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Tritt's challenge and delight is staying true to country muse

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In 1989, just as Travis Tritt's career was taking off, he got some timely advice from one of his heroes. Johnny Cash took the young man aside and told him, "There's a little thing called mystique that people seem to have forgotten about. Always maintain a bit of that for yourself. Keep them guessing and you can have this career as long as you want to." "I took that to heart."

And Tritt, who performs Saturday in Boca Raton, has kept them guessing ever since. But that's because, deep down, he knew who he was as a country musician.

"I'd played a lot of places before I came to Nashville looking for a record deal; biker bars, pool halls, clubs. I was part of the Class of '89, which was Garth Brooks, Alan Jackson, Vince Gill and Clint Black, and I stuck out like a sore thumb, because I had the long hair and the leather. "I think people thought I was trying to manufacture some sort of image, but I was simply showing people who I was. I was very much my own person before I ever set foot in Nashville." Tritt's love of music started early and his exposure to a variety of music styles growing up shaped him, he says. "Where I'm from just outside of Atlanta, my father and I would sit out in the yard on Saturday night and listen to the Grand Ole Opry, and I was exposed to bluegrass at festivals when I was a child, and the delta blues out of Mississippi, and Southern rock 'n' roll. Take all that and sprinkle some Southern gospel over the top of it and that's where I came from." Over the course of his career, Tritt has reinvented himself more than once. "For me, to get a chance to still surprise people after 20-something years in the business, to be able to show that there's more than just one dimension to my talent, that's the real blessing. "People have asked me if I think I could have sold more albums or won more awards if I'd played by the rules a little bit more or been a little less obstinate, and I say absolutely. I could have been easier to get along with, but again, I have to look at myself in the mirror. I'm not trying to show anything other than what's truthful. What's the point? I've been honest to myself and with other people and at the end of the day, I've shown who I really am." Even if the music execs were slow to embrace Tritt, the fans fell in love with his smooth baritone right away. But the fans weren't the only ones who recognized Tritt's talent. By 1992, the Grand Ole Opry had invited him into its very exclusive family. "I thought, the Opry being the traditional place that it is, they're never going to let me in. But the first time I ever

played it, I was backstage picking bluegrass on the banjo with some of the guys in my band and I felt this hand on my shoulder from behind, and this voice says, 'Can you play Cripple Creek on that thing?' It was Roy Acuff. He just stood there with his eyes closed and his arms folded across his chest while I played it, and he was smiling. From that first meeting I had no doubt that Roy Acuff loved me. And I loved him. And I think he was quite frankly the reason I was able to be a part of the Grand Ole Opry, the most unlikely of places. Roy Acuff made me feel like I belonged." Now, 20 years and 25 million albums later, Tritt will take the stage at Sunset Cove Amphitheater Saturday. He's itching to perform. "I still get butterflies. The little tingle up and down your spine, for live performances. We'll try to cover as many of the songs that people recognize from over the years and we also try to cover newer material. I guarantee you there will be songs that we'll be doing that people are going to be surprised by. It might be a song that people will recognize but they've never heard it from me. There will definitely be some surprises." Yep, he's still got a little bit of that Cash-inspired mystique.