

Places; French quartet gives fans the ooh-la-la
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The Parisian twin brothers in the Moutin Reunion Quartet are so physically attractive that it's almost difficult to look at them - sort of like staring directly at the sun, if you like the Aidan Quinn type. The Moutin brothers are actually a little more handsome than the American actor, if such a thing can be imagined. (The other two in the band aren't tough on the eyes, either.)

"How can those women be sitting in the front row, chowing down on French fries right in front of them!" a (albeit happily married) friend whispers at the band's Scullers gig Wednesday night.

The show is the second-to-last stop on the band's debut American tour in support of its new CD, "Power Tree" (on the Dreyfus Jazz label). Bassist Francois Moutin, a regular on the New York jazz scene, and his identical twin brother, drummer Louis, who lives in Paris, are critically hailed phenoms, highly sought-after as session and touring players by heavyweights such as legendary pianist Martial Solal.

Saxophonist Sylvain Beuf and 26-year-old keyboardist Baptiste Trotignon also have made their names in Europe, both as band leaders and sidemen. But stateside, the quartet has yet to claim brand recognition, and tonight's Boston audience is small.

Women are in the majority, as it turns out.

"Yes, yes, of course women show up," says their manager, Dan Doyle, when he's asked a few days later if there has been a big turnout of female jazz fans during this tour, especially in cities where he's managed to place a photo in the local paper. (Mentions of the Moutins' married status don't diminish the impact.) Doyle admits he's not unaware of the group's marketing potential, which has next- big-thing written all over it for better reasons than beauty.

These guys aren't exactly bimbos, and that's not even considering Louis Moutin's master's degree in mathematics or Francois' doctorate in physics.

At the Scullers show, it feels a little shameful to be distracted by their looks and blushing Gallic charm (they are shockingly nice, as it happens), especially as it becomes apparent that the music is as stunning. It gives modern jazz a good name, even if you think it needs one; their spontaneous integrations are breathtaking at points.

Obviously, the members of the rhythm section, who have been playing music together since they were small children and share the natural connectedness of twins, are the driving force in this musical communion. The band's improvisational adventures on the album pieces clearly are thrilling to the musicians, particularly the Moutins, who seem to be engaging in some spirited telepathy throughout their improvisational rides.

For the band, the Scullers gig can't be considered the high point of this tour - certainly not after stops such as Philadelphia, where an audience of 600 included Coltrane kin. There are a couple of important jazz scenesters in the crowd at Scullers, but this gang can't compete with the real-life "Cousin Mary" of song.

"Yes, it was only about 15 people, but they gave us a standing ovation," Francois says brightly of the Boston show, which he considers as worthwhile a gig as any on the tour, by way of breaking the ice with American jazz audiences. It's a memorable introduction, for sure, if not the farthest-reaching.

In promoting the band, Doyle admits he's not opposed to taking advantage of certain obvious commercial assets, when the time comes. The jazz world's attention comes first, he says, expressing hope for a nice slot at Newport.

But advertising opportunities, preferably in a "high-fashion context," might serve them well, says Doyle. He mentions that because the Moutins' parents were prominent in Parisian haute couture, there's a certain integrity to this idea. Had Moutin PERE, a fashion editor, not turned down an offer to work at Vogue in New York, the twins might have grown up in the Manhattan jazz scene.

As it was, their jazz-mad elders (the family library numbered some 3,000 American jazz and blues records) had them soaking up Sunday afternoon live-jazz programs at age 5; by 7 they were going to nightclubs to see such greats as Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Brown and Memphis Slim.

The Moutins' style of jazz is complex but musically natural, virtuosic but not flashy, and never, never cheesy. The rhythms cook. Beuf's soprano sax makes you forget you ever heard Kenny G. play one. Trotignon travels with an old Fender Rhodes. The "Power Tree" material ranges from such invigorating original pieces as "Africa" and "Free Climbing" to interpretive covers of Georges Brassens and a way-out take on "La Vie en Rose."

And then there's that old JE NE SAIS QUOI. . . .

Stepping up to the mike at one point, Louis explains that unlike Francois, he hasn't spent the past five years living in New York, and apologizes that his English is "not so good as my brother's one." He fearlessly goes on to note that the last song was "written for a woman, his name is Ursula."

Francois quietly alerts him to the flub. "HER name is Ursula, sorry," says Louis, with a smile.

Beuf pipes up, "Nobody's perfect!"

Maybe not. But it's a pretty close call. (Sigh.)