

I AM SECRETLY AN IMPORTANT MAN: RECALLING THE LATE LOCAL POET STEVEN JESSE BERNSTEIN

October 20, 2010

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<http://www.seattleweekly.com/2010-10-20/film/i-am-secretly-an-important-man/>



Bernstein in 1988, opening for Burroughs.

You worry about a guy who worshipped William S. Burroughs, and [Steven Jesse Bernstein](#) clearly made his friends worry long before he met his idol and preceded him onstage (at the Moore in 1988). He had mental troubles and substance-abuse issues for most of his life. Following his 1991 suicide, the local poet was honored by a [Sub Pop](#) album and EMP exhibit, but this new documentary from New York director [Peter Sillen](#) is the tenderest tribute yet. The film is extremely well-sourced, with home movies and stills; Sillen had the luxury of picking through material compiled by others, including local curator [Larry Reid](#). *Important Man* sets Bernstein's nasal verse to elegant streetscape montages of the city then and now. Friends and a few family members testify to Bernstein's happy, conventional L.A. childhood and drug-impacted Seattle years. "Jesse was a true outsider," says photographer [Charles Peterson](#), who with other grunge scenesters—[Kurt Cobain](#) included—latched on to Bernstein's raw words. "I'm not interested in making it in the literary world," he claims; yet outside the punk-rock clubs, Bernstein was willing to do a reading in a storefront window at [Nordstrom](#), to be interviewed—in hilariously awkward fashion—by [Susan Hutchison](#) on TV. *Why* he killed himself, and why he frequented the Elite after he married (and had two sons), is left unexplained. Straight biography isn't the point here, and Bernstein's contradictions, like Burroughs', remain unresolved. Whether he's a grunge footnote, a beatnik wannabe, or a beautiful, belated loser, the film allows you to decide.

Runs at Northwest Film Forum, Fri., Oct. 22–Thurs., Oct. 28. Not rated. 85 minutes.