

the Stranger

I AM SECRETLY AN IMPORTANT MAN

October 21, 2010

By Eric Grandy

<http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Search?search=movietimes&film=5232898&hp>

By the time Steven "Jesse" Bernstein arrived in Seattle in 1967, he'd survived childhood polio, been in and out of mental institutions, run away from home, caught a ride on Ken Kesey's magic bus to San Francisco, appeared in porno films, and started doing heroin. Poetry was the next obvious move. A stripper published Bernstein's first chapbook in 1978; he recorded a poem for the scene-cementing Sub Pop 200 compilation in 1988; by 1991, he was dead by his own hand. Director Peter Sillen (best known for his posthumous documentary about art rocker Benjamin Smoke of Athens, Georgia) cuts seamlessly from archival material—color-saturated footage of Bernstein ambling down his fire escape—to grayer, present-day Seattle, as Bernstein recites poetry over Steve Fisk's jazz loops or those who knew the poet speak about him in voice-over. Interviews with contemporaries such as Bruce Pavitt of Sub Pop, Slim Moon of Kill Rock Stars, as well as Bernstein's family and friends, range from the requisite mythmaking (he was the "godfather of grunge," "a *real* outsider") to stranger moments: an ex talking about the seizures he suffered says the doctors thought Bernstein's brain was too big for his skull, his two grown sons playing a marimba together. But the film is at its best when Bernstein is on-screen or at least audible, his snarling, nasal monotone and acerbic verse as naggingly charismatic as it must have been then.