BLIND John Davis makes his first visit to Britain this week, opening in London tomorrow. His background is pretty hazy at times, with gaps that John is either unable or reluctant to fill. He was born on December 7, 1913, in the town of Hassberg, Mississippi, where his father worked in the sawmill in Newman's Quarters for a mere $14 a week.

"When I was but 3 years old my daddy took us to live in Chicago—where we gotten ourselves a better life.

"Dad took up trade as a moulder for Griffon Wheel Factory and earned himself $62 every week. We paid 8 dollars a month rent for 5 or 6 rooms at 2252 West Lake Street so we was living real well.

"I lost my sight in 1922. I'm kinda touchy 'bout that subject. I got a 20 cent rusty nail in my foot. My grandma tried to help me using fat meat, but it didn't help none. Instead of lockjaw, the poison set in my eyes and I went blind.

"Later on my Dad got himself a speakeasy — and I black-mailed him 'cos he wanted me to learn music — I told him I would learn to play piano if 'n he'd pay me.

"He did too. I was but 13 or 14 years old, but the customers didn't say a darned thing — they just wanted to hear my blues, and didn't care who played. I made top of a dollar a night.

"I'd work in clubs for a time, then I decided to get me a band. I got Leon de Walker on trumpet; Johnny Gardner and Eric Blackwell on saxes, Mac McKendrick guitar, Ransom Knowling on bass, Al Wynn on trombone and Judge Riley playing drums.

"I called them The Johnny Davis Original Music Masters and we worked together from 1934 to '52. Later on George Fletcher came in for Riley on drums.

"I started recording in 1937—Big Bill Broonzy was a friend of my Dad's and he fixed for me to play on one of his sessions 'Sweet William Blues' I think it was. That was for Vocalion or Columbia.

"They all seemed to like my playing so I got to play on most of the sessions around at the time. My sessions were with Tampa Red for RCA Victor — do you remember that song ' She's More To Me Than A Palace Was To A King '?

"That was the time that King—The Prince Of Wales — married that Wally [Wallace] Simpson!

"I made a lot of record sessions in those days — I recorded with Lonnie Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Jazz Gillum, Memphis Minnie, Doctor Clayton, Sunnyland Slim.

"You know, those records by the name of Doctor Clayton's Buddy Well, that was Sunnyland Slim.

"Sometimes I used - to record the piano playing for Sunnyland to sing by— an' everyone thought it was him playing along. I was top piano player for Lester Melrose's Wabash Music Company.
"I could play for anybody. excepting Big Boy Crudup. I think no piano player in the world could play for him 'cos he plays so damn irregular. "You know I worked with Gene Krupa? Him an' me was playing for $3 a night apiece right down on Madison Street, Chicago. That's were I live now.

"All that used to be nothing but Gang Land — later Edgar Hoover came in and he started clearing them out.

"Those he didn't kill died in the penitentiary. Gangsters was all I worked for in them days: they was the only ones had places to work — Machine Gun Kelly, Al Capone, Diamond Joe, I knew 'em all.

"They was beautiful people so long as you stayed in your own business. They're still just as bad, but now they're cooler with it — just more sneaky.

"In 1949 I made my first recordings under my own name— for MGM, that was. Before I had no desire to sing and the record producers told me I didn't sound Southern enough.

"They got me recording again in '51 — this time with George Barnes on guitar and Ransom Knowling playing bass.

"I cut a lot of records over in Europe with Big Bill Broonzy — but we wasn't paid for none of them. I kept copies of all my recordings, but my house burned out in 1955 and I lost everything!

From then on John is pretty vague regarding his activities. Presumably work was hard to come by and he was reduced to playing bars, cafes and hotels.

He remained in obscurity in Chicago until he was unearthed by European blues fans earlier this year, resulting in a 4-week tour of Europe in April.

John still lives in Chicago, has a wife, 2 sons and daughter. He proudly tells of his 14 grandchildren and 2 great-grandchildren. His elder boy, now in his forties, keeps a Chicago night club —The Majestic Lounge.

Misty and semi legendary John may be to the British collectors, but he is most certainly held in high respect by other Chicago musicians — Homesick James, Snooky Pryor and Eddie Taylor (all recently in Europe with The 1973 Chicago Blues Festival) are unanimous that he used to be really big in Chicago, one of the most important piano-men around.