

New Directions

Volume 2 | Issue 3

Article 8

7-1-1975

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Federal Communications Commission

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Recommended Citation

Elliot, Joan Curt (1975) "The Soul Handshake," *New Directions*: Vol. 2: Iss. 3, Article 8.

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The 'Soul' Handshake

By Joan Curl Elliott

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The hand is especially constructed to grasp hold of objects, to make gestures and delicate motions, or to touch and feel things. The human hand also helps people to communicate with each other—as in the sign language of North American Indians or that of deaf persons. In these complex sign languages, gestures and positions of the hand and fingers represent words or phrases. On a simpler level, hands convey familiar expressions and ideas. Popular examples include the clenched fist of anger, the raised palm of peace, thumbs down for disapproval or hitchhiking. Men greet each other in various manners, but one way is to shake the hand. A simple handshake, for instance, is used in greeting, in bidding farewell, or in sealing a bargain.

For centuries Africans on the continent have used various handshakes as part of their culture. In front of a tribal chief, the African cups his hands and makes an applause. To show respect to an elder, the African uses the "regular" handshake with his right arm, but places his left hand midway on his right arm. The African handshake consists of shaking hands with the right hands and shifting the grip to the thumb. Black Americans have taken this handshake and added additional motions.

Since the rise of fraternal organizations, such as the Elks, The Knights of Pythias, The Eastern Star, in the early twenties, Black Americans had secret handshakes to identify members of the group. With the rise of Black sororities (1919) and fraternities at Howard University, students introduced secret handshakes for identification among fraternity or sorority members. As the sororities and fraternities spread to other Black colleges in the United States, these greetings and handshakes were made good-naturedly and warmly.

Blacks in large cities began to devise other forms of handshakes in the urban centers during the fifties. In the sixties, when the wave of sit-ins hit the country, Blacks became even more conscious of

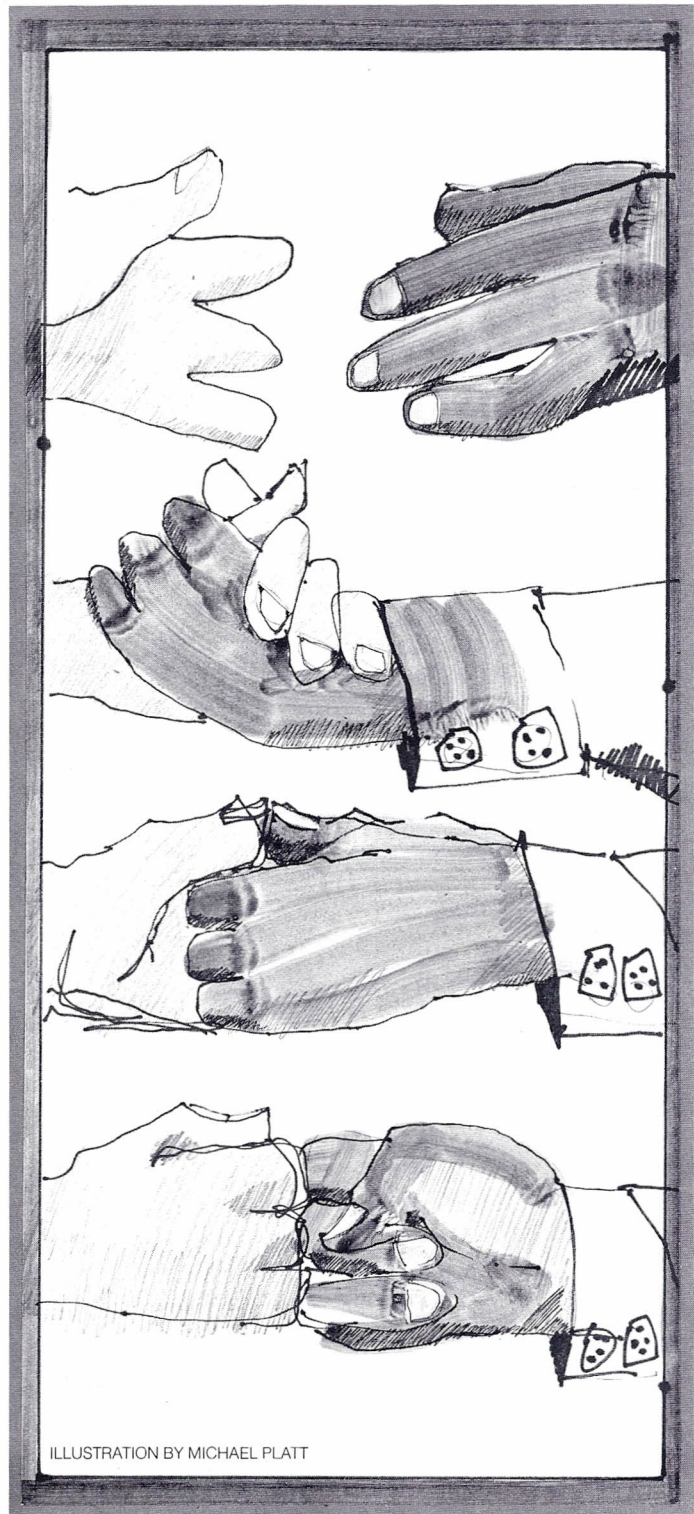


ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL PLATT

The role of the Black in the United States affected his dance, his concept of self (color and hair), his speech, and his diet. This effect continued as Blacks developed distinctive handshakes among themselves. In Selma, Alabama, Stokely Carmichael clenched his fist and shouted "Black Power." The clenched fist, to whites, represented revolt, aggression, rebellion and danger; to Blacks it symbolized unity, solidarity and togetherness.

In the fifties Black soldiers were shipped to Korea and Vietnam. Feelings of loneliness, homesickness and isolation overwhelmed the soldiers in foreign wars. Black soldiers, overjoyed at seeing someone from their home state or town, expressed emotions in their handshakes. Because of the severity of the homesickness, soldiers were glad to see any Black face because it symbolized home and roots. As they found comradeship with other Blacks, soldiers developed many greetings and handshakes to greet each other. The handshake revealed a lot of creativity as any other art form. These flashy, involved, and showy handshakes were literally dances with the hands, fingers and arms. In the fifties and sixties, soldiers in the "boondocks" or "rice paddies" of Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia had plenty of time and little activity. To take up time in the fields, the soldiers created variations of the handshakes. Each company or platoon had its distinct handshake which served to identify members of the group. After preparation, invention and creation of the handshakes, the soldiers took pride in them as a choreographer of new dance patterns. At first the soldiers began with the common Black expression, "Give me some skin!" or "Give me five!" The two acquaintances would mutually slap hands. The handshake added bumping hips, hitting the elbows, hitting knuckles, and interlocking the thumbs. Since the military reflected the dominant American culture, there was little fraternization between the races. Few Blacks associated with whites and looked with disdain on those who did.

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Whites for the most part found comradeship among their own. Hence the development of the involved handshake remained a Black phenomena. As whites reacted negatively to the Black handshakes, the more complicated they became.

Most of the handshakes represented a combination of different motions: The "Pound" is made when the person hits the fist of another with his fist to the left back, to the right side and to the front three times. The "Blood Knock" means to ball the fist together and hit fist on top of each other. The "Thumb Lock" means that each person locks his hand around the other's thumb, makes a firm grip while clutching the whole hand. "Give me five" indicates what it says. The knuckles are bent and the fingers on one person are laid on the other. The five fingers slowly fall into place of the other's fingers. Then the person brushes his hand against the back of the other. While stating, "Give me some skin," the person holds out the palms of the hands and one person slaps his hands in the other's. Comedian Flip Wilson introduced his guests on his weekly TV show with variations of a handshake. He actually styled his own personal handshake.

Perhaps the most popular of the handshakes is the "Dap." It begins with a combination of the regular handshake, the "Blood Knock" and the "Pound." After these motions the person kisses his fingers and points to his lips, mind, heart; touches the hand of the other softly, puts the hand in the other and rocks the hands back and forward. These handshakes originated with Black soldiers, sailors and marines. Within the Armed Forces, each group created a version of the "Dap." As members of the servicemen moved from Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Italy and Germany, they found variations of the "Dap" at their new bases. In the military the race problem arising from color is exacerbated by the private handshakes. The whites resented the new shakes of the Blacks and considered them as rebellious. The Blacks accused

the whites of repression on all levels. As the members of the Armed Forces returned home, the handshakes spread in the Black community all over the country.

One of the few positive elements which evolve from the life in a racist society is the solidification of group identity. Notwithstanding class differences, Blacks love each other and move toward each other in an all-white or all-Oriental-situation. The "soul handshake" communicates the unity and togetherness in a foreign or native situation. If a communicant gives another a "regular handshake," then this means that the two persons are not necessarily on the same "frequency." The "regular" handshake gives the appearance of a "stuffshirt" or a noncommunicant. However, if the communicant moves into the "soul handshake" then these motions indicate that these two persons can "rap" (talk) on subjects which affect the Black community sympathetically. □

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