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## POET'S PROBLEM

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**THANKS TO HIS GRIZZLED VOICE** and fascination with fringe life, Seattle poet Steven “Jesse” Bernstein emerged as a homegrown icon of the 1980s Northwest alternative scene. The writer, assiduously chronicled in [Peter Sillen](#)’s documentary *I Am Secretly an Important Man* (2010), first broke through to a wider audience in 1978, when a stripper who enjoyed his poems spent half a day raising the funds to publish his first official chapbook. Bernstein’s visions of Seattle’s drifters and junkies increasingly appealed to those who strayed from the mainstream, and sympathizers quickly gravitated toward the man with the tattooed fingers. By 1988, when one of his recorded readings arrived alongside Nirvana and Soundgarden tracks on the grunge compilation album “Sub Pop 200,” Bernstein had become one of the movement’s figureheads.

Though Bernstein died nearly two decades ago, Sillen’s reconstruction is an intimate portrayal, equipped with a treasure trove of published poems, audio recordings, and amateur videos. While home movies offer insight into Bernstein’s creative process and his unexpected fame, new interviews with lovers and confidants also chronicle Bernstein’s struggle with the unrelenting mental illness that led to his eventual suicide in 1991, at age forty.

It’s only late into this remembrance that Sillen fully reveals the brutal depths of Bernstein’s anguish—the sudden bouts of madness that would lead the soft-spoken man to erupt in violent fits. Worse than his condition were the prescribed treatments, which would alter his mental state

and make writing nearly impossible. Sillen argues that the very things that made Bernstein sick also allowed him to see the world as others never could, and *I Am Secretly an Important Man* is a tribute to the jagged edge that Bernstein was forced to walk.

*I Am Secretly an Important Man* opens December 15 at the IFC Center in New York. For more details, click [here](#).