



American Movie

American Movie

Chris Smith

USA, 1999

107 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
Production Company: **Blue Mark Productions**

Producers: **Sarah Price, Chris Smith**
Screenplay: **Chris Smith**
Cinematographer: **Chris Smith**
Editor: **Jun Diaz, Barry Poltermann, Chris Smith**

Production Designer: **Dick Blau**
Sound: **Sarah Price**
Music: **Mike Schank**
Principal Cast: **Mark Borchardt, family, and friends**

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Production: **Blue Mark Productions, 301 North Water Street, 4th Floor, Milwaukee, WI 53202, USA. T (414) 291-0345 F (414) 291-0407**

Coven

Mark Borchardt

USA, 1997

40 minutes ■ Black and White/35mm

Print Source: **See page 425**

This spectacularly entertaining, funny and genuinely touching film could well be the documentary sensation of the year. Slated for a major release, its simple story of a simple guy just trying to get his film made masks a complex and thoughtful exploration of the American Dream and what it takes to make that dream a reality.

The film follows Mark Borchardt, a tall, long-haired heavy metal enthusiast living in a working-class Wisconsin suburb. After watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and its ilk growing up, Borchardt was infected with a dream that has made him a man possessed ever since. He embarked on his calling as an independent filmmaker making Super 8 films as a kid, such as *The More the Scariest* and *I Blow Up*. When we begin to follow his career, he has decided to shelve his ambitious feature project, *Northwestern*, and is determined to finish the task he has been working on over the years, the 16mm short *Coven* (pronounced *COH-vin*). The video sales of *Coven* are (dubiously) meant to finance his feature film.

Borchardt is unquestionably inspiring to those around him. He gets his reluctant mom to act when the extras don't show up, and his drug-addled friend Mike is always there for him. Ultimately he turns to his sickly Uncle Bill for financing after a fundraising trip to, yes, the Toronto International Film Festival doesn't pan out.

The production has a catastrophic effect on Borchardt's life, especially his

relationship with his wife and kids. But his single-minded determination to see his dream fulfilled is paramount to him and acts as an inspiration and cautionary tale for us all.

Chris Smith's approach here is non-intrusive and subtly precise. He allows Borchardt to make his own decisions and his own mistakes. But, more importantly, he also elegantly balances the audience's relationship with Borchardt. He never allows his subject to appear as a clown, even when he is doing something patently absurd. Yet our empathy is tinged with regret for the amount his dream has cost him.

Coven, to be shown following *American Movie*, has since been blown up to a 35mm print. It is a black and white nightmare excursion into a world of witchcraft and zombies. Not for the faint of heart.

■ Noah Cowan

Chris Smith grew up and continues to live in the Midwest. His first film, *American Job* (95), premiered at the Sundance film festival in 1996. He has worked as a cinematographer on numerous films, including Michael Moore's *The Big One* (98). *American Movie* (99) is his second feature film.

Mark Borchardt was born in 1966. He is a native of Milwaukee. *Coven* (97) is his latest short film.

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