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“KING OF SPAIN” feat. bad shisha

Slumped over a cramped corner table with his hands across his idle arms, Sedgwick, his battered hair draping—or perhaps dripping—over his round, transparent-rim glasses, looks almost like a grown up, alternative Harry Potter who, after a stint in rehab, is in line to audition as the BBC’s next Doctor. A plaid shirt erupts from the collar of his black, buttoned blazer.

“I picked it up at a flea market,” he says about the gold pin on his coat. “I have no idea what it represents.”

Garret Sedgwick is on a touring hiatus in his Nashville residence, occasionally playing shows around town, but mostly relaxing in the wake of his fourth record, *Gravity Waltzes*, which, after an unsteady and brief career of hits and misses, somehow landed in the Top 40 for over a week.

For an artist who finally earned his respects around here, you’d think he’d be doing anything other than sulking. His face is a waxy blank slate, surrounded by the smoke from hookahs around the room. He has wandered off in thought and could return any minute having channeled any number of artists undercover: Ben Gibbard, Langhorne Slim, Isaac Brock, Beck. We are under the tent-like, dilapidated, hobo festival-themed Taboosh, the

downtown hookah bar where he agreed to meet. Christmas lights and colored tassels enchant the rising smoke from infrequently washed pipes. Sedgwick sips his cinnamon tea. Himself an ex-smoker, he found an odd spot for an interview.

"I like to take other people where they like to smoke," he says, tapping his teacup nervously. "And sometimes I don't mind the secondhand whiff. I went out on the Kerry Gaynor method, so I'm not afraid I'll slip back or anything. And it's a good place to camouflage yourself."

Wick, who has admitted to hating doing live shows, is a monastic recluse, avoiding crowds whenever he can. Although he could have picked a better spot. The edgy allure of hookah and Indian food is enough to attract the indie crowd that has followed him thus far. He is almost begging to be spotted. However, the infestation of emo teens and Vandy frat boys doesn't seem to take notice of this prodigious enigma. In the corner across from his guest, he is more nervous than he should be. Every word and movement is intentional, fidgety, as if he is about to divulge his innermost thoughts and emotions in an interview so candid that it won't be released until years after his death.

"It was nerve-wracking coming into the scene, to say the least," says Wick, reflecting on the rise of his career. "It's a nebulous blur, to be honest. I truthfully spread myself a little too thin. I was enraptured with so many musical ideas all at once. I don't remember any fan reactions or what I did about them. Maybe I blocked it out like soldiers do in combat. I just harnessed what was pulling me forward. Sometimes it's easy to feel out of touch."

Wick doesn't sound like he's alone. Although his relative stardom has in no way reached the surface of pop radio, hit soundtracks, or your mom's mini-van, Wick is a special breed of over-reflective, hyper-self-ware, garrulous-about-their-own-craft, ungrateful artists who seem clueless about their fan base. They act surprised when they put out great tracks, and so do we. When we hate them, they're misunderstood; when we love them, they're conscientious.

As proof of this, *Gravity Waltzes*, equally Wick's most paranoid and passionate record yet, arrived just after a false alarm announcement that he was temporarily "retiring" from musicianship. It may have been a veiled memorandum that he was slowing down, pacing himself.

"My mom once put me on Ritalin," he says, shifting himself in his seat as if in self-parody. "If I'm not writing, recording, or touring I get this itch and I go out in the night and I'm worried I'll wind up halfway across the country with no memory of why my pants are missing."

If he's threatening himself with self-destructive behavior in order to remain prolific, it shows. He has yet to be arrested, check in to a clinic, or make the front page, and rumor has it he owns a safe with over 40 hours of unreleased material. Still, despite his average of an album per year, secret negotiations with a yet-to-be-named label are hampering an upcoming project.

"This is why I've avoided major studio labels," he said. "There is no such thing as an artist-friendly label. Unless you leap off a building. Then they'll release everything you've ever written on a box set, no matter how sh—y it is."

But the latest rumor is that, without the backing of the new label, Wick has already reserved three days of his own studio time, on his own dime, and has yet to invite another artist. Names float around, including the collaborators from his previous records—The Hymnists, Gargamel Epic, The Follies, Al Jazari. Known for his mercurial flexibility and intrepid penchant for mimicry, Sedgwick’s next project could take off in any direction, with any number of collaborators. The mystery recording is still weeks away.

But Sedgwick isn’t leaking any details, not even to his closest compadres. He’s brought in a new graphic artist, an upcoming starter named Neil Oberlin, to produce the cover art for the upcoming album. Neil sits across from him, in a plain tee with the words “eschew obfuscation; espouse elucidation.” No one has heard of this young artist. His name isn’t even floating around. A casual fan of Wick, Oberlin only seems calm in the musician’s presence because he’s the only one smoking the ash-heavy apple flavor from the hookah between them.

“I wanted to go with someone who’d just come to the area looking to make it,” says Sedgwick. “I remember what it was like when I was playing around town, just trying to get my name out and work with whoever I could.”

Oberlin, unsure of what to say, gives a wincing smile, as if he’s still unsure whether this Sedgwick is an impostor, roping him into an elaborate prank.

“Okay,” he says after a long silence. “So, do you want me to give your demo a listen and see what I sketch out, or do you want me to give you some samples? I mean, I don’t even think you’ve seen any of my stuff. This is uncannily uncomfortable for me.”

Sedgwick nods and rolls his eyes, only empathetically, as if looking back into his own skull, somewhere into his past in order to identify with another human being. His eyes meet yours, try to get in touch with you, and then retreat into the heavens where you hoped he would take you. For a second you think you're looking at some redneck in a Halloween costume scratching his head because he forgot to recite a line. Although his antics have always been unpredictable, and sometimes, on the surface, counterintuitive, most established artists just don't insist on collaborating with some unproven up-and-comer whose work they haven't even seen yet.

Oberlin's inspirations range from the psychedelic art of John Maeda and Mark Weaver to the simplicity of Frank Chimero. "He has a kind of Wes Anderson feel to his work that I admire," he says, of the latter. "I think Wes Anderson has inspired me more than any visual artist. I like to begin my workday like a shot of one of his films. Just lay objects out on a table and sketch them as they are, laid out bare. I think deconstructing our tools and possessions really helps see the brand that we are."

Sedgwick nods in agreement, and an idea has come to him. He begins to pull small trinkets out of his pockets—a copper wire, a rechargeable AA battery, and a tiny magnet the size of an altoid. With the obsessive focus of a magician he wraps the copper wire into a coil. He snaps the magnet under the battery and stands it upright. He balances an end of the coil on the top of the battery and the coil begins to spin around it. Sedgwick's hands are spread away from it, and the small device continues as if it had a life all its own.

"It's a homopolar motor. The magnetic field propels the copper on a fixed axis."

The tiny MacGyveresque machine continues its smooth, silent loop.

"This was like Faraday's first motor demonstration. Everything reduced down to its components. Perpetual motion. As long as the current's in there. It could go on forever." He looks up at Oberlin, then back at his motor. "Who doesn't envy that?"

Oberlin taps the table, then interjects. "So you're thinking of a design like that? Harkening back to your Faraday album?"

Sedgwick rubs his hands over his face, as if this is a big decision. "I think. Maybe not literally a sketch. At first I was thinking a holographic image, but tossed it. Maybe something hand drawn. I don't know yet. It's a starting idea, you know. Just the concept. Something propelling itself on its own steam, you know. Like a brand new creation."

Oberlin bites his lip and begins to jot notes on a pad at his side.

Sedgwick holds up an invisible idea in the span of his thumb and forefinger. "Faraday said that there was one kind of electricity," he says. "One kind. For everything."

"Yeah," says Oberlin.

"Yeah," Sedgwick repeats. "Everything being powered the same way. Think about that."

Such a symbol could mean potential for anything. Wick's roots are as mysteriously laid out as his projected directions. His influences are outrageously eclectic, casting him in some culturally postcolonial, post-American age, an

impossible pigeon to pigeonhole. He seldom discloses his past, but occasionally drops hints here and there.

“Why would you bother asking Rembrandt what village he was born in or what his favorite coffeehouse is?” he once said in a radio interview. “If people want to know these random facts about me, they can just look up my Wikipedia page or something, if they have that kind of time. I’m sure someone’s looked into it.”

According to his Wiki page and its few citations, Sedgwick was first discovered in Nashville as a street performer, mostly covering Daniel Johnston or anything passersby requested. He had dropped out of college when he met a professor from South Africa who “inspired me to quit my studies and make something of myself.” A now defunct band called *Monolith in Stereo* took him on before splitting up, providing just the moment for him to be discovered by—well, here’s where it gets fishy. Nobody knows quite sure who claimed his discovery first. The Eels? Cake? Modest Mouse? The Decemberists? Any name you can drop is flattering.

But after a long string of short-term, uncredited stints with various bands, Sedgwick used seed money from deceased actor Heath Ledger to make a name for himself with an ambitious, yet patched together EP, *Orange*. To describe it would be to describe an audition for *America’s Got Talent* that even Tom Waits would dismiss as obscure—until you hear the vinyl for the first time. The head track, “Lodestone Blues,” sounds dichotomously like a stadium jam and a street-side croon, and his new hit “Upon Choking” sounds eerily similar.

It's near impossible to chart the course of Wick's career in a singular arc, and the closest we can come is to list his LP's chronologically, which is as useful as a list of births, marriages and deaths scribbled into a family Bible—punctuation suspended amidst missing letters. He's striving to assert his own identity to a fan-base teeming with more sectarian conflict than all of Palestine.

But if you go out and buy a copy of *Gravity Waltzes*, make sure you also grab a copy of *Orange*, or maybe a release by an even less celebrated artist. You can always say you are buying it for a friend. If you're admitting you like him at this point, you might as well admit he's over. Either purchase all his albums or choose just one. And you better know everything about this living, breathing, inimitable contradiction before he either fades out or sells out.

I'm being burlesque.