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The self-titled album by Head for the Hills opens with "One Foot in the Grave," and its instrumentation and twangy harmonies are classic bluegrass. The next track is "Solar Bowling Shoes," and the title alone is a clue that the Colorado-based band has interests beyond tradition.

But the band really establishes its newgrass credentials on the instrumental "Nooks & Crannies," which -- aside from its eloquent melodies and nimble digressions -- brings in an electric mandolin at the four-minute mark. Its introduction offers a hint of rock-and-roll distortion, and it later adds some feedback, and finally it breaks away from any sense of tradition with a soaring solo. The instrument's use is transcendent, creating a bridge between bluegrass and rock.

The blending of those two genres is of course a hallmark of newgrass, and Head for the Hills -- performing March 19 at RIBCO -- is particularly adept at farming that expansive middle ground. There's nothing else on the album as quintessentially bluegrass as "One Foot in the Grave,"

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Written by Jeff Ignatius

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and there's nothing as nontraditional as "Nooks & Crannies," but the remainder of the album is a testament to the band's alchemic skills.

There are the Celtic-ballad flavors and mournful fiddle melody of "Cold Walls," and the funky interlude and alternating solos of "My Angelie," and the speed-demon playing on the southwestern opening of the instrumental "Chupchik," which gets a little more casual and tropical as it progresses. And then there's "Unchain My Heart," a hit for Ray Charles that comes across naturally in an energetic bluegrass context that (like "Nooks & Crannies") builds to an electric climax.

The band's aim, said Head for the Hills guitarist and singer Adam Kinghorn in a phone interview last week, is "taking bluegrass to new levels without totally destroying the tradition of it."

Inspired by progressive-bluegrass icons Béla Fleck, Tony Rice, Jerry Douglas, and Edgar Meyer, none of the band's members was raised on bluegrass. "It's not something we've been playing our whole lives," Kinghorn said. "We're not locked in to any style yet because we're still expanding and still growing as musicians and as a group."

"One Foot in the Grave" shows that the six-year-old quartet has an obvious respect for the bluegrass form, while the remainder of *Head for the Hills* builds on it without being beholden. Instrumentation aside, "Nooks & Crannies" has a nearly classical compositional rigor and barely resembles bluegrass. "We have no problem with it not being bluegrass anymore," Kinghorn said. "We want to ensure that we hold up the tradition. We don't want to water anything down. We want to be able to play like the great bluegrass acts would like us to play At the same time, we want to stretch those boundaries out."

Co-produced by Drew Emmit (Leftover Salmon), recorded at the studio of Bill Nersi (The String Cheese Incident), and tracked by Gus Skinas (who has engineered the Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd), *Head for the Hills* has a gorgeously clean sound, in part because of the Direct Stream Digital process the band used.

Kinghorn said that Direct Stream Digital is akin to recording to digital tape. It has a higher sampling rate than other digital technologies -- which some people think gives it a warmer, richer sound -- but as with tape, different song sections need to be spliced together. To add

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something, the entire band would need to play the part in question.

"You have to piece the whole thing together; you can't just plug in this or plug in that" instrument or overdub, Kinghorn said. "We had to do it live or else it wasn't going to come across as well."

There is a downside, he said: "You don't have the most perfect solos, and you might not have had the best vocal take."

But the trade-off is worth it, he said: "It was live, and it was in the moment."

Head for the Hills will perform at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island) on Friday, March 19. The bill also includes the Milltown Wranglers, and the show starts at 9 p.m. Cover is \$6.

For more information on Head for the Hills, visit HeadForTheHillsMusic.com or MySpace.com/headforthehillsbluegrass