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Column: Interviews

Power Twins Unite: Francois and Louis Moutin

Posted: 2004-03-03

By [Franz A. Matzner](#)

Twin brothers, bassist Francois Moutin and drummer Louis Moutin came to jazz early. Born to jazz enthusiast parents in Paris, the two began playing together as young children, forming the deep musical bond that has led them to their present day international recognition, both as individual players and a team.

Though Francois currently resides in New York and Louis in Paris, they continue to work together often, having recently released the critically acclaimed album, *Red Moon*, for which they will be touring through the U.S. in the near future.

It was my distinct pleasure to speak with the Moutins about their current projects, musical



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development, and unique musical relationship. While Francois and I were able to speak on the phone, Louis Moutin, having returned to Paris, was unable to join the conversation directly. Fortunately, Louis was able to respond in brief to several questions submitted to him in writing. These comments have been placed at the conclusion of the Francois Moutin interview.

FRANCOIS MOUTIN

All About Jazz: Your latest release, *Red Moon*, really highlights your working relationship with your brother. [ed. note: Louis Moutin] You both contributed four compositions, and you can just hear it on the album that you guys play together seamlessly. I wanted to start there and ask how you both became so involved in music.



FM: We started listening to jazz as soon as we were born because our parents were jazz fans. Our father had thousands of jazz records and we picked the early jazz. He had records going from Jelly Roll

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Morton to whatever was the most modern stuff in the sixties when we were born. So we were listening first to Jelly Roll and Bix Beiderbecke. We were big fans of Fats Waller. Also my mother played piano by ear. Not professionally at all. She was a photographer, a fashion photographer actually. Her father also played piano by ear so there was a kind of tradition of listening and playing music in the family. She also played a little bit of guitar. She had the basic chords and she showed that to me. So I picked up the guitar first and my brother played piano. We would listen to Fats Waller and Bix Beiderbecke and we'd play them. You know, trying to pick the chords, you understand. I would say we started playing together when we were five years old. We started playing early jazz the way we could because we had no real training really except for the fun of doing it. But I would say that playing together, at least we had to play in rhythm.

(Laughing)

FM: What I mean is the starting point was having fun and we've kept that through all these years.

AAJ: So you've always been involved in jazz music—it wasn't a turn towards jazz?

FM: Right. We didn't—like many people—begin with listening to rock and roll or pop music and then go to jazz from that. Louis and I started listening to pop and rock when we were something like 18 years old. Not before. Before that we hated it. We only thought that jazz was the real music. Also with classical. It took us a long time to like classical. We were really jazz freaks. Maybe it was also a reaction against the fact that no one else knew a bit about

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jazz . I mean, you know, then all of France didn't know about jazz. They were only listening to pop music and we were so much in love with jazz.

AAJ: Were you always both equally interested in playing?

FM: Oh yeah, yeah. At one point I kept playing guitar and my brother stopped playing piano for a little while because he had been offered by our parents as a birthday present a little snare drum and a little hi-hat and a little cymbal, so we had this duet. I was playing guitar and he was playing drums and we were both singing...By the time we were seven years old, our parents started bringing us to jazz clubs. The first sets. We were not hanging until two in the morning.

But we could see people play live. Great people actually because some great musicians were coming to Paris from America to perform and also the French jazz scene was starting to be good in the late sixties and early seventies. We started learning how to play watching these guys and listening to them live because that's something different from the records. You have to have this sensation to really perceive what the music is all about.

AAJ: I agree. The industry can put out as many albums as it wants, but there still has to be a focus on going out and seeing people live. There's just something different. Everyone I've ever taken to a concert—even if they were professed jazz haters beforehand—they leave saying 'Wow. That was great.' You can play an album and that might not happen, but take them to a club and something changes.

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FM: Yeah. Exactly. You know, as a matter of fact, I read an article two days ago—I don't know where it was—commenting...that though the jazz record market has been down, the companies are collecting more copyrights because of the live performances. The audience knows. Maybe they buy a few less albums, but still they go to see the live performances. There is an eagerness about going to see the artists playing on stage and that's great.

AAJ: I'm quite interested in the development of the French jazz scene that you were talking about. First of all, we're seeing a stream of really fantastic players coming over from Paris. You and your brother. Jean-Michel Pilc. What's happening over there?

FM: For many years there's been a growing jazz scene in Paris. I would assume that it started after the war. There were a good deal of jazz lovers before the last world war, but then when the American army came in...they were like saviors. And jazz music became one of the symbols, so more and more jazz fans appeared in Europe and especially in Paris. Jazz clubs started to open. There were a good number of clubs in the fifties in Paris and because of that some musicians began to play jazz. At first it was, well, what it could be, but over the years it became more and more, and I think in the seventies we had some good players—though the seventies was a little hard for jazz players because of the whole rock and roll thing—but still people like Martial Solal were really great players proving the French could be the equal of American players.

It took a certain time, but through the eighties a lot

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of these older French jazz musicians managed to have conservatories and music schools trying to have jazz programs. This really opened the way for young musicians to play jazz and by the end of the eighties there were a good number of great young, French jazz musicians on the scene. Now the main conservatory in France has a very well-developed jazz program and there are new jazz musicians coming on the scene every year that really are astounding. So Paris is really a great jazz scene. Since the seventies there have been a lot of clubs. Some of them are closing, but it is a little bit like New York in reduction. It's not as many musicians, not as many clubs, but the quality matches, I think.

AAJ: At least from an American jazz fan's perspective there's always been a connection...

FM: ...with Paris.

AAJ: Exactly. There's always been this back and forth between the American and the Parisian jazz culture, and a very strong interest. Can we locate a French jazz stream? Is there any stylistic difference in what's coming out of Paris today?

FM: I wouldn't say so. I think jazz today has become a world phenomenon. It's not that much different. I mean, you find in Paris, just like in New York, you find modernists and people who are really like bebop enthusiasts—there are still people who would insist bebop is not jazz and that real jazz is the jazz of the thirties and the twenties, but of course there are modernists, musicians that want to open new ways and all these schools are existing in Paris as well as in New York. So I wouldn't say the different colors are because they are coming from Paris instead of

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New York. It's becoming a world phenomenon now. And it's not only Paris.

It's Stockholm, Tokyo, Africa. Jazz players have always been inspired by their popular musical culture...but there isn't a specific French way. I mean, to my ear. I know I disagree with some people in that. But to my ear, no. It's always been jazz. It actually varies all the time. I don't want to be from one style, or era, to focus only on the bebop area. It's very open to me.

AAJ: Why did you choose to come to New York?

FM: Yeah, yeah. It's a very good question. Although I told you the Paris scene is very rich, artistically very rich. First of all, I was lucky enough that about four years after I became a professional jazz musician, Martial Solal hired me...and this was the best jazz gig in France. In terms of combining good income and playing great music...So I was kind of comfortable. Doing great. But trying to have projects under my name, and with my brother, that was harder. I kind of got the message that, 'Hey, you're playing with Martial Solal, you've got the best gigs, why do you young guys want to have your own music? You're young. Wait. Take your place in the line.' You know?

“I wouldn’t be the musician I am without having had Louis there. Playing with a twin that I love.”

– Francois Moutin

That was pretty much what I felt as a response. And also, the thing is after a while being in Paris, being a French jazz musician on the Parisian scene we were treated—all Parisian musicians, especially when they are young—are treated like local musicians and don’t get the respect they deserve. Even Jean-Michel [Pilc] was totally ignored by the French press and the French jazz business until he came to New York... That’s really one reason he and I came here.

And the second reason is through all these years I was performing in France and I had these occasions to play with great American players... who kept telling me, ‘Hey, Francois, you really should go to New York and see how it is because you’ll like it.’ I came to see at last, in maybe ’95, and I immediately loved it. I felt like—what’s missing in the Paris scene, at least at the time I came to New York, was this fluidity that jazz musicians do sessions everyday in their apartments. That brings a real thing where people can meet, and have their music played. I mean, after just one month in New



York I could really do jazz sessions with a lot of great musicians, meet a lot of people, play music from other people, have other people play my music. I felt a great deal of enthusiasm and eagerness to play everyday from everyone here in New York. Then I started to have gigs. I really felt great and decided to stay.

AAJ: Was it difficult at first to play without your brother?

FM: It was. I was missing it. That's true. But it was a good thing also. It helped us to pass a point musically. At one point, before I came here, our playing together was only determined by our symbiotic relationship. Because we played less together for a couple years, we went in different directions and met a lot of different people, so now that we play a lot together again it has become different. There's still this symbiotic dimension, but it has acquired its right place and we came back into surprising each other more and that enriched our playing together. Not only in the music, but in the everyday life.

AAJ: I want to go back a little. We're talking about your relationship with your brother, growing up together. So going back to your childhood, what's the worst thing Louis ever did to you?

FM: Why do you want to know that?

AAJ: It could be funny?

FM: It is. It's a funny story...there was this time when we were playing, I think we were ten years old or so, and we were big Oscar Peterson fans. We kept

playing these duets. We were playing every day at home, and he was playing piano and I was playing guitar. I was a big fan of Wes Montgomery at that time. One day we were playing over a blues and his solo became too long to my ears and instead of being quiet and not saying anything I said, 'Hey, can you end it so I can do a solo?' And that made him very mad—this is so funny—so he stood up and punched me in the face.

[Laughing]

FM: When we talk about it now we are laughing. But actually, he broke one of my teeth. We keep that as a symbol. Then, not long after that, I saw that Oscar Peterson was playing in Paris and I told my dad and asked if we could go...That was the first time I saw Ray Brown playing live. I was amazed. That changed my life. Seeing Ray Brown play with Oscar Peterson, I think that night I decided I would be a bass player... He was so swinging. There was so much pleasure listening to him and seeing him play. That's what put the virus in me.

AAJ: So maybe it's a good thing your brother punched you?

FM: I think it is. That's true. It turned me to play bass. It helped me find my vocation.

But you know, all these things. Twins growing up together is a beautiful thing. Of course, I don't know what it is not to have a twin brother. The benefit was to have always had this partner all these years, to [have] this feeling that you have this person you can always fit with...

AAJ: It's such a special relationship. You can hear it, I think, in the music, that there's some other level of understanding that you share.

FM: I wouldn't be the musician I am without having had Louis there. Playing with a twin that I love. It's true. I wouldn't have been able to play jazz with someone since I was five years old. Which is different. When you approach an instrument at home and you are the only one, and you're working on it by yourself I think it is less fun than having someone there who wants to do the same, wants to have fun like you. I think it is less painful.

LOUIS MOUTIN



All About Jazz: How did you and your brother become so involved with jazz?

Louis Moutin: As children, in the sixties, we had the chance to have many jazz records at home. From the earliest jazz (I was personally a big Fat's Waller

fan when I was six years old) to Miles, Coltrane, etc. We also had a natural instinctive relation with this music.

On top of that, as twin brothers, we could share this and play with it like kids play. Having fun and that's it. Then, when growing up, we discovered one jazz artist after another, one "jazz-style" after another, following the actual chronology of the historical creation of this music. So we could clearly see the tradition of jazz as pushing each artist to bring his "thing" as a part of the whole process. That made us more and more involved.

AAJ: Were you always both equally interested in playing?

LM: Yes.

AAJ: Francois spoke about how important it was that your parents took you to see live jazz when you were young. Do you agree? How is live jazz different from recorded jazz?

LM: I agree, of course. The difference as a player is obvious to me. When playing live, I'm not only connected with the other players, but also with the energy of the audience. I can physically feel it. It's very exiting.

It's also true as an audience member. You share and exchange directly the emotions with people around you (musicians on stage or other audience members).

But this is not to say that live is better than records. Jazz became what it is also because of the invention

of the recording technology. I mean that improvisation has always existed in music. But the 20th century made possible that a musical improv created with three people in the room, can be listened to by thousands (millions?) of persons. This changed the music.

AAJ: Francois spoke a little about the current French scene, and the history of jazz in France. Could you give me your perspective? Is there a difference between French jazz and American jazz?



LM: About the history of jazz in France, let's just say that jazz has been important to this country in many ways since the twenty's. There are a lot of great jazz players in France, and that makes a real French jazz scene.

To me, you can find stylistic differences from an artist to another artist. It's less obvious from a country to another country, since there is not ONE American jazz or ONE European jazz or ONE French jazz. I mean that style belongs to the artists more than to the countries.

AAJ: Francois explained that after he came to New York you visited him and enjoyed the New York jazz scene, but were unable to move because of family commitments. Did it effect your playing to be separate from Francois after having played together for so many years?

LM: Being a twin brother is something really special, from a psychological point of view. To be

physically separate from François for a few years helped me to get more self-confidence. In that way, it changed something in my playing.

AAJ: I spoke with Francois a little about your childhood. I asked him what was the worst thing he ever did to you when you were kids. To be fair, I'll ask you the same question. What was the worst trick you ever played on Francois?

LM: No comment.

AAJ: You began as a piano player. What made you choose the drums? What about drumming made you focus on the instrument?

LM: I felt that I was gifted for drumming.

AAJ: Were there any particular drummers who inspired you?

LM: Elvin Jones, Tony Williams....

AAJ: I know Francois was at university for physics. Did you study sciences as well?

LM: Yes, I studied math and physics as well. For music I'm totally self-taught, like François.

AAJ: What do you do in your free time?

LM: I try to keep some free time for my family. But, this expression, free time, sounds strange to me since I feel free even when I'm working.

Visit the Moutin Brothers on the web at www.

moutin.com.

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