. Our slavers have been cleared to retake government, *and us*.

ELLA

(staggered, but defiant)

Congress can pass whatever they want. The President's on our side --

WALLACE

Your boy *Judas* signed it into law. And those U.S. troops that're supposed to "protect" us down South? They're packing it in - lock, stock and barrel. Game over.

ELLA

(breaking down)

Y-you're wrong. We're winning this. It's a new day.

WALLACE

Oh right - "*Rise and Shine, it's that Great Getting Up Morning*." Wake up!

ELLA

Y-you haven't seen what we've seen, the change breaking out. Read the papers!

WALLACE

Read past your own headlines to the real news! America's washing its hands of us and handing us to our executioners - and while you crow "*Mission Accomplished*," they're gearing up for the kill! With nothing standing between us and that Southern Cross, Nashville's a bloodbath waiting to happen! It's dark midnight for our people; there'll be no sunrise for us, not in this life or the next!

ELLA
Please...

WALLACE
Wake up!

ELLA
DREAM WITH ME!

WALLACE
WAKE UP!

Shattered, she slumps to the floor. He SMASHES a glass cabinet.

GUARDS rush in. Wallace doesn't resist as they furiously BEAT HIM DOWN. As they haul him off, he SHOUTS back:

WALLACE
YOUR AMA "LIBERATORS" - ASK THEM
WHAT'S GOING ON! ASK THEM!!

← **END**
CUT TO:

EXT. WHITE HOUSE - ROOFTOP TERRACE - SHORTLY AFTER

The Jubilees anxiously huddle with Hiram, Susan, and Cravath. The mood is dire. Ella is there but not there, her head still reeling.

Hiram points into the distance at an ABORTED CONSTRUCTION SITE.

BENNIE
The Washington Monument, abandoned by
Congress twenty years ago.

HIRAM
Ruins of a great promise.

WHITE
Translate.

HIRAM
The Southern Cross' race-baiting has
panicked Middle America, and Moderates
in Congress into fearing us as
equals. We're losing Washington.

SUSAN
Which puts the Southern Cross within
striking distance of retaking the South.
If their party wins the upcoming
elections --

AMERICA
Goodbye tomorrow.

IKE
(glowers at Ella)
Three. Plus speeches, receptions,
travel, and of course rehearsals.

DR. FREARS
Good God. About this tour --
Just then, an amiable telegram man enters.

CHOIR
Hey, Sean.

SEAN
Morning. Telegram for Miss Sheppard
from New York.
White jealously snatches it. Awkward.

SEAN
Godspeed Mr. Holmes' recovery. I
say it all the time, but Ireland's
thankful for you.
He exits. White reads the cable. The news is bad.

WHITE
They need us to raise more money;
they've booked us a litany of new
tours. We leave tonight for Wales.
After that, Switzerland, the
Netherlands, then Scotland.

AMERICA
What about our vacations?? Our
vacations start tomorrow.

WHITE
Canceled. We work straight through to
December.
(his face turns pale)
They're *doubling* the daily schedule.

The room erupts in panic.

← **START**

DR. FREARS
What do they want from you, *blood*?

ELLA
Let's calm down...

DR. FREARS
Calm down?! This hospital is *already*
your second home!

SC 5

ELLA

No one is forced to work when sick; I tell them not to.

WHITE

But they *do*, to keep up with you.

DR. FREARS

Miss Sheppard, do you have any idea how serious Ben's condition is?! If it's what we suspect --

ELLA

I didn't send myself that telegram!
I trust Bennie's in good hands. Now you'll do your job, Doctor, and leave me to do mine.

(to the choir)

We've got *Wicklów* in half an hour. We make our day then leave for Wales.

LOUDIN

Send us a postcard; we'll be tanning in Nice. Vacations are in our contracts!

ELLA

(whips out their contract)
So's cancellation. "*The AMA may suspend vacations as it deems necessary.*" Paragraph Six.

Loudin and Ike trade looks; apparently they'd forgotten that.

LOUDIN

Screw the fine print; we'll get this arbitrated.

ELLA

Paragraph Nine: "*The AMA shall arbitrate all disputes, and its decisions shall be permanently binding.*" You signed it, and per your demand it's "*ironclad.*"
Don't cross my lawyers.

IKE

You're full of it!

ELLA

Know where Maggie is? Singing in Nashville, for pigeons and stray dogs. She can't get work doing funerals.

LOUDIN

You killed her career.

ELLA
It was *suicide*; be kinder to your own.

Just then, we hear a COMMOTION in the hallway. NURSES chase the feeble Bennie into the room.

DR. FREARS
Bennie, you've got to lie down!

LOUDIN
(to Bennie)
Vacations canceled, workload doubled.
They're bleeding the life out of us!

Loudin's eyes demand his allegiance. Ella picks up on the cryptic exchange. Bennie is alarmed; he processes that... then defiantly buttons his coat.

BENNIE
Wicklows.

ELLA
LET'S MOVE!

←END

CUT TO:

EXT. HOSPITAL - JUST AFTER

As the choir hustles to the coach, White chases Ella down.

WHITE
What the hell?!

ELLA
Go back inside.

WHITE
I'm suspending this tour!

ELLA
I can't let that happen.

WHITE
Get off your high horse, Ella! I've missed a few shows but that doesn't make you God! *Those are my kids!*

ELLA
Our parents went through far worse.

WHITE
Geez, you sound like Cravath!

ELLA
I'm just navigating reality. *Reality!*