

## What's hot at Hot Docs

by [Brian D. Johnson](#) on Wednesday, April 24, 2013 7:08pm -



[Hot Docs](#), North America's largest documentary festival, celebrates its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, with 205 films from 43 countries showing April 30 to May 5. I've been screening them over the past few weeks. Though I haven't seen nearly enough to provide a definitive list, here's what I've found to be the most compelling so far. As I see more, the list may expand . . .

1. [Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer](#) If you think you know about this feminist punk group from the media coverage of their trial, and Madonna's flashes of solidarity, that's not the half of it. Filmmakers Mike Lerner and Maxim Pozdorovkin, who won a special jury award in Sundance for this documentary, have forged a riveting account of the court case. But most of all, they have composed an fascinating and credibly heroic portrait of the three Pussy Riot members who go to trial. For all their collective bravado, they emerge as distinct and formidable personalities, who seem to be undergoing a personal transformation as the camera rolls—especially the mesmerizing Nadia ([Nadezhda Tolokonnikova](#)), who combines movie-star magnetism with insouciant wit and a sophisticated view of conceptual art.

The film includes video clips of the the group's hit-and-run performances, and interviews. But their most revealing moments come from their candid conversations as prisoners behind the glass of the court's media scrum. Like animals in a zoo, surrounded by a phalanx of cameras, they use their trial as a stage for impromptu performance art. Supporting players range from biker-like militants of the Orthodox church to the girls' anxious but tolerant parents—notably Nadia's father, who co-wrote lyrics for the punk anthem that landed them in jail after its fleeting performance in the church.



The young John Hartley Robertson, in 'Unclaimed'

## 2. [\*Unclaimed\*](#)

In 1968 U.S. special ops soldier John Hartley Robertson was pronounced MIA after his helicopter was shot down in a firefight over Laos. Over four decades later, a man claiming to be Robertson surfaces in a remote village in Vietnam. He has a Vietnamese wife, with whom he's raised four children, and he's lost his ability to speak English, along with virtually all memory of his life as an American. But, at 77, he wants to see his American family before he dies. In this astonishing documentary, Alberta filmmaker Michael Jorgensen follows a team led by a dedicated Vietnam vet to Robertson's home in the wilds of Vietnam. As he follows their quest to prove his identity, the filmmaker focusses on the heart-rending personal drama, rather than the rats nest of procedural loose ends kicked up by the investigation. This is the kind of movie that leaves viewers emotionally spent, yet it raises as many questions as it answers: *Unclaimed* is bound to stoke

major controversy with allegations that the Pentagon muddied the trail to John Hartley Robertson with lies and a cover-up.



The schooner carrying the fiord explorers in 'The Expedition to the End of the World'

### 3. *The Expedition to the End of the World*

Thanks to global warming, and unprecedented melting of ice at the North Pole, fiords along Greenland's north-east coast that were previously entombed by glaciers are now briefly navigable. Exploring their waters for the first time, aboard a three-masted wooden schooner, is an eclectic crew that includes a geologist, marine biologist, archaeologist, geographer—and three artists. Unlike most expeditions, this one has no real goal. The crew isn't on a mission to prove or discover anything in particular. The result is a sublimely idiosyncratic odyssey. While the scientists unearth fascinating details of a lost world, the artists in the group mull over the cosmic, and existential, implications, lending the voyage a Beckett-like sense of the absurd. The deadpan wit of this Danish/Swedish production is in the Herzog vein, though without his overbearing Teutonic voice. Instead, the voyage is filtered through various forms of droll Nordic detachment. But if even the film were silent, its eerie landscapes are so breathtaking, and serenely composed, that we'd still be entranced.