

# SOS WHY I LOVE... TINY GEAR

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My early musical experiences included a university course in electronic music as well as playing guitar in various garage bands. I studied modular synthesis in a room with an expansive wall of original Moog modules, and I lugged around a heavy Stratocaster flight case with an even heavier tube amp. Live processing a guitar through this massive synth struck me as a neat way to expand one's sound palette, but the logistical problems seemed insurmountable. Aside from the obvious transport hassles, live tweaking of knobs on more complex Moog patches required coordinating several sets of hands, and keeping track of a layout that spread over 25 square feet in area was discombobulating. I dreamed of a more portable and compact, yet equally versatile, setup.

Over time, technology advanced and equipment downsized. I discovered a handcrafted miniature guitar, and companies like Quilter Labs started producing tube-like amps that could fit into a jacket pocket. The synth side of things remained problematic. Powerful systems remained too large, and smaller systems lacked the one-knob-per-function convenience for improvisational live patch tweaking.

Then two articles in *Sound On Sound* caught my attention. First, the March 2022 issue reviewed the Empress Effects Zoia, a comprehensive 90-module modular synth in a 5.7 x 3.75-inch guitar pedal format, weighing only 1.5lbs. Both CV and MIDI-enabled, the Zoia contained not only all the synth building blocks like oscillators and filters, but also effects, from distortion to granular synthesis, pitch detection and envelope followers, delays, loopers and reverbs, sequencers, samplers and a usable keyboard!

The Zoia is infinitely flexible, but only a partial solution, since there is only a single knob to control all patch parameters. The missing link came in the form of Intech Studio's Grids, reviewed in the February 2024 issue. At four inches square and 0.38lbs, each



Grid module is a programmable MIDI controller containing up to 48 buttons, pots, faders and encoders. Combining these tiny units with the Zoia provides a modular synthesis system more powerful than a wall of Moog, with individual tactile control over every parameter of every module. One Zoia, three Grid modules and a tiny amp fits into a kid's lunchbox, and the entire rig including the guitar with carrying case weighs only 6lbs!

Advantages of tiny gear include not only easier transport, but also aesthetic and other practical concerns. No one

can deny the inherent cuteness of tiny gear, but equally important is enabling one to focus attention on a small space with minimal fussing about. Manipulating a multi-module modular synth rack can take deep concentration, but mental strain eases when all control knobs are collected into one tiny space with no patch cables in the way. Yes, the setup requires some organisation and preparation, as the Zoia and Grid modules both need to be programmed in advance to partner well with each other, but that is also part of the fun. My dream system is finally a reality... Tiny gear rules! ■■■