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For bluegrass band, music is reward enough

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I sat in Theo Heap's den Tuesday night and listened to the music of the Red Mountain Bluegrass Band — not a tape or CD of the band, mind you, but the actual band.

The band members straddled the furniture in Heap's cozy den in Mesa, picking and fiddling and harmonizing for almost three hours before an audience of two — Heap's wife, Gloria, and me.

I am a huge bluegrass fan, so it was a special treat. But as I listened it occurred to me that what I was really watching was the world's oldest garage band.

I am not denigrating the group's abilities in saying this. On the contrary, these boys can play and sing.

They just don't represent the demographic you normally associate with bands who do most of their playing in somebody's spare room.

At 28, John Heap (guitar, harmony vocals) is the youngest of the group. His grandfather Theo, at age 79, is the eldest. Duncan Kunz (guitar) is 62, bass player Ron Carpenter is 60. Banjo player Ralph Heap is 53, fiddler Hayden Boyett is 39, Boyd Lee (guitar, lead vocals) is 30 and Kristopher Heap (mandolin) is 29.

The Red Mountain Bluegrass Band has been around in one form or another for 15 years, but they don't play too many paid gigs. Most of their performances are staged for church functions or civic clubs.

Occasionally, they'll play a festival. Most of their playing, though, happens in Theo's den, where they meet once a week to rehearse and tease each other for a few hours.

Truth is, it's sort of hard for the band to get all that serious about their music. Two of the band members are doctors, one is a dentist, two work for Boeing and have impressive job titles I don't understand.

Another owns a refrigeration business. Theo, the former president of Mesa Community College, still works at the college, an association he has maintained for 41 years. They all have families and other interests and obligations.

Still, I thought, these boys have "po-tential," as they say down South.

All they really needed was a manager, I thought, say someone like "Colonel" Slim Smith to grease the rails a bit.

First thing I'd do is change the band's dishwater, dull name. I came up with a good one, too: Buck Nekked & The Skinny-Dippers.

I figure we could put the finger on another of Theo's grandsons — NFL star Todd Heap — to buy us a big ole tour bus and some sharp sequined outfits. I had a bushel basket full of ideas.

But as I watched the guys standing around in Gloria's kitchen wolfing down the peanut-butter fudge Ralph's mom had made, I realized that the Red Mountain Bluegrass Band has a pretty good thing going just like it is.

You know, we should all be so fortunate as to have a skill that we can't make money off of, a talent that can't be corrupted by greed or ambition.

Those are the kinds of gifts that remain pure, and a joy forever.