

Interview with guitarist and composer, Jason Newsom, about Anomalous Quintet's *Simple Forms* By Chris Dominic

DOMINIC: I was hoping today we could talk a little bit generally about the Anomalous Quintet, and then I'd like to talk about the album specifically. I've gotten a chance to listen to it. And so my first question is where was the band formed and when?

NEWSOM: Here in Portland. I think '97 after I moved out here I started looking for musicians, putting something together. It has changed in personnel over the years. This is the third CD. There have been different people on each one of them with some overlap between the last one and this one.

DOMINIC: At the time when you were forming the band. What was your overall goal, your influences, or what were you trying to do at the time?

NEWSOM: Well I had this trio in Pittsburgh, sort of a fusion trio, and I wanted to do something a little bit bigger. Get some horns involved, because I love saxophone. You know the whole goal of this for me is to write songs and to be able turn the ideas into something material. It's amazing how well that has worked at least in terms of success in my mind—actually having what is played match what I was thinking initially. And that is really incredibly rewarding. I'm really lucky to have such great musicians to play with. It's an amalgam of influences—I suppose as a composer I'm influenced by anybody from Thelonious Monk to Donald Fagen to Sly and the Family Stone.

DOMINIC: Now that I know this, I just have to ask. Are some of the specific staccato styles coming from Monk?

NEWSOM: Yeah, that is actually I think a lot of it. I think the thing that Monk does is completely interesting syncopation stuff. If you listen to him carefully, he'll play the same line three or four times, each time totally rhythmically a revision of what he played before. It's all this completely odd syncopation. Between that and the more off harmonies, people have a hard time getting into Thelonious Monk. He's not something you listen to and right away immediately say "wow, this is so appealing."

DOMINIC: I think that's right. Traditionally, he's been seen as a musician's pianist. On the other hand, just as an example, I've got a friend in Seattle who's not a music guy, but one of his favorite jazz artists is Thelonious Monk. So, there's got to be something that's just groovy or appealing about that kind of sound.

NEWSOM: It's very different too. It's really refreshing in that sense I think. In fact, it took me forever to realize that Thelonious Monk didn't come from outer space or something. (laughs) It sounds so different from anything you've ever heard before. But if you listen to some solo Duke Ellington you'll hear—you could swear it was Thelonious Monk in some places. There's this stride basis to it and there is this syncopation offbeat stuff. Although Duke was always a little bit more harmonious, less dissonant. And there wasn't that bebop harmony that was added in that Thelonious Monk was part of contributing to.

DOMINIC: So, now I know a little more about the band's style. You also have a very interesting finger-picking style, and I'd love to know a little more about your inspiration for that in particular. What are some of your influences there?

NEWSOM: Well, thanks, I guess. Sometimes "interesting" does not necessarily mean good. (laughs)

DOMINIC: Well, just to put a little more clarity on it. One, it's finger picking. But it's an interesting finger picking. I can't say "oh, he's doing that thing that Hendrix does with his pinky" or "oh, he sounds a lot like Mark Knopfler." There's clearly something that you are taking from a lot of different places and making it your own. And so I'm curious as to how you got there.

NEWSOM: Well, I've always thought that there is not really any use in playing music unless you can be your own person about it. And there are so many musicians or teachers that I've had or talked to who say "you should find an artist and emulate them" and I understand kind of what the point of that is. It's that you develop some sort of technical skill and standard of ability from them, but if you are just copying all the time, you can't be your own person. So, long ago I just said I'm not going to follow anybody's playbook on how I should play. I used to have a classical guitar hanging around. I would just kind of fool around with it, and it's an odd thing to try to use a pick with nylon string classical guitar.

DOMINIC: It's not done very often.

NEWSOM: No, it lends itself to the fingers.

DOMINIC: Like Segovia.

NEWSOM: And, yeah, at the time I never really listened to classical guitar. At the time at least. So that wasn't really the influence. And I just developed this affection for funk music. But this idea that—I hadn't really ever heard anyone do this—that you could play funk, kind of slap guitar like you play a bass. Around '93, I just decided to throw away my picks and go cold turkey, and I never looked back.

DOMINIC: Right, because funk guitar is thought of as someone who is playing almost exclusively a very pick-driven rhythm.

NEWSOM: And that's true, just that kind of syncopated chink, chink, chink.

DOMINIC: Right.

NEWSOM: The other thing I think that's important in terms of my style is that I've always listened to more piano players than guitar players. One of the things that kind of led me into doing that is to try to emulate piano players. A piano player can hit all of the notes in a chord at once in a very staccato way. But when you are strumming with a pick you can't really do that. So, the ability to be able to play a chord with that same percussive attack that piano players can use and be able to integrate the harmony stuff with the solo stuff. That's the thing that fascinates me. One of the guitarists that has probably influenced me the most is Leo Kottke. He has this ability through his finger-picking style to play chords at the same time he is playing melody. Kind of like a piano player. So maybe I have in mind a kind of combination of Herbie Hancock and Leo Kottke.

DOMINIC: Now I really feel like I understand a little better. Can you tell me a little bit about the intro to Track 5, the intro to "Shanghaied"?

NEWSOM: "Shanghaied". Oh, ok.

DOMINIC: Because the first thing I did when I fired up Track 5. I thought "he's gotta tell me what's going on there". That's a really interesting way to start that song and I think it's something that people would really be interested in hearing about.

NEWSOM: Yeah, well, that's a good question. I suppose it does relate actually to what we were just talking about. I was trying to do this funk, slap thing, but also include some sliding (*glissando*), because that's one of the kind of sounds you can get out of the guitar that you can't really get out of any other instrument. And I also wanted to do something that wasn't just a single note line. So, I did this minor third interval where I just pulled two strings at the same time, and it created a kind of dissonant start note. And then there is this slide kind of thing. That whole line came out of trying to... I don't know if you noticed this by counting, but there is a bar of 4 and then a bar of 6 beats. I wasn't explicitly trying to create an odd time signature, but I was trying to create a funk like line that went on longer than the listener expected. And it wound up putting in this sort of extra length for the second bar. So, it's kind of a combination of all of those things. "Shanghaied" refers to being swindled or tricked and I thought that reflected my attempt at deceiving your expectations in that way.

DOMINIC: So, the one thing you haven't told me was who some of your funk influences were.

NEWSOM: The major funk influence is Sly. Parliament I've listened to a lot and I love them. In fact, one of the tracks on here, *No Shuffle*, has a little allusion to Parliament-Funkadelic's "Flashlight". But Sly, just has a brilliant approach to rhythm and arrangement. In the PBS history of rock n' roll series, there is this musicologist who is talking and he refers to Sly as the "Bach of rhythm" and I just totally related to that. I completely believe that.

DOMINIC: What about the title of that one?

NEWSOM: Well, I was in New Orleans the year of Hurricane Katrina, actually before it happened. And I was reminded of this great style of horns playing in this conversational way of trading off in a sort of celebratory way, and I was kind of going for that overall sense. I was never really sure if what I was doing was a shuffle or not. "No" is either "N.O." or "no."

DOMINIC: So, let's talk about the inspiration for *Simple Forms* in general. You have two records in a row now that talk about shapes (laughs). Well, maybe you just realized that. (laughs). But what takes you in the direction that you went for simple forms.

NEWSOM: It kind of hit me part way through writing this set of songs. There are really kind of two things going on. One is that it was nice to be able to create simple song structures that would be easy to play all at once at gigs. The guys playing with me are just amazing musicians (*Michael York*, tenor, *Daniel Covrett*, baritone, *Arcellus Sykes*, bass, *Ronnie LaGrone*, drums) who read incredibly well and they can sit down with a new tune and they can just play it

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great the first time. Even so, I wanted to have material that we didn't have to think at all about the song form—we didn't have to worry about what came next and we could focus on the improvisation. But also I was thinking a lot about this tune that I've always kind of kept in my sets that I wrote for the first CD called "Push." It's a blues tune. Actually, it's thirteen bars. There's this extra bar with a bass riff. It's kind of a minor blues. It has a real basic blues structure with a kind of four bar bridge. I can play that over and over again and I still feel really good about it. Even though it is a simple song, I still feel like, compositionally, I really accomplished something I wanted to accomplish. I kept wanting to reproduce that overall essence. Also around this time, I had a resurgent interest in the Beatles and I listened closely to a lot of their earliest stuff. Before their song writing started taking off, they were doing all kinds of covers of rockabilly, Elvis, what have you. But they were sneaking in all of these little arranging tricks—two bar guitar solos, intros and outros, harmonies. I developed this new found appreciation for their early work and it inspired me to try to make more out of each little moment.

DOMINIC: Now, you've got a new rhythm section with Sykes and LaGrone. What stylistically do they add to the *Simple Forms* record?

NEWSOM: Well, I think they fit in with that goal completely because they really know how to play a groove with the appropriate amount of ornamentation—not making it too complicated but also keeping it interesting. And they just lock in great together.

DOMINIC: So your arranging I think showcases really a clinic on when to layer sounds and when to separate them. I don't know if this was intentional but the concept of the record is called "Simple Forms" and you have these tracks, like "Entanglement," that is a really great example of when sounds should be layered and when they should be separated. And I am really just curious what inspires some of the choices you've made to arrange some of that.

NEWSOM: Boy, a lot of it is just feel and getting used to or comfortable hearing when I want to hear certain instruments. Around the time I wrote that song, I had been listening to Henry Mancini and John Barry. I call it "spy funk". In fact, it actually says it on the chart, it says "spy funk". So I was kind of looking for that 007, Peter Gunn sound. And that one started with a bass line that sounded just right when it came out in terms of wanting to capture that overall feel. Then later I came up with a guitar rhythm to go with it, and then the sort of tag-team sax melody line between (*tenor player*) Micheal (York) and (*the baritone player*) Daniel (Covrett), a device I had been looking for an opportunity to use for some time.

DOMINIC: Where does the title for that one come from by the way?

NEWSOM: The title was originally a reference to a physics phenomenon where linked quantum particles can have an immediate affect on one another even though they are far apart. Einstein called it "spooky action at a distance". There is a kind of intrigue to the word that fits with the "spy" musical concept. I had this idea for a melody line that I wanted to use at some point that was a single melody line but played by two instruments, each completing each other's sentences. And this fit with my idea of the term "Entanglement" also. There is a nice connection of the term to certain current political events as well.

DOMINIC: One of the things about *Simple Forms* that I am curious to hear what you think about is that you seem completely unabashed about showing us the hook on some of these songs. (laughs). And so in Track 2 "Hold on Tight Mr. Buckaloo," you just give it to me right off the bat. When I heard it on the CD, I remembered the song from the live performance which I had only heard once. So, how much of that is intentional and how much is unintentional? Do you think about the hook?

NEWSOM: Yeah, I do, but it's interesting that you put it that way, because I certainly wasn't thinking about the hook in terms of the way you just expressed it. It would be a brilliant thing if I had planned it that way (laughs). It really came out of looking for how to have different introductions to the songs. I have this tendency to want to do a guitar vamp at the beginning of every song. There's a pop sense to a lot of this stuff and I don't want to be afraid of that. I was in love with pop and rock and roll music before I was in love with jazz. There are a few composers that I would classify as jazz, like (*pianist, producer*) Jim Beard, that at some point long ago I heard. In terms of something that falls into the jazz genre, it said to me "it's ok to like the melody". You don't have to have this melody that's buried or really complicated or inaccessible.

DOMINIC: Absolutely.

NEWSOM: It doesn't have to be a cheap, unsophisticated, commercialized, piece of crap if it has a hook in it. It can still be good. But that's hard to get past—this feeling that if it is going to be appealing and accessible, it is "pop" and so it is not artistic.

DOMINIC: Why the title "Hold on Tight Mr. Buckaloo"?

NEWSOM: When she was like three years old, my daughter used to shout "hold on tight Mr. Buckaloo!" when we would run down the hill with her stroller. And it became this joke that we would use all the time on the tire swing or whatever. I later found out that her preschool teacher would say "hold on tight Mr. Buckaloo" to mean "hold your horses, not so fast". There is also a similarity to part of the phrasing of the melody that is reminiscent of Coltrane's "Mr. P.C." that I liked the connection to also.

DOMINIC: Now, let's talk about Track 9, "bg." I noticed it because it's got obvious reggae and ska influences in it.

NEWSOM: Really? (laughs)

DOMINIC: Yes, whether you intended it or not. And I was just curious where that was coming from. And maybe it is just that your rhythm section does such a good job with it. Playing a song with lots of rim shots and hi-hat isn't the easiest thing in the world to do well. Yet it comes across as a really nice change to the record right at the end. What was your thinking behind that song? And I am curious about what bg means.

NEWSOM: Ok, well, "bg" actually kind of means two things, "bass and guitar" because I was shooting for something very kind of simple and it is really the reason it is just a trio. And "bg" are my wife's initials. It's interesting that you say that, because I certainly wasn't really thinking reggae. That song was the hardest for me. We did a bunch of takes of that, which wasn't at all Arcellus' or Ronnie's fault. We did three different sessions where we tried it, two takes each, each session in a pretty different style. The first two attempts we were not really approaching it the way I wanted and I didn't know what I wanted. That's kind of rare for me. Usually I go in and I know specifically what I want and we will do two takes or maybe three takes of a song. So, I'm glad to hear it had some sort of success from a listeners stand point. But I wanted to do something kind of stripped down. That is the reason it's the last on the CD, because it's sort of the simplest of them all I think.

DOMINIC: Let me ask you about a couple of other titles. What about "Rhumb Line"?

NEWSOM: Well, in that one, I was trying to do something with a definite funky feel, but putting the accent on the two instead of the one. I came across the term "rhumb line" that is a way to navigate on the sea to get most directly to where you want to go using an arc instead of a straight line. So, I liked the fit with the idea of a more indirect route to a funk feel by not bashing the one quite the same way.

DOMINIC: How about the title for "In the Rustle of the Leaves"?

NEWSOM: That title came from this article I read about a letter a soldier in Iraq who wrote to his wife or fiancée and it was very poetic. It said essentially that if he died, she would hear him in the rustle of the leaves. He was subsequently killed. I was really struck by the beauty of the language he used and by the circumstance of knowing he might die any day. It struck me how much the soldiers are as much a victim in this horrendous affair as the Iraqi citizens when you think about the political forces running it.

DOMINIC: What is it that you are listening to these days that other people might want to check out?

NEWSOM: Oh my. Ok, for sax players, Joshua Redman, Chris Potter, Dave Holland Quintet, a lot of Wayne Shorter's recent groups. Pianists: Chucho Valdez, Michel Camilo, and always Bill Evans. For guitarists: Wayne Krantz, Oz Noy, and Bill Connors.

DOMINIC: So, now I can't stop myself now that I know you are a fan of the saxophone. If you had to name three of your favorite saxophone players, who would they be.

NEWSOM: Wayne Shorter, Coltrane—Coltrane's sound just can't be beat, and Bob Sheppard. Bob Sheppard is a lesser known player from LA. He has two of his own records (*Tell Tale Signs* on Windam Hill Records, *In the Now* on Sirocco Jazz). He's been on a lot of recordings as a studio musician, like Steely Dan, Joni Mitchell. He is just an amazing tenor player.

DOMINIC: How about guitar? If you had three players you just love to death, who are they?

NEWSOM: Well, my pat answer for that is kind of an odd answer because I don't think they have much resemblance to how I play on the surface at least: George Barnes, who is an old swing jazz guitar player, Leo Kottke, and probably Walter Becker. I've listened to every guitar player, especially jazz guitar player, in the book, but those are the three players that probably have the most impact on what I play and how I play.

DOMINIC: Well, Jason, thanks very much. Everybody ought to go out and check out *Simple Forms*. It's been great talking with you.