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Mountainfilm 2014: A Call to Action

May 22, 2014 | By [Eric Ming More](#)



‘FREEDOM SUMMER’ – A scene from the film about the early days of the Civil Rights movement that screens at Mountainfilm this weekend. (Courtesy photo)



EPIC – Mountainfilm Festival Director David Holbrooke (far left) and Executive Director Peter Kenworthy with Everest pioneers Tom Holbein and Jim Whittaker, who summited Everest within three weeks of one another in 1963. (Courtesy photo)

TELLURIDE – Mountainfilm Festival Director David Holbrooke has had his eyes on every one of the 2014 festival’s 100 entries – the stories and sub-stories, and all the films that didn’t quite make the cut. The theme of this year’s festival is Wilderness, because this is the 50th anniversary of Lyndon Johnson signing the act into law – and leaving us with the admonition, “If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it.”

Holbrooke tirelessly dove into selections of films that range from a two-minute short about Sniffles, a comic dog, written by a committee of Telluride kids, to the longest entry: Freedom Summer, a 113-minute-story of the Civil Rights movement about the struggle to get voting rights for black Americans 50 years ago – the same summer the Wilderness Act came into being (why is it we have to fight so hard for what seems inherently right?).

This year’s adventure films include everything from a documentary about Sylvain Saudan, one of the godfathers of extreme-mountain skiing, to The Questions We Ask, about Canadian Bruce Kirby’s passage from Vancouver to Victoria on a stand-up paddleboard. The categories – wild places, epic adventure, activism – may seem disparate, but at this year’s Mountainfilm, I don’t think they are. As Holbrooke stated, “everything’s related.”

The films are about characters as well as character, and bravery or steadfastness in the face of a challenge. From talking to Holbrooke, I got the sense that much of what this year’s festival seeks to showcase is the struggle and the courage of the heroines and heroes who are the subjects of these films, as well as the filmmakers themselves, and the dangers they sometimes face in order to tell their stories; to activists, who step completely outside the human herd and stand for some deeply given belief; and to those who allow their story to be told, even when they fear the outcome.

“We are in the golden age of documentary film,” Holbrooke said. “There was a period when we had the machines out there, the cameras. The editing equipment was there. But people hadn’t caught up to it. Now, they have. Those people include Ben Knight [the director of DamNation, along with Travis Rummell], who is a photographer, and is now making beautiful films. I think there are a lot of people across the world who are saying, OK, ‘I can make a film.’ The quality of filmmaking has just taken off. These filmmakers are young, in their 20s or 30s, and they’ve trained themselves. The amount of high quality films and filmmakers is astonishing.”

Director Stash Wislocki’s film is an example of the risk and effort the new auteurs put in. “Dear Governor Hickenlooper is a film where the filmmakers are omnipresent. They are willing to gain the confidence of their subjects,” Holbrooke said. “Wislocki had access to the fracking capital of America. To film these inhuman scenes shows deep comfort with his subjects. The filmmaker gained the trust of these people.”

Another example of a risk taker is the subject of *Emptying the Skies*, a documentary by Douglas and Roger Kass based on a 2010 *New Yorker* article by Jonathan Franzen. The story is about a young Italian “Who is basically putting his life on the line to save songbirds,” Holbrooke said. “The birds migrate 5,000 miles from Europe to Africa, and they stop along the way [to rest and eat] in Cyprus and other countries, and they get killed. These birds are the size of a donut hole. You can’t believe they are being munched on by Europeans, and this guy feels it is wrong. It’s a tradition – a tradition that should be stopped. And so he’s out there on the front lines.”

“We are living in the sixth extinction.” Holbrooke tells me with no uncertainty, referring to Elizabeth Kolbert’s, *New York Times* bestseller about the five previous extinctions that have taken place in the earth’s history. He posits that we are not only in the sixth, but that we are responsible for it. Holbrooke’s statement lends gravity to all these films: we have the opportunity to see what we are losing, through these filmmakers’ eyes.

And then there is *Wrenched*, described as “An entertaining ramble through the environmental history of the Southwest.” The film is about the curmudgeonly “Ed Abbey and the Abbey crew and the people that have followed him, like Tim DeChristopher,” Holbrooke said. “*Damnation* has some amazing activists. There are a lot of people who are really putting their lives on the line. I’m always struck by that. It always moves me, because these are the real stories people want to hear.”

Sometimes, adventure and activism go together. Such is the case in *Vessel*, a documentary by Diana Whitten about Dutch physician Rebecca Gomperts who buys a ship, forms a nonprofit group called *Women on Waves*, and then sets sail to countries where abortion is illegal, offering those services to women just outside the territorial waters 12 miles from shore. Gomperts meets virulent resistance in Ireland and Portugal (the Portuguese Navy goes so far as to barricade its territorial waters) before moving on to Ecuador and Tanzania. Wherever you stand on this issue, there is no way you will come away from this film without riding the emotional seismograph. “That’s a great example of a film that I look at as very adventurous” in the clever ways its subject uses to get around a system that restricts women’s choices, Holbrooke said. “The film is all about that sensibility. She’s on an adventure, that woman. The idea of being out there...it’s remarkable activism.”

In addition to offering films about adventure, the festival itself is also stretching its boundaries. “*Mountainfilm* has expanded the horizons of what I thought it could be,” Holbrooke said. “It’s important to have films about our core interests – adventure, climbing, environmentalism, all of those – but I think it’s also great to add in other perspectives. I think the horizon is as much about our minds as it is our bodies at play. That’s what we do. We try and find the best adventure films, we try and find the best environmental films in any given year, but then we look at what else is out there. We are willing to stretch, and we think our audience is, too.”

One film in particular from last year inspired Holbrooke to continue stretching the boundaries this year. “Last year’s film, *God Loves Uganda*, was about the persecution of gay men in Africa,” he recalled. “The film really connected with our audience. So we looked about and said, in addition to the best adventure outdoor and adventure films, which we are really excited to deliver, our audience does want a variety.”

There may be an explosion of younger filmmakers, yet interestingly, Holbrooke pronounced it “striking, how many older people were showing up in this year’s films.” He mentioned Katie Lee, a woman in her 90’s who appears in both *Damnation* (because of her work to preserve rivers) and *Wrenched* (because of her friendship with the late Ed Abbey). There is an especially poignant moment in *Wrenched* when Lee recalls an extra special spot in Glen Canyon before it was dammed, and how she and a friend (photographed at the bottom of the canyon, in a shaft of light) had the powerful sense that they were the only humans that had ever been there. It is a moment of full-blown epiphany, and she seems to relive it, telling the story. The tragedy comes when Lee returns later, as the waters are just covering what must have been a primeval Eden. She looks on from a boat, and reaches down to touch the rock as it recedes below the rising water for the last time – a place disappearing from her forever.

I previewed *Wrenched* before I interviewed Holbrooke, and Vessel, and also Mark Grieco's *Marmato* (about a mountain in Columbia that contains the greatest remaining lode of gold in the world, "a powerful elegy for a traditional community besieged by forces that spin inexorably beyond its control"). Grieco's imagery of the Christ statue that overlooks this community on the last Christmas before a Canadian mining company is due to arrive and level the mountain on which it sits is riveting. At this point I was making a connection between the preservation of wilderness and ecosystems – like old growth forest, river systems (*DamNation*) and air quality (*Dear Governor Hickenlooper*) –and people losing their personal freedoms, their homes and their livelihoods, (*Marmato*), and losing the freedom of choice about their own bodies (*Vessel*). The morality in fighting for remaining tracts of wilderness was beginning to resemble the ethos of the human rights battle. When you are standing in front of a D-9 Cat in an old growth forest in Oregon, you might as well be standing against a line of angry people who don't want you to vote, or send your kids to their schools, or allow women to make decisions about their own bodies. Even if their subjects aren't all technically "wilderness," these films are about the battles to protect everything worth keeping.

Mountainfilm is exceptional for the people it draws and the ideas it generates, but what sets it apart, Holbrooke says, is this question: "How much do we actually do? The doing is so important. We hope to get the films to inspire us into action."

He left me with a quote by Jim Whittaker, the subject of Eric Becker's short *A Life Well Lived: 50 Years of Everest*: "If you are not standing on the edge, you are taking up too much room."



'FREEDOM SUMMER' – A scene from the film about the early days of the Civil Rights movement that screens at Mountainfilm this weekend. (Courtesy photo)



EPIC–Mountainfilm Festival Director David Holbrooke (left) and Executive Director Peter Kenworthy with Everest pioneers Tom Holbein

and Jim Whittaker, who summited Everest within three weeks of one another in 1963.
(Courtesy photo)

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Upcoming Events

JUN 12 Thu 2014	10:30 am Cortez Public Library's monthly children's storytimes @ Cortez Public Library
	1:00 pm Historic Walking Tours of Telluride @ Telluride Historical Museum
	6:00 pm Free Qi Gong Talk and Demonstration @ Ah Haa School
	6:00 pm The Brothers Comatose at the Mountain Air Music Series @ Fellin Park, Ouray
	9:00 pm Finnders & Youngberg live @ O'Brien's Pub & Grill
JUN 13 Fri 2014	all-day Telluride Farmers' Market @ South Oak Street
	8:00 am BarreWorks @ Weehawken Ridgway
	9:00 am Fantastical Fridays @ Weehawken Ouray
	9:00 am Qi Gong Stretch Class @ Oak Street Plaza Green
	11:30 am Flag Day Celebration @ Demoret Plaza
	6:00 pm Andrew Wynne @ Coachlight Tavern
	6:00 pm Bonewagon live at the Skybar @ Four Corners Cafe in Ridgway
	6:00 pm Gotta Be @ Remington's at the Bridges
	10:00 pm Andrew Wynne @ Trail Town Still
JUN 14 Sat 2014	9:00 am Montrose Garden Tour @ Five local gardens (2 in town, 3 on Spring Creek Mesa)
	9:00 am Norwood Farm & Craft Market Summer 2014 @ Norwood Mainstreet
	9:00 am Qi Gong Weekend Workshop @ Oak Street Plaza Green
	6:00 pm Andrew Wynne @ Horsefly Brewing Co.
	6:00 pm Chris Knight live at the Skybar @ Four Corners Cafe in Ridgway
	6:00 pm Gotta BE @ Camp Robber Restaurant
	7:30 pm Radney Foster – Music at the Wright @ Wright Opera House
JUN 15 Sun 2014	11:00 am Andrew Wynne @ Sky Bar at Four Corners Cafe-Chipeta Solar Springs Resort
	11:00 am Jazz Brunch with Ben Gaude @ Four Corners Cafe in Ridgway
	4:30 pm Michael Martin Murphey Concert @ Ridgway Town Park
JUN 16 Mon	8:00 am Pilates Barre: Function & FUN @ Weehawken Ridgway

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