

= George Balabushka =

George Balabushka (Russian : ????????? ?????????? ?????????? Grigoriy Antonovich Balabushka ; December 9 , 1912 ? December 5 , 1975) was a Russian @-@ born billiards (pool) cue maker , arguably the most prominent member of that profession , and is sometimes referred to as " the Stradivarius of cuemakers " . His full name or last name standing alone is often used to refer to a cue stick made by him . Arriving in the U.S. in 1924 , he worked at various carpentry and toy and furniture making jobs . He was an avid pool player and purchased a pool room with a business partner in 1959 and thereafter started making cues as gifts for friends which quickly blossomed into a business when others wanted to purchase them .

Balabushka turned out approximately 1 @, @ 200 handcrafted cues during his 16 @-@ year cue @-@ making career , spanning from 1959 to his death in 1975 . His cues are highly valued collectors items , made more so after being prominently featured in Martin Scorsese 's 1986 film , The Color of Money . Balabushka cues are generally separated into three distinct classes and time periods related to what blanks Balabushka was using in cue construction : The Titlist blank era (1959 ? 1966) , the Burton Spain blank era (1966 ? 1971) and the Gus Szamboti blank era (1971 ? 1975) . Original Balabushka cues with verified provenance may realize tens of thousands of dollars at auction .

= = Life and career = =

= = = Early life = = =

George Balabushka was born in Russia on December 9 , 1912 and immigrated to the United States in 1924 at 12 years of age . His family , parents Anton and Natalie and younger sister Mary , settled in New York City . Although originally named Gregori , according to Balabushka he was given a new first name , George , by immigration officials when he was processed through Ellis Island .

= = = Employment = = =

Balabushka 's first job was as a wooden toy designer and maker , working for the Educational Equipment Company , then located at 71 West 23rd St. , in Manhattan , which made building blocks for nurseries and schools . Thereafter he built children 's furniture for the Playtime Woodworking Company located on Greenwich Village 's Jane Street . While on the job , Balabushka lost his middle finger to a band saw . Using a wooden mold , he made himself a replacement plastic finger of such craftsmanship that even his friends did not realize his loss until long after the incident . As Balabushka 's carpentry skills deepened he began building accordions and other detailed carpentry pieces on his own time . In 1949 , Balabushka applied for patent on a folding leg bracket mechanism he invented , which was granted in 1951 .

= = = Marriage and children = = =

While working at Playtime Woodworking he met a woman named Josephine , his future wife , who then lived directly across the street from the toy company . They were married in 1941 , and bought a home in Brooklyn several years later . Josephine and George had two sons , Gregory and George , both named after their father .

Josephine was not just a source of love and stability but was the rock that allowed Balabushka the ability to hone his craft . According to the writers of the The Billiard Encyclopedia , " Josephine 's limitless patience and strong sense of independence would afford George the time and solitude necessary that a great artist needs in order to perfect his craft . "

= = = Transition to cuemaker = = =

Balabushka was an avid billiards player , especially of the game of straight pool , taking part in competitions and spending time with well @-@ known practitioners of the sport . In 1959 , he purchased a Brooklyn @-@ based pool hall with partner , Frank McGown , which was located at 50th Street and 5th Avenue . While running the room , he began repairing cues as a hobby , and soon the idea was sparked to design and manufacture his own line of pool cues .

By the end of 1959 , Balabushka had made a number of cues , most of which were given to friends as Christmas gifts . As this practice went on , he began receiving orders for his cues . His first cues were conversions of the popular Brunswick @-@ Balke @-@ Collender Company manufactured " Titlist " cues , which were one @-@ piece cues ; that is , they had no joint in the middle that would allow a player to break down the cue into two sections for ease of transport . At the time he started , there were very few private cuemakers , the industry being dominated by large manufacturers .

= = = Cuemaking career and death = = =

Between 1959 and 1962 , Balabushka handcrafted between 20 and 30 cues per year on a part @-@ time basis . Because of the relative dearth of private cuemakers and the excellence of his product , Balabushka 's name quickly became known amongst professional players . By the end of 1962 , Balabushka was receiving more orders for cues than he could fill given his time constraints . Balabushka accordingly sold his interest in the pool room , converted his garage into a carpentry shop , and by 1964 was building cues full @-@ time , while continuing to hone his cuemaking abilities .

Unlike many of the large manufacturers of the day , Balabushka 's emphasis was on playing ability and fine craftsmanship , reflecting the values he had held during his years in the woodworking business . He was an innovator in cue construction , cue finishes and cue design . Balabushka 's cues were not the elaborately decorated attempts at building art that became a mainstay of the cue market starting in the 1980s and onward . Rather , most Balabushka cues are relatively plain and without grand ornamentation flourishes . Many of his trademark construction techniques have become standard in the industry , such as the use of Irish linen for wrap material and block style checkered @-@ pattern ringwork above a cue 's wrap , commonly employing alternating ebony and ivory , pieces which are eponymously named " Bushka rings . "

George Balabushka died in 1975 at the age of 62 . He was posthumously honored as the first inductee into the American Cuemakers Association Hall of Fame in February , 1993 . In 2004 , he was inducted into the Meritorious Service category of the Billiard Congress of America 's Hall of Fame .

= = Cue details = =

There are three distinct classes of cues produced during different time periods related to what blanks Balabushka was using in cue construction : The Titlist blank era (1959 ? 1966) , the Burton Spain blank era (1966 ? 1971) and the Gus Szamboti blank era (1971 ? 1975) . The " blanks " referred to are the bottom (butt) portion of a cue where the splicing of various hardwoods has been completed but the cue has not yet been turned on a lathe to produce the final shape , and certain features have not yet been added such as a wrap , joint mechanism , butt cap , bumper and any inlays .

While blank variety is the defining demarcation between one Balabushka cue and another , there are some shared features spanning Balabushka 's fleeting 16 @-@ year career . Cue forearms were characteristically made with straight @-@ grained maple , based on Balabushka 's belief that a single @-@ direction maple grain provided superior integrity to that of curly maple or birdseye maple . He used stainless steel joints and delrin butt caps almost exclusively . A small number of his cues feature ivory joints and ivory butt caps , making them highly valued collector 's items . Balabushka used a distinguishing reddish @-@ brown bumper , and employed Cortland Irish linen for many of his wraps , with the highly sought after leather wrap a rare departure for him and a distinct value

enhancer . Unless a different length was specified , Balabushka made all his cues to a standard 57 ½ inches in length .

In addition to Bushka rings , various other decorative rings were commonly incorporated , including various colored plastics (often marbled) , and silver and contrasting wooden rings . For decoration , Balabushka often inlaid small mother @-@ of @-@ pearl dots and notched diamonds . Series of window @-@ shaped maple pieces commonly adorned Balabushka butt sleeves , with each window usually featuring one burl for its aesthetic effect . Some other features common to many other cuemakers ' lines from the same era are notably absent or mostly absent from Balabushka 's , including ivory inlays and the signing of his cues . A long @-@ standing controversy exists over what finish Balabushka used . One side argues that he used an oil finish on all his cues , while the other insists that his later cues were coated with a spray lacquer .

= = = Titlist era = = =

When Balabushka first started repairing cues while working at his pool room , he started converting house cues into custom cues . Many of these house cues were made by Brunswick . When he started building his own cues in 1959 , he used blanks purchased from Brunswick for their " Titlist " cue line ; the same used in the construction of the house cues he had been converting . Many of the fine cuemakers working during the same era as Balabushka did likewise , including Frank Paradise (Paradise cues) , Eugene Balner (Palmer cues , named after Arnold Palmer) and Ernie Gutierrez (Ginacue) , all following in the footsteps of earlier master cuemaker , Herman Rambow .

Building a full spliced blank from scratch was an expensive and painstaking process , and the large manufacturing facilities of Brunswick turned out good quality blanks , with beautiful points , veneers and sound construction . In Balabushka 's case , his entire workshop consisted of a single lathe and other woodworking equipment in the confines of his modest garage , and building his own full @-@ splice butts would have been prohibitively difficult and expensive for him .

= = = Burton Spain era = = =

Balabushka used Titlist blanks until 1966 when he was contacted by Chicagoan Burton Spain . Spain had recently begun making handmade spliced blanks and was supplying them to Balabushka 's closest rival , Frank Paradise . Spain had become fascinated by splicing technology when he came upon a Titlist cue split down the middle in 1965 and set out to perfect and even improve on the Titlist splice . Spain 's original intent was to be predominantly a cuemaker in his own right using his proprietary spliced blanks . However , by 1966 Spain 's superior blanks were in high demand and he instead turned to making blanks for other cuemakers full @-@ time , which he continued until 1970 .

Balabushka took Spain up on his offer after seeing the quality of his splices . Buying from Spain also had the advantage that he was able to have Spain customize the blanks to his specifications . During this period Balabushka began incorporating more elaborate details into his cues , including the eponymous Bushka rings innovation . Many later cuemakers would install Bushka rings both above the wrap and on the butt sleeve below the wrap . Balabushka used them only above the wrap , which is believed to have aided him in keeping the balance point higher on the cue . In 1970 , Spain sold his cue business to tool and die maker John Davis , who had been assisting Spain for a number of years . Balabushka continued buying blanks from Davis until 1971 .

= = = Gus Szamboti era = = =

In 1971 , Balabushka met Penndel , Pennsylvania native Gus Szamboti at a tournament . Szamboti had been working for RCA as a draftsman and designer , but RCA layoffs were common at the time , and he had started designing and selling pool cues as a more stable job path . Though he too started production with Titlist blanks as well as blanks manufactured by WICO of Chicago , Szamboti later began making his own . Balabushka was very impressed with Szamboti 's blanks and

, in addition to the two men becoming fast friends , he became Szamboti 's first customer , buying blanks from him for \$ 18 apiece .

Balabushka cues from the Gus Szamboti era are typified by straight grained maple forearms bearing four ebony points , with four veneers included , normally colored black , green , white and mahogany , or sometimes with an orange veneer in place of mahogany . Balabushka cues from this era , spanning the last five years of his life , are considered the finest of his career as a class . There have been unconfirmed rumors that some few cues made during this period included splices made by Balabushka himself .

= = Prominence = =

It is estimated that Balabushka produced between 1 @, @ 000 and 1 @, @ 200 cues during his lifetime . However , by the mid @-@ 1960s , forged Balabushka cues started circulating in the market , as he was already recognized as the premier cue maker of the era , referred to as " the Stradivarius of cuemakers " . Balabushka and his cues achieved much wider recognition after being prominently featured in Martin Scorsese ' s 1986 film , The Color of Money (the sequel to the classic 1961 film The Hustler) .

In the film , Tom Cruise ' s character , Vincent Lauria , is presented with a beautiful cue by Paul Newman 's character , Fast Eddie Felson . Vincent takes the cue , his reverence obvious , and is told by Eddie " it 's a Balabushka . " After this , Balabushka 's name became associated by the general public with highly valued and rare cues . The cue actually used in the film was , however , not a genuine Balabushka , but a Joss Cues model J @-@ 18 (renamed the N @-@ 07) , custom @-@ made to look like a Balabushka . The filmmakers feared that any cue used might get damaged during filming ; especially in light of a scene set in a pool room where Cruise 's character rapidly whirls the cue around in time to the song Werewolves of London . An original Balabushka was thus considered too valuable to be risked in the production .

Original Balabushka cues with verified provenance may realize tens of thousands of dollars at auction . In 1994 , for example , a Balabushka was purchased by a collector for \$ 45 @, @ 000 . In a 1998 Syracuse Herald @-@ Journal article a collection of thirty original Balabushkas cues and six Gus Szamboti cues was estimated to be worth 2 million dollars , the cues said to be the equivalent in the cue collecting world of Rembrandts and van Goghs respectively . There are , however , many fake Balabushka cues in existence . Complicating matters , in the 1980s with the permission and license of his surviving family , a line of Balabushka replicas began to be manufactured in large quantities by the Adam Custom Cue Company .