

## PERFORMANCE, PERCEPTION AND THE GREAT DIVIDE by Sam Sherry

The guitarist Jerry Garcia once said, “What you hear when you play, what the crowd hears when you play and what you hear when you listen to the tape are three totally different things.”

Musicians measure their actual performance against their mental image of their goal for performance. That is a nearly impossible standard to meet (unless you set your own standards low). And musical performance draws on our emotions, so players' contemporaneous reaction to their performance are often fairly extreme: Either “Hot diggity, I *am* good” or “I didn't sound as good as John (Coltrane , McLaughlin, Gillespie, Lewis, Hartman or Pastorius) so I *sucked*.”

“But,” you respond, “I'm a knowledgeable jazz fan, and I heard it, and it was *great*.” And you are absolutely correct. You heard spontaneous interplay which sounded so tight it must have been planned — but it wasn't. You heard ensemble parts so precise they must have been rehearsed for years — but the players met on the stand. You heard moments of beauty that brought tears to your eyes (and only for the right reasons). It is entirely possible that you heard things even the players didn't hear, but with your perspective, it was all crystal clear.

The third aspect of this phenomenon is players' reactions to recordings of their own performances. As with all things subjective, these run the gamut. I very rarely listen to recordings of me because I hear all the mistakes with terrifying clarity. On the other hand, many players record themselves precisely so that they can hear and address their faults. Pat Metheny says, “After every gig, I write a tune-by-tune description of the show . . . If I don't, it's easy to . . . forget you sucked on the third tune.” And sometimes, players find that a concert which was a negative experience to play is a positive experience to revisit. The pianist Les McCann talks of having a terrible time playing at Montreaux in 1969; he was inebriated, the band was thrown-together on the spot and the audience was waiting for Ella Fitzgerald to take the stage. The resulting record, *Swiss Movement*, was a career-maker for McCann and Eddie Harris.

Ultimately, the beauty of jazz performance is that one moment may offer fulfillment to performers, enjoyment to listeners and meaningful experiences on later review.