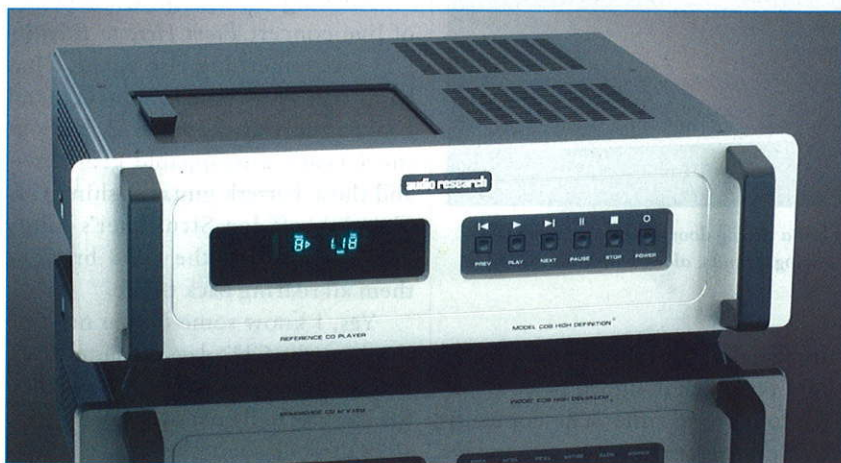


# THE LONG RUN

THE AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE CD8: YOUR LAST CD PLAYER?

> BY STEVE GUTTENBERG



The CD8 has five 6H30 vacuum tubes and one 6550C regulator tube. The CD mechanism is the Philips PRO2R.

**H**ave you ever heard a live band off in the distance and instantly knew it was the real thing? I can't tell you why, but there's something about the sound of live music that recordings always miss. So hi-fis, even the best ones, never sound realistic, but they can get close.

Audio Research's CD8 Reference player does just that. It's one of the least "digital" sounding CD players I've ever used. That sort of statement is usually followed by something like, "CDs now sound a lot more like LPs." That's not the case here, but the CD8 is considerably more musical than other state-of-the-art CD players. Why? Maybe because Audio Research doesn't approach digital design as a

game of spec-manship or flaunt new cutting-edge doohickeys. That's not their style.

This is my first Audio Research review for *Home Entertainment*, so introductions are in order. In 1970, vacuum-tube audio was considered obsolete and solid-state ruled the roost. Audio Research's founder and chief engineer William Z. Johnson thought otherwise and his company played a big part in the American tube revival of the 1970s. The company has since crafted a number of landmark vacuum tube *and* transistor designs in its Minnesota factories. Audio Research is as American as apple pie.

The marriage of vacuum tubes and CD players isn't new; designers started sticking tubes in CD players in

the 1980s. But most of those players use just a pair of tubes, typically as a "buffer" output stage. The CD8's tubes are responsible for audio as soon as the digits are converted to analog. The tubes are configured much as they are in Audio Research's very best stereo preamplifier, the Reference Pre (\$12,000). Measuring an imposing 19 by 5.25 by 15.3 inches, the CD8 is the size of a pretty serious power amplifier.

Under the hood you'll find five 6H30 vacuum tubes and one large 6550C regulator tube; the digital zeros and ones are processed via a 24-bit digital-to-analog converter. The CD laser/drive system is a beefy professional unit, sourced from Philips. The CD8 doesn't have a disc-loading drawer; the drive mechanism is located under a sliding door on the top panel. Disc loading involves placing a small magnetic clamp on the disc. (*Just like the Naim Uniti. It's almost like I planned that...—GM*) I like the "hands-on" approach, maybe because it's more like playing an LP.





No pedestrian CD tray here. The top loading design has a sliding door on the top where you place the CD. There are balanced and unbalanced analog outputs, along with coax and XLR AES/EBU digital outputs

Don't get the wrong idea: The CD8's tubes aren't there to merely smooth over any residual digital edge. No, this player resolves more detail and low-level ambiance than most solid-state players. With the CD8, dynamics seem to have more of a "live" visceral punch, and instruments and voices have a more believable, vivid presence.

The rear panel houses stereo RCA and XLR main outputs, plus BNC coax and XLR AES/EBU digital outputs. The CD8 is available in natural brushed "silver" aluminum or black, with matching front handles. Black rack handles have graced Audio Research components for as long as I can remember, but the company now also offers a choice of silver handles. The difference is striking—a CD8 with silver handles is the hot ticket.

The handles aren't there just to lend a "pro" look to the player: I used the handles whenever I needed to move the 32-pound CD player around.

Build quality not only feels robust, Audio Research designed the CD8 to last a long, long time. The company offers service for almost every product they've built over their near 40-year history. The CD player under consideration here was built to have a working life of 20 years, so if you'd like to be able to access your CD collection over a top-notch machine in the 2030s, the CD8 makes a lot of sense.

The CD8, like every Audio Research product, is fully bench-tested, but it's also listened to in a reference system before it's shipped out. Audio Research wants every piece it makes to fit within a small sonic window and listening is the only way to guarantee that. At Audio Research, the ears have the final say.

I played the CD8 through my solid-state Parasound JC preamplifier and power amplifier and the CD8's tube signature shined through. If you're tube shy, Audio Research offers a

solid-state player, the CD5, which looks almost exactly like the CD8.

I never thought much of James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James* CD, but it absolutely shined over the CD8. Taylor's laidback delivery was somehow more soulful, and his ace session players' nimble support was a joy. Maybe it was the CD8's tubes, but the music had a more organic feel, less hi-fi-ish, so it connected more like live music does. That's exactly what differentiates the best components from the merely good ones.

Rocking out with the Clash's best-of live concert *From Here to Eternity* CD was something else again. That band was at its best in concert, and I loved the way the CD8 kicked out the Clash's unstoppable grooves—and those berserk guitar slashing riffs glancing off Joe Strummer's lung-popping vocals—the CD8 brought them all roaring back to life.

Yes, I know some of you must be thinking the CD's days are numbered. Thing is, we don't have any idea when the last CD will be made. Then again, all of this talk about the end has a déjà-vu-all-over-again-feel to it. They said the LP was on its last legs in the late 1980s, and LP sales have been going up every year for the past several years.

So is it too late to buy a high-end CD player? Perhaps, but it depends on a number of factors: How many CDs do you own? I have close to 4,000, and I doubt I would ever dump them onto a music server. Do you like having CDs around? I do, so chances are I'll be playing a good number of those discs for the rest of my life. If you think you'll be playing the music you've collected over the last few decades for the next few, consider a CD8. [E]

#### PRICE/CONTACT

PRICE: \$10,000

CONTACT: 763.577.9700, audioresearch.com