

# Diftong: a Dutch poet in an American dream

Diftong sees himself as a poet and songwriter who plays his own music rather than a singer who writes his own songs. His music can be characterized as indie Americana with a ragged twist, blending folk, country and rock. Mix equal parts of Neil Young and the Gourds, stir in some Jim Croce and 16 Horsepower and you might come up with a Diftong sound..

Up till now Diftong has released two albums. His debut album *Robot vs Totem Pole* was a true solo effort coming from the loner and control freak he claims to be. He wrote all lyrics, composed the music, played all instruments himself and did the recording, mixing and mastering in his own tiny *Toonzetting* studio. For his second album *Heart in a Jar* he chose another approach and called on some friends and relatives to contribute to the album. The sound of *Heart in a Jar* is therefore more versatile than the sound of *Robot vs Totem Pole*.

On stage, Diftong is just one man with his guitar, his banjo and his voice. He makes himself feel at home by bringing his own rug and lamp. His shows are best suited for an audience that is willing to listen to the lyrics and that enjoys acoustic music. Diftong's music is not intended for parties and noisy crowds.

## Music

It is never easy to define music in terms of genre or style. This certainly applies to Diftong's music. Diftong does not like the idea of stereotypes that force you to be something you're not.

*"These tags just aren't important to me. When I write a song, I never wonder whether it will turn out to be rock or folk or whatever. I guess, it is not the song in itself, but the way it is performed that makes one designation more appropriate than another."*

On the CD *Heart in a Jar* there are songs with distorted electric guitars and drums, which definitely make them sound like rock music. But when Diftong plays the same songs on stage, with just his guitar or his banjo, they sound much more folky. If forced to describe his music Diftong will say:

*"I'm a singer-songwriter playing indie Americana on the cutting edge of folk, country and rock."*

Diftong is clearly influenced by Neil Young. As a 13 year old, he heard the sound of Neil Young's *After the Gold Rush* coming from his sister's room and young Diftong was hooked. He picked up his dad's old guitar and when his other sister bought him a Neil Young songbook on the flea market, he started playing. He gradually found his own sound. In the process other musicians left their marks: Jim Croce, with his inspiring stories and heartfelt love songs full of sadness and melancholy; Patti Smith and 16 Horsepower, with their intense way of performing; The Gourds, with their genuine cheerfulness and drive; and many more.

## Albums

The solo debut *Robot vs Totem Pole* was released in 2007. The ten songs on this album are inspired by the tension between the struggle for wealth and power (the robot) and the search for peace of mind and spirituality (the totem pole). Acoustic guitar, banjo and mandolin are accompanied by electronic instruments; all played by Diftong himself. It is best characterized as contemporary folk music.

The second album *Heart in a Jar* was released in September 2010 and has a different feel to it. Friends and relatives play along on this album. They form a colorful group of musicians with backgrounds in genres ranging from opera to rock. The overall atmosphere of the album is one of longing for a better world that always lies just around the corner. The 12 songs meander through acoustic folk, roots rock and alternative country. Lyrics cover subjects like the zealots and their army of superstitious hot-shots, out-of-sequence re-assembly, a broken heart in a Mason jar and the colors of Indian Summer in Colorado.

At the moment Diftong is writing new songs for a third album that is scheduled for spring 2012.

### Press quotes on *Heart in a Jar*

- ▶ Diftong has succeeded in demonstrating how versatile traditional American Folk and Country music can be and he proves that fine Americana can be made in the Rhine Delta as well as in Tennessee or The Rocky Mountains. If you are still enjoying *After the Goldrush* or *Harvest*, *Heart in a Jar* will not be wasted on you.  
Joost Schreurs, [3voor12.nl](http://3voor12.nl)
- ▶ An honest recording with high quality music that's pleasant to listen to but never too easy. An adventurous CD full of atmospheric songs that vary in style between folk, altcountry and folkrock. *Heart in a jar* is an intriguingly sounding album that reaches outside the Dutch borders. A CD for people that like to try something different.

## Poetry

A few years ago Diftong published a small book with 45 selected lyrics written between 1986 en 2006. It is called *Robot vs Totem Pole*, just like his debut CD. There are no cheerful songs in the book. Some of them are broken-heart love songs, others are dark contemplations of war and injustice around the turn of the century and some are melancholic or maybe mildly optimistic. Diftong however, is not an unhappy person. He is just not equipped to write about his own happiness, or maybe only in words like these:

Holy Joe was carved from a tree  
As a kind of therapy  
And it worked for me, it worked for me  
Now I've got my own totem pole  
Full of woodworms and full of soul  
Holy Joe watches over me

The carving of Holy Joe, his own totem pole, sowed the seeds of the song *Robot vs Totem Pole*. Holy Joe is proudly presented in the artwork of the CD and the songbook. After a couple of years Holy Joe was eaten by bugs and collapsed into dust, but Diftong carved him a successor.

As a kid, Diftong devoured the books of Karl May, the German writer who wrote about the Wild West without having been there. Diftong was intrigued by 'Indians'. Later he read books by Thomas Berger, Larry Mc Murtry, Robert Pirsig, and the journals of Lewis & Clark. While those books added to a more realistic perception of native Americans, parallels can be drawn between the bodies of work of Karl May and Diftong. He sometimes finds himself living in an American dream.

Mixed notions of America  
Here's where the dream began  
No buffalo or mustang herds  
The billboards showing no regret

Diftong loves the great outdoors. Places where the environment forces people to slow down and to contemplate. Mountains and deserts are his favorite. Unfortunately, the Netherlands have not much to offer in that sense. Diftong is often making travel plans... Maybe the Rockies?

I've been longing for the mountains  
Stretch my hamstrings on a slope  
The quiet victory of the summit  
And all the mayhem so remote

## Background

Diftong started playing at the age of 13, imitating Neil Young. In later years he found his own sound and way of playing, and started writing his own lyrics. Some key moments in his development:

- ▶ Around 1980 Diftong and his friends were heavily into New Wave. A friend asked him to play bass guitar in a band he was forming: Modern Management, the first of several bands to come.
- ▶ Just about 10 years later Diftong played guitar in a band that was looking for a new bass player. One audition, a really good musician turned up and Diftong thought: "This guy will never stay with a crappy band like this". But he did. That's the way Diftong and jd decker met. The band fell apart, but the two of them kept on playing together as the Americana duo The Understate Men. They have done so for over 15 years now.
- ▶ In 1992, Diftong – on the verge of becoming a father – invited some friends to record an official CD before it would be too late (!). 'Bats in the Belfry' was released in 1993, all songs written by Diftong.

*"Never could I imagine that by now I have released five more CD's (3 with The Understate Men and 2 Diftong albums) and that at the moment I am recording a new Understate Men CD and writing songs for another Diftong album."*

- ▶ Neil Young revisited. Around the millennium Diftong and jd decker played in a Neil Young tribute band called The Kicking Mule. At the Dutch Neil Young Fanclub Day they played for an audience of a few hundred diehard Neil Young fans and set the place alight.
- ▶ After quitting his job in 2006, Diftong became a fulltime musician. He was invited to play at the first edition of the Goud'acoustic Folk and Americana Festival in the South of France in 2008.

*"It was a magical atmosphere and all the people there, organizers, musicians, people in the village, were great. I got an enormous boost from this."*