



## MOVIE PREVIEW: *I AM SECRETLY AN IMPORTANT MAN* @ NWFF

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[I Am Secretly an Important Man](#) at Northwest Film Forum Oct. 22 - 28

New York based director Peter Sillen had a lot to work with in his gushingly visual biography on Seattle poet - punk icon Steven “Jesse” Bernstein, *I Am Secretly an Important Man*. Bernstein apparently loved to be shot, enigmatically carved in image from low income Seattle and San Francisco SRO apartments and graffiti-splattered art collectives and dusty backyards, all through his long and twisted but richly appreciated life. Because no matter how dole line murky or darkly mental he may have looked, he knew his presence shook the guts of the squares and normals. So he insisted on insistent visual documentation. It matched his projectile-noir writing, burning blue and red word-bullets delivered from a life invested in a yeasty evisceration of visage and the chemical cheat for bliss.

What were his family, friends, comrades, lovers, and camera people there to shoot the post-punk and proto-grunge bands he opened for capturing exactly? The sinewy body, inimically prison-tatted, his face fierce and somehow funny at the same time — 5 o’clock shadow face with the

DSHS once-a-year prescribed goggle glasses not quite keeping his black-hole stare from landing on you — Bernstein himself was a slender hammer of living protest, a fly-ment (an ointment entirely made out of flies). “What have you got?” would be far more polite than what he’d probably answer in a poem or a rant (vice versa, usually both at once) if you asked him what he was against.

Sillen made the films *Speed Racer: Welcome to the World of Vic Chesnutt* (1994) and *Benjamin Smoke* (2000), both known for their minimalist elegance — so watching *I Am Secretly an Important Man* has a fuck-ton of childhood, teenage, pre-and-during buzz early 90s Seattle rock milieu footage. Bernstein is appropriately ubiquitous in his own documentary, perhaps suspiciously so, as if this once-inside poet of prison piss-drinking was a hoax crafted by Sub Pop to sell copies of his must-have Steve Fisk-produced CD document, *Prison*. (A spoken word album which reveals as much about the soul and is as warmly welcoming to return to as anything by the contemporaneous musicians at the label.)

Cult-favorite musician/engineer/producer Fisk is here talking about Bernstein as a powder-keg of sub-cultural force, as is Kill Rock Stars’ Slim Moon and Sub Pop’s producer and founder Bruce Pavitt, and Bernstein’s many very articulate, unusual, and ambivalent girlfriends. My favorite interviews are with seminal Seattle punk club promoter and current Fantagraphics curator Larry Reid — whose excellent “This is why Steven mattered in this period” footage is taken from a couple of different buzz-eras in which he was filmed — and god-head rock photographer Charles Peterson, whose way with an anecdote and enthusiasm for explaining the details of the grimy, wild Seattle music scene two decades back are almost as Jack Kirby-huge as his shots of musicians creating in blurred paroxysms.

I only have a couple of issues with the movie — would love to have seen some of the more exciting live performances Bernstein violently blessed local clubs with in the mid-late 80s (the Big Black show in Georgetown just isn’t long enough, and we could use a whole Target style video of both opener and headliner of that gig for sure). But does that footage exist? With so many other photos and videos, I would think there has to be more actual live footage of Bernstein performing his writing somewhere (maybe in the extras in the eventual DVD of this release, hopefully). Also, Bernstein was REALLY funny — he had a great sense of humor that went beyond whether or not he would try to brain you with a broken bottle later at a party (he probably wouldn’t anyways). There is a mordant seriousness throughout *I Am Secretly an Important Man* that fully captures his tragedy and raging need for love but somehow leaves out his joy (save for hanging out with William Burroughs, an obvious but true inspiration).

Jay Van Hoy and Lars Knudson of *Old Joy* and *Wild Tigers I Have Known* executive produced *I am Secretly an Important Man* and the documentary has beautiful, rain-glistening and sun-peeking footage of Seattle through those years, with Bernstein’s descriptively city-loving poetry as narration through the ambience. This is the movie to close the 13th Annual Local Sightings Festival, and is the West Coast Premiere of a movie that affirms why some of the people attracted to the flame of the Pacific NW music scene aren’t moths, but are sizzling bright lights in themselves.