

Local bluegrass quartet Head for the Hills ushered in the new year with a pair of long and varied sets at the Aggie Theatre Sunday night. The festive atmosphere catalyzed a musical experience that was at once celebratory, cerebral and mournful.

A sharp rendition of “Fire on the Mountain,” an original tune that has been a long-standing staple in the group’s repertoire, made it clear that Head for the Hills had come to play. The band started and stopped in telepathic unison, and changed tempos with impressive smoothness. Lessard tore through the song’s signature riff at a blistering pace; later, Parks and Kinghorn traded crisp solos.

A grassed-up cover of “Mama Tried” featured effortless vocal harmonies; Lessard and Parks traded solos on the bridge.

The crowd shrieked and sang along with glee throughout the opening set, prompting Loewen to interject, “Jesus, I take it people came to party or something,” before launching into a piece built around pulsing rhythms from Parks and Kinghorn and a slow, legato part courtesy of Lessard.

“Never Does” began with its trademark bass line, which entered unaccompanied, forming a spacious pocket that underpinned economical fills from each band member. Loewen adopted an accelerated urgency towards the end of the chorus; then, the song settled back into plodding airiness. The darkness of the music and the lyrics provided a sobering contrast to the wild jubilation that permeated the venue.

The brightness returned when “Never Does” bled into a cover of Peter Gabriel’s “Solsbury Hill,” the centerpiece of which was Lessard’s fiddle.

The band closed set one with a standard rendition of “Going Down,” an upbeat, dance-worthy homage to the glories of Colorado.

Set two opened with “One Foot in the Grave,” another crowd favorite. Loewen, Kinghorn and Lessard delivered mellifluous vocal harmonies that came to prominence during an a cappella section.

Just before midnight, the band embarked upon a cover of Paul Simon’s “Kodachrome.” Loewen’s bass line and Lessard’s bright fiddle brought a palpable bluegrass influence to the tune. After the final chorus, the men on stage led a ten-second countdown to 2018. As the crowd reveled in the first moments of the new year, the band began a slow rendition of “Auld Lang Syne.” Lessard took the melody. Later, Loewen jumped in with a classic bluegrass bass line and brought the tempo into floor-stomping territory.

Loewen raised his glass and said, “Here’s to ya” before the band dove into Tom Petty’s “Won’t Back Down.” The song, possibly a Head for the Hills debut, felt like a eulogy for Petty, who died in early October at the age of 66.

The band members donned and doffed an array of headwear throughout the second set, much to the crowd’s delight. Lessard remained bare-headed longest, but an insistent “one more hat” chant eventually compelled him to put on a fedora.

A cover of John Hartford’s “Get No Better,” which Loewen prefaced by wondering whether things really need to get better, or whether we just need to stop complaining, carried a hopefulness that fit the occasion well.

After asking whether the crowd had the energy for a few more tunes, the band obliged enthusiastic yelps with a cover of “Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was

In)." The song developed around a mellow, dark pocket supplemented by muted fiddle accents. Then, Kinghorn played an ascending fill and the tempo picked up.

The second and final piece with which the band encored opened with spritely interplay between Lessard and Parks. Later, the fiddle took on a haunting, manic quality, screeching over muted rhythm parts from the rest of the band.

There was a party at the Aggie Sunday, and Head for the Hills played host ably. But there were points when the vocals became gravelly, the fiddle grew desperate, and the rhythms turned slow and spacious. The juxtaposition of festive, danceable soundscapes and slower, darker ones made the night worth remembering.