

# Merging Rock Music and Multimedia: It's a Sinch.

A hot American band dazzles audiences with its unique combination of multimedia performance art and rock.

## By Nancy Eaton

Twenty-first century music fans, reared on MTV and its successors, have come to expect dynamic visuals along with music, whether they're watching TV or attending live concerts. And, if it's something they've never seen before, well, so much the better.

Multimedia performance artist Jay Smith understood the power of combining compelling visual media with original, innovative music. Whether performing solo at gallery shows or art installations, or collaborating with friends on stage, Smith, a graduate of Philadelphia's University of the Arts, hoped to someday expose his unique style of video-based performance art to a broader audience.

## Multimedia Jamming

That occasion came after he and his long-time buddies, musicians Tony Lannutti and Jamie Stem, started jamming together in local clubs as an experiment. "It was kind of like improv electronic music, video and multimedia jazz, experimenting to see what would happen," says Smith. At that time, Lannutti and Stem were members of [Sinch](#), a rock quartet formed in 1994.

"When I go out to shows, I get bored," Stem told Philadelphia Weekly in a recent interview. "We thought, 'Why not add a visual element to the show and have it be played onstage?'" So in 2001, the same year Sinch signed a recording contract with Roadrunner Records, Smith joined the band.

## A Viditar Virtuoso

What Smith brought to the party was his virtuosity on the [Viditar](#) — a multimedia instrument he invented and patented. The Viditar lets him weave a wide range of custom video elements and special effects into the band's performances in real time. With its guitar-shaped Lucite frame supporting a myriad of switches, sliders, toggles and buttons, a video screen and a natty strip of green neon around its perimeter, Smith's Viditar almost resembles a futuristic sitar, with its electronic innards clearly on display.

Instead of connecting the Viditar to an amplifier, Smith plugs it directly into the [FireWire](#) port of his 800 MHz [PowerBook G4](#) which he brings onstage with him. While the band plays, he triggers videos using buttons on the Viditar neck, which call up any of 128 individual [QuickTime](#) files per song. Smith also adds real-time effects to the videos using the Viditar's hardware



Photo © Ash N

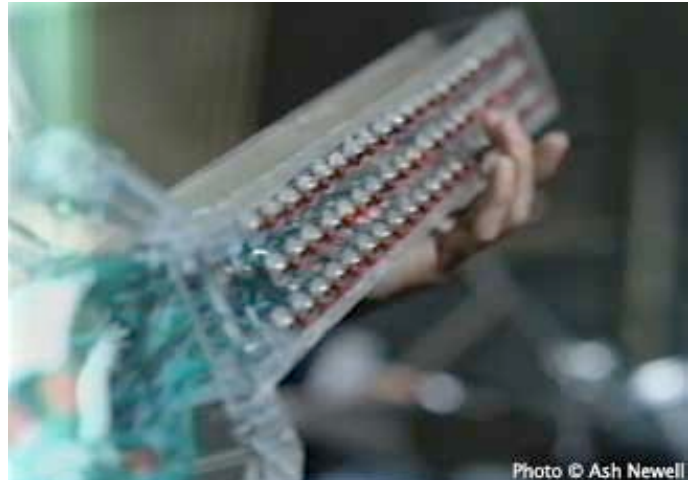


Photo © Ash Newell

**Buttons, not Strings.** Buttons on the Viditar's neck call up any of 128 individual QuickTime files per song.

To project the images during the concert, Smith connects a video distributor to the Video Out port on the PowerBook to hook up two large-screen TVs and a video projector with an 8-foot screen.

## Making the Video

Each video Smith uses during his show is a mini art film of his own creation. "What I do is create short QuickTime movies, ten seconds or less," he explains. "I use a Canon Mini-DV camera, the [Elura](#). I start by filming various things, from my own narrative stuff to just general observations — filming things in public, filming news, taking stuff from the public domain. Tony, who is our guitarist, does some modeling and 3D animation and so I'll take that and mix it in with my work.

"I capture everything through FireWire onto my PowerBook and edit it with [Final Cut Pro](#). I store everything on an external hard drive, do my editing on the external drive. Then I'll bring the files onto my computer once they're compressed. I use [\[Discreet\] Media Cleaner](#) to compress files; it's the lowest compression I can get. Each file is under 1 MB, so they're very small."

## Audio Flexibility

Smith uses the Viditar primarily for video experiences, but he also incorporates audio samples into some of his QuickTime movies. "I'll include audio within the video, so I'll have either spoken word stuff, or just someone talking," he says.

Because the Viditar can control straight audio samples as well

controllers.

“I can get a lumakey effect, kaleidoscope effect, make the videos faster or bigger, scrubbing them back and forth like a DJ does to a record,” he explains. “I can even take live feeds and manipulate them in real time using a pedal I plug into the Viditar. Through FireWire, I can hit the pedal and that will switch to the live feed, grabbing it in real time. The possibilities are endless.”



So how does Smith know which button triggers the exact video he wants? “Practice. It’s just like any instrument. I can look at a pianist and ask him, how do you know what notes you’re playing? It just takes a lot of practicing.”

### Viditar to the Max

To create the custom software needed to interface with the Viditar, Smith worked with independent programmer Peter Nyboer, who used Cycling 74’s [Max](#), an object-oriented multimedia programming environment. “What it basically lets me do is manipulate QuickTime objects in real time,” says Smith.

Because the Viditar can control straight audio samples as well as video, Smith says he could play the Viditar as an audio synthesizer if he wanted to — something he’s done in recordings but not yet used on stage.

### A New Dimension

As video makes an increasingly important contribution to a contemporary band’s identity, some would argue it’s already as defining as song lyrics, melodies, or the performers themselves. Yet in so many cases, the creative control for this key component has largely been out of the hands of the band, especially during live performances. What Smith has done with the Viditar and his PowerBook, and what Sinch has done by embracing Smith and his technology, is to place the creative control for this key artistic element squarely where it belongs — on stage with the band.

Says Smith, “It’s a way for visual artists, multimedia artists, to be present through a tool. This is the tool I use and I hope others will use tools like it. It allows for instant performance and it completely reshapes in my mind. It’s just opened up a totally new world for me.”

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