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Revolutionary inventor R. Buckminster Fuller re-emerges in multimedia performance at Colony Theatre

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Ed Dittenhoefer

Sam Green and Yo La Tengo in "The Love Song of R. Buckminster Fuller"

R. Buckminster Fuller was an inventor, architect, designer, engineer, philosopher, poet, public intellectual, teacher — and environmentalist, before that title was invented. One of the most famous figures of the 1960s, he spent decades circling the globe to spread his ideas.

Yet after Fuller's death in 1983, his reputation diminished to the point that most people knew nothing about him except, perhaps, that he invented the geodesic dome. But in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in this iconoclastic inventor, increasingly seen as one of the most prescient thinkers of the 20th century.

Many of the ideas [Fuller](#) pioneered — renewable energy from wind and solar power, using design to do more with less and its potential to reshape society in the process, and the concept of synergy — now seem strikingly relevant to 21st century issues of global warming, diminishing resources and the effect of growth.

This complex figure comes to multimedia life in *The Love Song of R. Buckminster Fuller*, a combination of film and performance by director [Sam Green](#). Miami Dade College's MDC Live Arts presents the film Saturday at the Colony Theatre in Miami Beach. It combines a documentary film with onstage narration by Green and a performance by cult alternative band Yo La Tengo.

"Fuller is definitely in the air and has been for about five years," says Green, whose other films about radical '60s idealists include Academy Award nominee *The Weather Underground*. "People see him as a fascinating person who had very sophisticated ideas ahead of their time. . . His ideas resonate with a lot of younger people."

Green discovered Fuller three years ago, after the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art asked him to create a film on the inventor. He began researching Fuller's papers at Stanford University, part of the enormous archive of a life that Fuller documented in painstaking, mountainous detail.

“I was struck by what an interesting person he was, and I was knocked out by the fact that his ideas seemed so relevant today,” Green says.

So was MDC Live executive director Kathryn Garcia. “The more you learn about him the more fascinated you become,” she says. “He’s one of those great American minds that’s underappreciated in American consciousness and from time to time re-emerges.”

Such reactions are increasingly common, says Pablo Freund, managing director of the [Buckminster Fuller Institute](#) in New York. He was working as a banker when he became obsessed with Fuller five years ago.

“There’s a whole subculture around him,” Freund says. “I often hear people say ‘I once sat in one of Bucky’s lectures and it changed my life.’ ”

Among those influenced by Fuller are artist/designer [Olafur Eliasson](#) and Stewart Brand, creator of the [Whole Earth Catalogue](#), a manual for the counterculture and back-to-the-land movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Whitney Museum in New York staged a Fuller exhibit in 2008, and in 2011 Miami developer Craig Robins put on an exhibit of one of Fuller’s “Fly Eye” geodesic domes and other artifacts for DesignMiami/ during Art Basel Miami Beach.

People in the worlds of design and environmentalism, as well as a younger generation attuned to technology’s transformative potential, are drawn to Fuller’s legacy and free-thinking idealism. “This was a man who thought the rules didn’t make sense, so he wasn’t going to play by those rules,” Freund says. “He was thinking about sustainable development — how do we make it work for everyone? He thought we needed a revolution by design — he said it was the only revolution palatable to everyone.”

Among the Fuller Institute’s programs is an annual design [competition](#); [winners](#) include Ecovative, whose young inventors created a material from fungi and agricultural waste that can replace Styrofoam and plastic; and Operation Hope, a plan to reverse desertification.

Born in 1893 and raised in Massachusetts, Fuller began making tools and other objects as a child and alternated between working as a machinist and laborer and attending Harvard University (from which he was expelled twice). He underwent several personal crises in the 1920s; his daughter Alexandra died of spinal meningitis at age 3, and he began drinking heavily after a building company he launched with his father failed.

He emerged with an ambitious commitment to what he described as “the search for the principles governing the universe” and to helping “advance the evolution of humanity in accordance with them.”

He perfected the [geodesic dome](#) in the late 1940s as a cheap, easily built, energy-efficient dwelling; first used by the U.S. military, it became a popular futuristic structure at places like the 1964 World’s Fair, [Epcot Center](#) at Disney World and the Miami Seaquarium. (In 1985, scientists would discover a molecule, named the [Buckminsterfullerene](#), with the same structure.) His other most influential practical invention was a method for building curved concrete structures.

But Fuller's greatest impact came from his ideas, including synergy, conservation and sustainability, which he passed on in more than 30 books and hundreds of articles, and by teaching and making constant speaking tours.

Miami photojournalist Mark Diamond, who became friendly with Fuller after hearing him speak at the University of Miami in the late 1970s, describes him as overflowing with intellectual energy.

"He was the kind of person who walking down the street would look up at a palm tree, count the fronds and say how that correlates with synergetic geometry," says Diamond. "In the middle of a conversation he'd go in the next room, go to sleep for 15 or 20 minutes, then come back and it was like he slept all night."

The mix of film and live performance for *The Love Song of R. Buckminster Fuller* came partly from Green's love of an old-fashioned, immersive cinema experience he admits is at odds with the growing tendency to watch movies on a computer or even a smartphone. But he was also inspired by Fuller's globe-trotting years of speeches (some of whose attendees have shown up at Green's performances) in his tireless quest to inspire change.

"So much of what he was about was alive — this performative, collective experience by a bunch of people in an auditorium was at the heart of how he operated," Green says. "So in some ways this is an echo of that."

If you go

What: Sam Green and Yo La Tengo in "The Love Song of R. Buckminster Fuller"

When: 6:30 and 9:30 p.m. Saturday.

Where: Colony Theatre, 1040 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach

Info: \$30, \$10 for MDC students, at 305-237-3010, or mdclivearts.org.